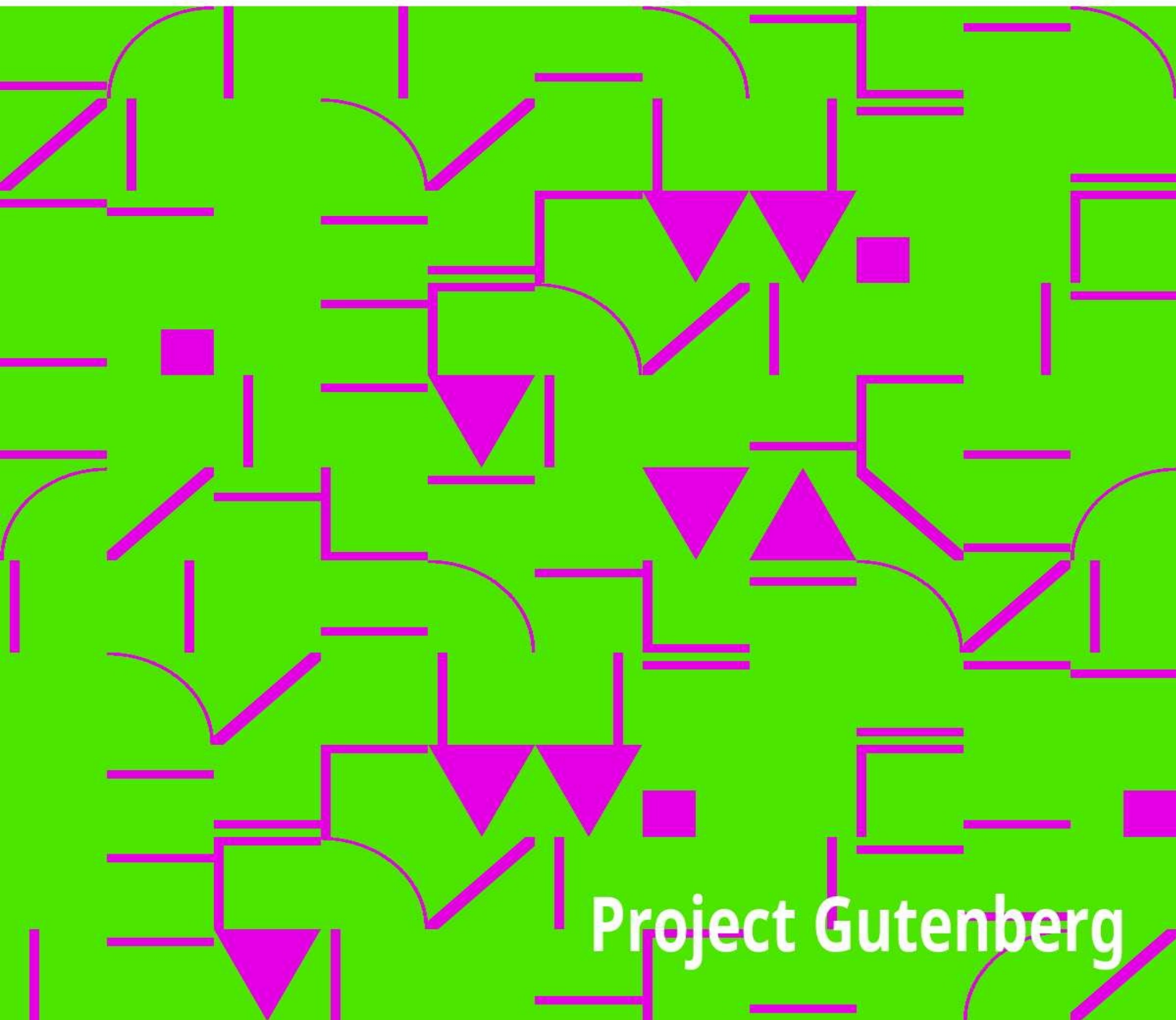


Ruth Fielding in the Red Cross; Or, Doing Her Best for Uncle Sam

Alice B. Emerson



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Title: Ruth Fielding In the Red Cross
Doing Her Best For Uncle Sam

Author: Alice B. Emerson

Release Date: June 12, 2011 [EBook #36395]

Language: English

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OCCASIONALLY A DARTING AIRPLANE ATTRACTED HER TO THE
WINDOW.
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Ruth Fielding In the Red Cross

OR
DOING HER BEST FOR
UNCLE SAM

BY
ALICE B. EMERSON

AUTHOR OF "RUTH FIELDING OF THE RED MILL,"
"RUTH FIELDING IN THE SADDLE," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED



NEW YORK
CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

Books for Girls
BY ALICE B. EMERSON
RUTH FIELDING SERIES

12mo. Cloth. Illustrated.

Price per volume, 50 cents, postpaid.

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RUTH FIELDING AT SNOW CAMP
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RUTH FIELDING IN THE SADDLE
RUTH FIELDING IN THE RED CROSS
RUTH FIELDING AT THE WAR FRONT
CUPPLES & LEON CO., PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK.

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RUTH FIELDING IN THE RED CROSS

Printed in U. S. A.

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Ruth Fielding in the Red Cross

CHAPTER I—UNCLE JABEZ IS EXCITED

“Oh! Not *Tom*?”

Ruth Fielding looked up from the box she was packing for the local Red Cross chapter, and, almost horrified, gazed into the black eyes of the girl who confronted her.

Helen Cameron’s face was tragic in its expression. She had been crying. The closely written sheets of the letter in her hand were shaken, as were her shoulders, with the sobs she tried to suppress.

“It—it’s written to father,” Helen said. “He gave it to me to read. I wish Tom had never gone to Harvard. Those boys there are completely crazy! To think—at the end of his freshman year—to throw it all up and go to a training camp!”

“I guess Harvard isn’t to blame,” said Ruth practically. If she was deeply moved by what her chum had told her, she quickly recovered her self-control. “The boys are going from other colleges all over the land. Is Tom going to try for a commission?”

“Yes.”

“What does your father say?”

“Why,” cried the other girl as though that, too, had surprised and hurt her, “father cried ‘Bully for Tom!’ and then wiped his eyes on his handkerchief. What can men be made of, Ruth? He knows Tom may be killed, and yet he cheers for him.”

Ruth Fielding smiled and suddenly hugged Helen. Ruth’s smile was somewhat tremulous, but her chum did not observe this fact.

“I understand how your father feels, dear. Tom does not want to be drafted——”

“He wouldn’t be drafted. He is not old enough. And even if they automatically draft the boys as they become of age, it would be months before they reached Tom, and the war will be over by that time. But here he is throwing himself away——”

“Oh, Helen! Not that!” cried Ruth. “Our soldiers will fight for us—for their country—for honor. And a man’s life lost in such a cause is not thrown away.”

“That’s the way I feel,” said Helen, more steadily. “Tom is my twin. You don’t know what it means to have a twin brother, Ruth Fielding.”

“That is true,” sighed Ruth. “But I can imagine how you feel, dear. If you have hopes of the war’s being over so quickly, then I should expect Tom back from training camp safe and sound, and with no chance of ever facing the enemy. Has he really gone?”

“Oh, yes,” Helen told her despondently. “And lots of the boys who used to go to school with Tom at Seven Oaks. You know, all those jolly fellows who were at Snow Camp with us, and at Lighthouse Point, and on Cliff Island, and out West on Silver Ranch—and—and everywhere. Just to think! We may never see them again.”

“Dear me, Helen,” Ruth urged, “don’t look upon the blackest side of the cloud. It’s a long time before they go over there.”

“We don’t know how soon they will be in the trenches,” said her friend hopelessly. “These boys going to war——”

“And I wish I was young enough to go with ’em!” ejaculated a harsh voice, as the door of the back kitchen opened and the speaker stamped into the room. “Got that box ready to nail up, Niece Ruth? Ben’s hitching up the mules, and I want to get to Cheslow before dark.”

“Oh! Almost ready, Uncle Jabez,” cried the girl of the Red Mill, as the gray old man approached.

He was lean and wiry and the dust of his mill seemed to have been so ground into his very skin that he was a regular “dusty miller.” His features were as harsh as his voice, and he was seldom as excited as he seemed to be now.

“Who’s going to war now?” he asked, turning to Helen.

“Poor—poor Tom!” burst out the black-eyed girl, and began to dabble her eyes again.

“What’s the matter o’ him?” demanded the old miller.

“He’ll—he’ll be shot—I know he’ll be killed, and mangled horribly!”

“Fiddle-de-dee!” grunted Uncle Jabez, but his tone of voice was not as harsh as his words sounded. “I never got shot, nor mangled none to speak of, and I was

fightin' and marchin' three endurin' years."

"You, Uncle Jabez?" cried Ruth.

"Yep. And I wish they'd take me again. I can go a-soldierin' as good as the next one. I'm tough and I'm wiry. They talk about this war bein' a dreadful war. Shucks! All wars air dreadful. They won't never have a battle over there that'll be as bad as the Wilderness—believe me! They may have more battles, but I went through some of the wust a man could ever experience."

"And—and you weren't shot?" gasped Helen.

"Not a bit. Three years of campaigning and never was scratched. Don't you look for Tom Cameron to be killed fust thing just because he's going to the wars. If more men didn't come back from the wars than git killed in 'em how d'ye s'pose this old world would have gone on rolling? Shucks!"

"I never knew you were a soldier, Uncle Jabez," Ruth Fielding said.

"Wal, I was. Shucks! I was something of a sharpshooter, too. And we old fellers—course I was nothin' but a boy, *then*—we could shoot. We'd l'arn't to shoot on the farm. Powder an' shot was hard to git and we l'arn't to make every bullet count. My old Betsey—didn't ye ever see my Civil War rifle?" he demanded of Ruth.

"You mean the old brown gun that hangs over your bed and that Aunt Alvira is so much afraid of?"

"That's old Betsey. Sharpe's rifle. In them days it was jest about the last thing in weepsons. I brung it home after the Grand Army of the Potomac was disbanded. Know how I did it? Government claimed all the guns; but I took old Betsey apart and me an' my mates hid the pieces away in our clothes, and so got her home. Then I assembled her again," and Uncle Jabez broke into a chuckle that was actually almost startling to the girls, for the miller seldom laughed.

"Say!" he exclaimed, in his strange excitement. "I'll show her to ye."

He hurried out of the room, evidently in search of "Old Betsey." Helen said to the miller's niece:

"Goodness, Ruth! what has happened to your Uncle Jabez?"

"Just what has happened to Tom—and your father," returned the girl of the Red Mill. "I've seen it coming on. Uncle Jabez has been getting more and more excited ever since war was declared. You know, when we came home from college a month ago and decided to remain here and help in the Red Cross work

instead of finishing our sophomore year at Ardmore, my decision was really the first one I ever made that Uncle Jabez seemed to approve of immediately.

“He is thoroughly patriotic. When I told him I could study later—when the war was over—but that I must work for the soldiers now, he said I was a good girl. What do you think of *that*?”

“Cheslow is not doing its share,” Helen said thoughtfully, her mind switched by Ruth’s last words to the matter that had completely filled her own and her chum’s thoughts for weeks. “The people are not awake. They do not know we are at war yet. They have not done half for the Red Cross that they should do.”

“We’ll make ’em!” declared Ruth Fielding. “We must get the women and girls to pull together.”

“Say, Ruth! what do you think of that woman in black—you know, the widow, or whoever she is? Dresses in black altogether; but maybe it’s because she thinks black becomes her,” added Helen rather scornfully.

“Mrs. Mantel?” asked Ruth slowly. “I don’t know what to think of her. She seems to be very anxious to help. Yet she does nothing really helpful—only talks.”

“And some of her talk I’d rather not hear,” said Helen sharply.

“I know what you mean,” Ruth rejoined, nodding. “But so many people talk so doubtfully. They are unfamiliar with the history of the Red Cross and what it has done. Perhaps Mrs. Mantel means no harm.”

At that moment Uncle Jabez reappeared with the heavy rifle in his hands. He was still chuckling.

“Calc’late I ain’t heard Aunt Alvirah talk about this gun much of late. One spell—when fust she come here to the Red Mill to keep house for me—she didn’t scurce dare to go into my room because of it. But, of course, ‘twarn’t ever loaded.

“I was some sharpshooter, gals,” he added proudly, patting the stock of the heavy gun. “Here’s a ca’tridge. I’m goin’ to stick it in her an’ you shall hear how she roars. Warn’t no Maxim silencers, nor nothin’ like that, when I used to pot the Johnny Rebs with Old Betsey.”

He flung open the door into the back yard. He raised the rifle to his shoulder, having slipped in the greased cartridge.

“See that sassy jay atop o’ that cherry tree? I bet I kin clutter him up a whole lot

—an’ he desarves it,” said Uncle Jabez.

Just then the door into the other kitchen opened, and a little, crooked-backed old woman with a shawl around her shoulders and a cap atop of her thin hair appeared.

“Jabez Potter! What in creation you goin’ to do with that awful gun?” she shrilled.

“I’m a-goin’ to knock the topknot off’n that bluejay,” chuckled Uncle Jabez.

“Stop! Don’t! Gals!” cried the little old woman, hobbling down the two steps into the room. “Oh, my back! and oh, my bones! Gals! stop him! That gun can’t shoot ’cause I went and plugged the barrel!”

At that moment Old Betsey went off with an awful roar.

CHAPTER II—THE CALL OF THE DRUM

There was a flash following the explosion, and Uncle Jabez staggered back from the doorway, his arm across his eyes, while the gun dropped with a crash to the porch. The girls, as well as Aunt Alvira, shrieked.

"I vum!" ejaculated the miller. "Who done that? What's happened to Old Betsey?"

"Jabez Potter!" shrilled the little old woman, "didn't I tell you to git rid o' that gun long ago? Be you shot?"

"No," said the miller grimly. "I'm only scare't. Old Betsey never kicked like that afore."

Ruth was at his side patting his shoulder and looking at him anxiously.

"Shucks!" scoffed the miller. "I ain't dead yit. But what made that gun——"

He stooped and picked it up. First he looked at the twisted hammer, then he turned it around and looked into the muzzle.

"For the good land o' liberty!" he yelled. "What's the meanin' of this? Who—who's gone and stuck up this here gun bar'l this a-way? I vum! It's *ce-ment*—sure's I'm a foot high."

"What did you want to tetch that gun for, Jabez Potter?" demanded Aunt Alvira, easing herself into a low rocker. "Oh, my back! and oh, my bones! I allus warned you 'twould do some harm some day. That's why I plugged it up."

"You—you plugged it up?" gasped the miller. "Wha—what for I want to know?"

"So, if 'twas loaded, no bullet would get out and hurt anybody," declared the little old woman promptly. "Now, you kin get mad and use bad language, Jabez Potter, if you've a mind to. But I'd ruther go back to the poorhouse to live than stay under this ruff with that gun all ready to shoot with."

The miller was so thunderstruck for a moment that he could not reply. Ruth feared he might fly into a temper, for he was not a patient man. But, oddly

enough, he never raged at the little old housekeeper.

“I vum!” he said at last. “Don’t that beat all? An’ ain’t it like a woman? Stickin’ up the muzzle of the gun so’s it couldn’t shoot—but *would* explode. Shucks!” He suddenly flung up both hands. “Can you beat ’em? *You can’t!*”

Now that it was all over, and the accident had not caused any fatality, the two girls felt like laughing—a hysterical feeling perhaps. They got Aunt Alvira into the larger kitchen and left Uncle Jabez to nail up the box that he was going to ship for Ruth to Red Cross headquarters.

The girl of the Red Mill had been gathering the knitted wear and comfort kits from the neighbors around to send on to the Red Cross headquarters, and, in the immediate vicinity of the Red Mill, she knew that the women and girls were doing a better work for the cause than in Cheslow itself.

The mill and the rambling old house that adjoined and belonged to Uncle Jabez Potter stood upon the bank of the Lumano River, and was as beautiful a spot as one might find in that part of the state. Ruth Fielding had always loved it since the first day her eyes had spied it, when as a little girl she had come to live with her cross and crotchety Uncle Jabez.

The miller was a miserly man, and, at first, Ruth had had no pleasant time as a dependent on her uncle. Had it not been for Aunt Alvira Boggs, who was nobody’s relative but everybody’s aunt, and whom Uncle Jabez had taken from the poorhouse to keep house for him, the lonely little orphan girl would have been quite heartbroken.

With Aunt Alvira’s help and the consolation of her philosophy, as well as with the aid of the friendship of Helen and Tom Cameron, who were neighbors, Ruth Fielding began to be happy. And really unhappy thereafter she never could be, for something was always happening to her, and the active person is seldom if ever in the doldrums.

In the first volume of the series, “Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill,” these and others of Ruth’s friends were introduced, and the girl began to develop that sturdy and independent character which has made her loved by so many. With Helen she went to Briarwood Hall to boarding school, and there her acquaintance rapidly widened. For some years her course is traced through several volumes, at school and during vacations at different places where exciting and most delightful adventures happen to Ruth and her friends.

In following volumes we meet Ruth Fielding at Snow Camp, at Lighthouse

Point, at Silver Ranch, on Cliff Island, at Sunrise Farm, in a Gypsy camp, in Moving Pictures, down in Dixie, and, finally, she graduates from Briarwood Hall, and she and her chums enter Ardmore College. At the beginning of this, the thirteenth volume of the series, Ruth and Helen were quite grown up. Following their first year at Ardmore, Ruth had gone West to write and develop a moving picture for the Alectrion Film Corporation, in which she now owned an interest.

In “Ruth Fielding in the Saddle; or, College Girls in the Land of Gold,” an account of this adventure is narrated, the trip occupying most of the first summer following Ruth’s freshman year. Ruth’s success as a writer of moving-picture scenarios of the better class had already become established. “The Forty-Niners” had become one of the most successful of the big scenarios shown during the winter just previous to the opening of our present story.

Ruth had made much money. Together with what she had made in selling a claim she had staked out at Freezeout, where the pictures were taken, her bank accounts and investments now ran well into five figures. She really did not want Uncle Jabez to know exactly how much she had made and had saved. Mr. Cameron, Helen’s father, had her finances in charge, although the girl of the Red Mill was quite old enough, and quite wise enough, to attend to her own affairs.

Interest in Red Cross work had smitten Ruth and Helen and many of their associates at college. Not alone had the men’s colleges become markedly empty during that previous winter; but the girls’ schools and colleges were buzzing with excitement regarding the war and war work.

As soon as Congress declared a state of war with Germany, Ruth and Helen had hurried home. Cheslow, the nearest town, was an insular community, and many of the people in it were hard to awaken to the needs of the hour. Because of the peaceful and satisfied life the people led they could not understand what war really meant.

Cheslow and the vicinity of the Red Mill was not alone in this. Many, many communities were yet to be awakened.

Ruth bore these facts very much on her heart. She was doing all that she could to strike a note of alarm that should awaken Cheslow.

Despite Uncle Jabez Potter’s patriotism, she would have been afraid to tell him just how much she had personally subscribed for the work of the Red Cross and for other war activities. And, likewise, in her heart was another secret—a longing to be doing something of moment for the cause. She wanted to really

enlist for the war! She wished she might be “over there” in body, as well as in spirit.

Not only were the drums calling to Tom Cameron and his friends, and many, many other boys, but they were calling the girls to arms as well. Never before has war so soon and so suddenly offered womankind a chance to aid in an undying cause.

Yet Ruth did not neglect the small and seemingly unimportant duties right at hand. She was no dreamer or dallier. Having got off this big box of comforts for the boys at the front, the very next day she, with Helen, took up the effort already begun of a house-to-house campaign throughout Cheslow for Red Cross members, and to invite the feminine part of the community to aid in a big drive for knitted goods.

The Ladies’ Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church was meeting that day with Mrs. Curtis, the wife of the railroad station agent and the mother of one of Ruth’s friends at boarding school. Mercy Curtis, having quite outgrown her childish ills, welcomed the friends when they rang the bell.

“Do come in and help me bear the chatter of this flock of starlings,” Mercy said. “Glad to see you, girlies!” and she kissed both Ruth and Helen.

“But I am afraid I want to join the starlings, as you call them,” Ruth said demurely; “and even add to their chatter. I came here for just that purpose.”

“For just what purpose?” Mercy demanded.

“To talk to them. I knew the crowd would be here, and so I thought I could kill two birds with one stone.”

“Two birds, only?” sniffed Mercy. “Kill ’em all, for all I care! I’ll run and find you some stones.”

“My ammunition are hard words only,” laughed Ruth. “I want to tell them that they are not doing their share for the Red Cross.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Mercy. “Humph! Well, Ruthie, you have come at an unseasonable time, I fear. Mrs. Mantel is here.”

“Mrs. Mantel!” murmured Ruth.

“The woman in black!” exclaimed Helen. “Well, Mercy, what has she been saying?”

“Enough, I think,” the other girl replied. “At least, I have an idea that most of the

women in the Ladies' Aid believe that it is better to go on with the usual sewing and foreign and domestic mission work, and let the Red Cross strictly alone.”

CHAPTER III—THE WOMAN IN BLACK

“Do you mean to say,” demanded Helen Cameron, with some anger, “that they have no interest in the war, or in our boys who will soon begin to go over there? Impossible!”

“I repeat that,” said Ruth. “‘Impossible,’ indeed.”

“Oh, each may knit for her own kin or for other organizations,” Mercy said. “I am repeating what I have just heard, that is all. Girls! I am just boiling!”

“I can imagine it,” Helen said. “I am beginning to simmer myself.”

“Wait. Let us be calm,” urged Ruth, smiling as she laid off her things, preparatory to going into the large front room where Mrs. Curtis was entertaining the Ladies’ Aid Society.

“Is it all because of that woman in black?” demanded Helen.

“Well, she has been pointing out that the Red Cross is a great money-making scheme, and that it really doesn’t need our small contributions.”

“And she is a member herself!” snapped Helen.

“Well, she joined, of course, because she did not want anybody to think she wasn’t patriotic,” scoffed Mercy. “That is the way she puts it. But you ought to hear the stories she has been telling these poor, simple women.”

“Did you ever!” cried Helen angrily.

“It is well we came here,” Ruth said firmly. “Let me into the lions’ den, Mercy.”

“I am afraid they are another breed of cats. There is little noble or lionlike about some of them.”

Ruth and Helen were quite used to Mercy Curtis’ sharp tongue. It was well known. But it was evident, too, that the girl had been roused to fury by what she had heard at the meeting of the Ladies’ Aid Society.

The ladies of the church society were, for the most part, very good people

indeed. But at this time the war was by no means popular in Cheslow (as it was not in many places) and the plague of pacifism, if not actually downright pro-German propaganda, was active and malignant.

When the door into the big front room was opened and the girls entered, Mrs. Curtis rose hastily to welcome Ruth and Helen warmly. The women were, for the most part, busily sewing. But, of course, that puts no brake upon the activities of the tongue. Indeed, the needle seems to be particularly helpful as an accompaniment to a “dish of gossip.”

“I still think it is terrible,” one woman was saying quite earnestly to another, who was one of the few idle women in the room, “if an organization like that cannot be trusted.”

The idle woman was dressed plainly but elegantly in black, with just a touch of white at wrists and throat. She was a graceful woman, tall, not yet forty, and with a set smile on her face that might have been the outward sign of a sweet temperament, and then——

“Mrs. Mantel!” whispered Helen to Ruth. “I do not like her one bit. And nobody knows where she came from or who she is. Cheslow has only been her abiding place since we went to college last autumn.”

“Sh!” whispered Ruth in return. “I am interested.”

“Oh, I assure you, my dear Mrs. Crothers, that it may not be the organization’s fault,” purred the woman in black. “The objects of the Red Cross are very worthy. None more so. But in certain places—locally, you know—of course I don’t mean here in Cheslow——

“Yet I could tell you of something that happened to me to-day. I was quite hurt—quite shocked, indeed. I saw on the street a sweater that I knitted myself last winter.”

“Oh! On a soldier?” asked another of the women who heard. “How nice!”

“No, indeed. No soldier,” said Mrs. Mantel quickly. “On a girl. Fancy! On a girl I had never seen before. And I gave that to the Red Cross with my own hands.”

“Perhaps it belonged to the girl’s brother,” another of the women observed.

“Oh, no!” Mrs. Mantel was eager to say. “I asked her. Naturally I was curious—very curious. I said to her, ‘Where did you get the sweater, my girl, if you will pardon my asking?’ And she told me she bought it in a store here in Cheslow.”

“Oh, my!” gasped another of the group.

“Do you mean to say the Red Cross sells the things people knit for them?” cried Mrs. Crothers.

“How horrid!” drawled another. “Well, you never can tell about these charitable organizations that are not connected with the church.”

Ruth Fielding broke her silence and quite calmly asked:

“Will you tell me who the girl was and where she said she bought the sweater, Mrs. Mantel?”

“Oh, I never saw the girl before,” said the lady in black.

“But she told you the name of the store where she said she purchased it?”

“No-o. What does it matter? I recognized my own sweater!” exclaimed the woman in black, with a toss of her head.

“Are you quite sure, Mrs. Mantel,” pursued the girl of the Red Mill insistently but quite calmly, “that you could not have made a mistake?”

“Mistake? How?” snapped the other.

“Regarding the identity of the sweater.”

“I tell you I recognized it. I know I knitted it. I certainly know my own work. And why should I be cross-questioned, please?”

“My name is Ruth Fielding,” Ruth explained. “I happen to have at present a very deep interest in the Red Cross work—especially in our local chapter. Did you give your sweater to our local chapter?”

“Why—no. But what does that matter?” and the woman in black began to show anger. “Do you doubt my word?”

“You offer no corroborative evidence, and you make a very serious charge,” Ruth said. “Don’t be angry. If what you say is true, it is a terrible thing. Of course, there may be people using the name of the Red Cross who are neither patriotic nor honest. Let us run each of these seemingly wicked things down—if it is possible. Let us get at the truth.”

“I have told you the truth, Miss Fielding. And I consider you insulting—most unladylike.”

“Mrs. Mantel,” said Ruth Fielding gravely, “whether I speak and act as a lady should make little material difference in the long run. But whether a great organization, which is working for the amelioration of suffering on the battle front and in our training camps, is maligned, is of very great moment, indeed.

“In my presence no such statement as you have just made can go unchallenged. You must help me prove, or disprove it. We must find the girl and discover just how she came by the sweater. If it had been stolen and given to her she would be very likely to tell you just what you say she did. But that does not prove the truth of her statement.”

“Nor of mine, I suppose you would say!” cried Mrs. Mantel.

“Exactly. If you are fair-minded at all you will aid me in this investigation. For I purpose to take up every such calumny that I can and trace it to its source.”

“Oh, Ruth, don’t take it so seriously!” Mrs. Curtis murmured, and most of the women looked their displeasure. But Helen clapped her hands softly, saying:

“Bully for you, Ruthie!”

Mercy’s eyes glowed with satisfaction.

Ruth became silent for a moment, for the woman in black evidently intended to give her no satisfaction. Mrs. Mantel continued to state, however, for all to hear:

“I certainly know my own knitting, and my own yarn. I have knitted enough of the sweaters according to the Red Cross pattern to sink a ship! I would know one of my sweaters half a block away at least.”

Ruth had been watching the woman very keenly. Mrs. Mantel’s hands were perfectly idle in her lap. They were very white and very well cared for. Ruth’s vision came gradually to a focus upon those idle hands.

Then suddenly she turned to Mercy and whispered a question. Mercy nodded, but looked curiously at the girl of the Red Mill. When the latter explained further Mercy Curtis’ eyes began to snap. She nodded again and went out of the room.

When she returned with a loosely wrapped bundle in her hands she moved around to where the woman in black was sitting. The conversation had now become general, and all were trying their best to get away from the previous topic of tart discussion.

“Mrs. Mantel,” said Mercy very sweetly, “you must know a lot about knitting sweaters, you’ve made so many. Would you help me?”

“Help you do what, child?” asked the woman in black, rather startled.

“I am going to begin one,” explained Mercy, “and I do wish, Mrs. Mantel, that you would show me how. I’m dreadfully ignorant about the whole thing, you know.”

There was a sudden silence all over the room. Mrs. Mantel's ready tongue seemed stayed. The pallor of her face was apparent, as innocent-looking Mercy, with the yarn and needles held out to her, waited for an affirmative reply.

CHAPTER IV—"CAN A POILU LOVE A FAT GIRL?"

The shocked silence continued for no more than a minute. Mrs. Mantel was a quick-witted woman, if she was nothing else commendable. But every member of the Ladies' Aid Society knew what Mercy Curtis' question meant.

"My dear child," said the woman in black, smiling her set smile but rising promptly, "I shall have to do that for you another day. Really I haven't the time just now to help you start any knitting. But later——"

"I am sure you will forgive me for running away so early, Mrs. Curtis; but I have another engagement. And," she shot a malignant glance at Ruth Fielding, "I am not used to being taken to task upon any subject by these college-chits!"

She went out of the room in a manner that, had she been thirty years younger, could have been called "flounced"—head tossing and skirts swishing with resentment. Several of the women looked at the girl of the Red Mill askance, although they dared not criticize Mercy Curtis, for they knew her sharp tongue too well.

"Mrs. Pubsby," Ruth said quietly to the pleasant-faced, Quakerish-looking president of the society, "may I say a word to the ladies?"

"Of course you may, Ruthie," said the good woman comfortably. "I have known you ever since you came to Jabez Potter's, and I never knew you to say a dishonest or unkind word. You just get it off your mind. It'll do you good, child—and maybe do some of us good. I don't know but we're—just a mite—getting religiously selfish."

"I have no idea of trying to urge you ladies to give up any of your regular charities, or trying to undermine your interest in them. I merely hope you will broaden your interests enough to include the Red Cross work before it is too late."

"How too late?" asked Mrs. Crothers, rather snappishly. She had evidently been both disturbed and influenced by the woman in black.

“So that our boys—some of them your sons and relatives—will not get over to France before the Red Cross is ready to supply them with the comforts they may need next winter. It is not impossible that boys right from Cheslow will be over there before cold weather.”

“The war will be over long before then, Ruthie,” said Mrs. Pubsby complacently.

“I’ve heard Dr. Cummings, the pastor, say that he is told once in about so often that the devil is dead,” Ruth said smiling. “But he is never going to believe it until he can personally help bury him. Our Government is going about this war as though it might last five years. Are we so much wiser than the men at the head of the nation—even if we have the vote?” she added, slyly.

“It does not matter whether the war will be ended in a few weeks, or in ten years. We should do our part in preparing for it. And the Red Cross is doing great and good work—and has been doing it for years and years. When people like the lady who has just gone out repeat and invent slanders against the Red Cross I must stand up and deny them. At least, such scandal-mongers should be made to prove their statements.”

“Oh, Ruth Fielding! That is not a kind word,” said Mrs. Crothers.

“Will you supply me with one that will satisfactorily take its place?” asked Ruth sweetly. “I do not wish to accuse Mrs. Mantel of actually prevaricating; but I do claim the right of asking her to prove her statements, and that she seems to decline to do.

“And I shall challenge every person I meet who utters such false and ridiculous stories about the Red Cross. It is an out-and-out pro-German propaganda.”

“Why, Mrs. Mantel is a member of the Red Cross herself,” said Mrs. Crothers sharply.

“She evidently is not loyal to her pledge then,” Ruth replied with bluntness. “The lady is not a member of our local chapter, and I have failed yet to hear of her being engaged in any activity for the Red Cross.

“But I want you ladies—all of you—to take the Red Cross work to heart and to learn what the insignia stands for.”

With that the earnest girl entered upon a brief but moving appeal for members to the local chapter, for funds, and for workers. As Helen said afterward, Ruth’s “mouth was opened and she spake with the tongues of angels!”

At least, her words did not go for naught. Several dollar memberships were

secured right there and then. And Mrs. Brooks and Mary Lardner promised a certain sum for the cause—both generous gifts. Best of all, Mrs. Pubsby said:

“I don’t know about this being shown our duty by this wisp of a girl. But, ladies, she’s right—I can feel it. And I always go by my feelings, whether it’s in protracted meetings or in my rheumatic knee. I feel we must do our part.

“This gray woolen sock I’m knitting was for my Ezekiel. But my Ezey has got plenty socks. From now on I’m going to knit ’em for those poor soldiers who will like enough get their feet wet ditching over there in France, and will want plenty changes of socks.”

So Ruth started something that afternoon, and she went on doing more and more. Cheslow began to awake slowly. The local chapter rooms began to hum with life for several hours every day and away into the evening.

In the Cameron car, which Helen drove so that a chauffeur could be relieved to go into the army, the two girls drove all about the countryside, interesting the scattered families in war work and picking up the knitted goods made in the farmhouses and villages.

In many places they had to combat the same sort of talk that the woman in black was giving forth. Ruth was patient, but very insistent that the Red Cross deserved no such criticism.

“Come into Cheslow and see what we are doing there at our local headquarters. I will take you in and bring you back. I’ll take you to the county headquarters at Robinsburg. You will there hear men and women speak who know much more than I do about the work.”

This was the way she pleaded for fairness and public interest, and a ride in a fine automobile was a temptation to many of the women and girls. An afternoon in the rooms of a live Red Cross chapter usually convinced and converted most of these “Doubting Thomasines,” as Helen called them.

Working with wool and other goods was all right. But money was needed. A country-wide drive was organized, and Ruth was proud that she was appointed on the committee to conduct it. Mr. Cameron, who was a wealthy department store owner in the city, was made chairman of this special committee, and he put much faith in the ability of the girl of the Red Mill and his own daughter to assist materially in the campaign for funds.

“Get hold of every hardshell farmer in the county,” he told the girls. “Begin with your Uncle Jabez, Ruthie. If he leads with a goodly sum many another old fellow

who keeps his surplus cash in a stocking or in the broken teapot on the top cupboard shelf will come to time.

“The reason it is so hard to get contributions out of men like Jabez Potter,” said Mr. Cameron with a chuckle, “is because nine times out of ten it means the giving up of actual money. They have their cash hid away. It isn’t making them a penny, but they like to hoard it, and some of ’em actually worship it.

“And not to be wondered at. It comes hard. Their backs are bent and their fingers knotted from the toil of acquiring hard cash, dollar by dollar and cent by cent. It is much easier to write a check for a hundred dollars to give to a good cause than it is to dig right down into one’s jeans and haul out a ten-dollar note.”

Ruth knew just how hard this was going to be—to interest the purses of the farming community in the Red Cross drive. The farmers’ wives and daughters were making their needles fly, but the men merely considered the work something like the usual yearly attempt to get funds out of them for foreign missions.

“I tell ye what, Niece Ruth, I got my doubts,” grumbled Uncle Jabez, when she broached the subject of his giving generously to the cause. “I dunno about so much money being needed for what you’re callin’ the ‘waste of war’!”

“If you read those statistics, compiled under the eyes of Government agents,” she told him, “you must be convinced that it is already proved by what has happened in France and Belgium—and in other countries—during the three years of war, that all this money will be needed, and more.”

“I dunno. Millions! Them is a power of dollars, Niece Ruth. You and lots of other folks air too willing to spend money that other folks have ained by the sweat of their brows.”

He offered her a sum that she was really ashamed to put down at the top of her subscription paper. She went about her task in the hope that Uncle Jabez’s purse and heart would both be opened for the cause.

Not that he was not patriotic. He was willing—indeed anxious—to go to the front and give his body for the cause of liberty. But Uncle Jabez seemed to love his dollars better than he did his body.

“Give him time, dearie, give him time,” murmured Aunt Alvirah, rocking back and forth in her low chair. “The idea of giving up a dollar to Jabez Potter’s mind is bigger than the shooting of a thousand men. Poor boys! Poor boys! How many of them may lack comforts and hospitals while the niggard people like Jabez

Potter air wakin' up?"

Ruth's heart was very sore about the going over of the American expeditionary forces at this time, too. She said little to Helen about it, but the fact that Tom Cameron—her very oldest friend about the Red Mill and Cheslow—looked forward to going at the first moment possible, brought the war very close to the girl.

The feeling within her that she should go across to France and actually help in some way grew stronger and stronger as the days went by. Then came a letter from Jennie Stone.

"Heavy," as she had always been called in school and even in college, was such a fun-loving, light-hearted girl that it quite shocked both Ruth and Helen when they learned that she was already in real work for the poor poilus and was then about to sail for France.

Jennie Stone's people were wealthy, and her social acquaintances were, many of them, idle women and girls. But the war had awakened these drones, and with them the plump girl. An association for the establishment and upkeep of a convalescent home in France had been formed in Jennie's neighborhood, and Jennie, who had always been fond of cooking—both in the making of the dishes and the assimilation of the same—was actually going to work in the diet kitchen.

"And who knows," the letter ended in Heavy's characteristic way, "but that I shall fall in love with one of the *blessés*. What a sweet name for a wounded soldier! And, just tell me! Do you think it possible? Can a poilu love a fat girl?"

CHAPTER V—"THE BOYS OF THE DRAFT"

"My goodness, Ruth Fielding!" demanded Helen, after reading the characteristic letter from Jennie Stone, "if she can go to France why can't we?"

Helen's changed attitude did not surprise her chum much. Ruth was quite used to Helen's vagaries. The latter was very apt to declare against a course of action, for herself or her friends, and then change over night.

The thought of her twin brother going to war had at first shocked and startled Helen. Now she added:

"For you know very well, Ruth Fielding, that Tom Cameron should not be allowed to go over there to France all alone."

"Goodness, Helen!" gasped the girl of the Red Mill, "you don't suppose that Tom is going to constitute an Army of Invasion in his own person, and attempt to whip the whole of Germany before the rest of Uncle Sam's boys jump in?"

"You may laugh!" cried Helen. "He's only a boy—and boys can't get along without somebody to look out for them. He never would change his flannels at the right time, or keep his feet dry."

"I know you have always felt the overwhelming responsibility of Tom's upbringing, even when he was at Seven Oaks and you and I were at Briarwood."

"Every boy needs the oversight of some feminine eye. And I expect he'll fall in love with the first French girl he meets over there unless I'm on the spot to warn him," Helen went on.

"They are most attractive, I believe," laughed Ruth cheerfully.

"'Chic,' as Madame Picolet used to say. You remember her, our French teacher at Briarwood?" Helen said.

"Poor little Picolet!" Ruth returned with some gravity. "Do you know she has been writing me?"

"Madame Picolet? You never said a word about it!"

“But you knew she returned to France soon after the war began?”

“Oh, yes. I knew that. But—but, to tell the truth, I hadn’t thought of her at all for a long time. Why does she write to you?”

“For help,” said Ruth quietly. “She has a work among soldiers’ widows and orphans—a very worthy charity, indeed. I looked it up.”

“And sent her money, I bet!” cried the vigorous Helen.

“Why—yes—what I felt I could spare,” Ruth admitted.

“And never told any of us girls about it. Think! All the Briarwood girls who knew little Picolet!” Helen said with some heat. “Why shouldn’t we have had a part in helping her, too?”

“My dear,” said her chum seriously, “do you realize how little interest any of us felt in the war until this last winter? And now our own dear country is in it and we must think of our own boys who are going, rather than of the needs of the French, or the British, or even the Belgians.”

“Oh, Ruth!” cried Helen suddenly, “perhaps Madame Picolet might help us to get over there.”

“Over to France?”

“I mean to get into some work in France. She knows us. She may have some influence,” said the eager Helen.

But Ruth slowly shook her head. “No,” she said. “If I go over there it must be to work for our own boys. They are going. They will need us. I want to do my all for Uncle Sam—for these United States—and,” she added, pointing to Uncle Jabez’s flag upon the pole in front of the Red Mill farmhouse, “for the blessed old flag. I am sorry for the wounded of our allies; but the time has come now for us to think of the needs of our own soldiers first. They are going over. First our regular army and the guard; then the boys of the draft.”

“Ah, yes! The boys of the draft,” sighed Helen.

Suddenly Ruth seized her chum’s wrist. “I’ve got it, Helen! That is it! *‘The boys of the draft.’*”

“Goodness! What’s the matter with you now?” demanded Helen, wide-eyed.

“We will screen it. It will be great!” cried Ruth. “I’ll go and see Mr. Hammond at once. I can write the scenario in a few days, and it will not take long to film it. The story of the draft, and what the Red Cross can and will do for the boys over

there. Put it on the screen and show it wherever a Red Cross drive is made during the next few months. We'll do it, Helen!"

"Oh! Yes! We'll—do—it!" gasped her chum breathlessly. "You mean that you will do it and that I haven't the first idea of what it is you mean to do."

"Of course you have. A big film called 'The Boys of the Draft,' taking a green squad right through their training from the very first day they are in camp. Fake the French and war scenes, of course, but show the spectators just what may and will happen over there and what the Red Cross will do for the brave hearts who fight for the country."

Ruth was excited. No doubt of that. Her cheeks burned. Her eyes shone. She gestured vigorously.

"I know you don't see it as I do, honey," she added. "I can visualize the whole thing right now. And Helen!"

"Goodness, yes!" gasped Helen. "What now?"

"I'm going to make Uncle Jabez see it! You just see if I don't."

CHAPTER VI—THE PATRIOTISM OF THE PURSE

While she was yet at boarding school at Briarwood Hall Ruth had been successful in writing a scenario for the Alectrion Film Corporation. This is told of in "Ruth Fielding in Moving Pictures." Its production had been a matter to arouse both the interest and amazement of her friends. Mr. Hammond, the president of the film-producing company, considered her a genius in screen matters, and it was a fact that she had gained a very practical grasp of the whole moving picture business.

"The Heart of a Schoolgirl," which Ruth had written under spur of a great need at Briarwood Hall, had practically rebuilt one of the dormitories which had been destroyed by fire at a time when the insurance on that particular building had run out.

One of her romantic scenarios had been screened at the Red Mill and on the picturesque Lumano and along its banks. Then, less than a year before, "The Forty-Niners" had been made; and during the succeeding winter this picture had been shown all over the country and, as the theatrical people say, "had played to big business."

Ruth had bought stock in the corporation and was sometimes actually consulted now by Mr. Hammond and the heads of departments as to the policies of the concern. As the president of the corporation had already written her, the time was about ripe for another "big" film.

Ruth Fielding was expected to suggest the idea, at least, although the working out of the story would probably be left to the director in the field. He knew his people, his properties, and his locations. The bare skeleton of the story was what Mr. Hammond wanted.

Ruth's success in making virile "The Forty-Niners" urged Mr. Hammond to hope for something as good from her now. And, like most composers of every kind, the real inspiration for the new reel wonder had leaped to life on the instant in her brain.

The idea of “The Boys of the Draft” came from her talk with her chum, Helen Cameron. Helen had a limited amount of pride in Ruth’s success on this occasion for, as she said, she had blunderingly “sicked Ruth on.” But, oddly enough, Ruth Fielding’s first interest in the success of the new picture was in what effect it might have upon Uncle Jabez Potter’s purse.

The drive for Red Cross contributions was on now all over the country. That effort confined to the county in which Cheslow and the Red Mill were located had begun early; but it had gone stumblingly. Indeed, as Helen said, if it was a drive, it was about like driving home the cows!

Mr. Cameron had expected much of Ruth and his own daughter among the farming people; but they were actually behind the collectors who worked in the towns. It was at a time in the year when the men of the scattered communities were working hard out of doors; and it is difficult to interest farmers in anything but their crops during the growing season. Indeed, it is absolutely necessary that they should give their main attention to those crops if a good harvest is to be secured.

But Ruth felt that she was failing in this work for the Red Cross just because she could not interest her uncle, the old miller, sufficiently in the matter. If she could not get him enthused, how could she expect to obtain large contributions from strangers?

After seeing a screen production of Ruth’s play of the old West Uncle Jabez had for the first time realized what a really wonderful thing the filming of such pictures was. He admitted that Ruth’s time was not being thrown away.

Then, he respected the ability of anybody who could make money, and he saw this girl, whom he had “taken in out of charity” as he had more than once said, making more money in a given time—and making it more easily—than he did in his mill and through his mortgages and mining investments.

If Uncle Jabez did not actually bow down to the Golden Calf, he surely did think highly of financial success. And he had begun to realize that all this education Ruth had been getting (quite unnecessary he had first believed) had led her into a position where she was “making good.”

Through this slant in Uncle Jabez’s mind the girl began to hope that she might encourage him to do much more for the cause her heart was so set on than he seemed willing to do. Uncle Jabez was patriotic, but his patriotism had not as yet affected his pocket.

As soon as Uncle Jabez knew that Ruth contemplated helping to make another picture he showed interest. He wanted to know about it, and he figured with Aunt Alvira "how much that gal might make out'n her idee."

"For goodness' sake, Jabez Potter!" exclaimed the little old woman, "ain't you got airy idee in your head 'cept money making?"

"I calc'late," said the miller grimly, "that it's my idee about money in the past has give me what I've got."

"But our Ruthie is going to git up a big, patriotic picture—somethin' to stir the hearts of the people when they think the boys air actually going over to help them French folks win the war."

"I wish," cried the old woman shrilly, "that I warn't too old and too crooked, to do something myself for the soldiers. But my back an' my bones won't let me, Jabez. And I ain't got no bank account. All I can do is to pray."

The miller looked at her with his usual grim smile. Perhaps it was a little quizzical on this occasion.

"Do you calc'late to do any prayin' about this here filum Ruth is going to make, 'The Boys of the Draft'?" he asked.

"I sartinly be—for her success and the good it may do."

"By gum! she'll make money, then," declared Uncle Jabez, who had unbounded faith in the religion Aunt Alvira professed—but he did not.

Ruth, hearing this, developed another of her inspirational ideas. Uncle Jabez fell into a trap she laid for him, after having taken Mr. Hammond into her confidence regarding what she proposed doing.

"I reckon you'll make a mint of money out'n this draft story," the miller said one evening, when the actual work on the photographing of the film was well under way.

"I hope so," admitted Ruth slowly. "But I am afraid some parts of it will have to be cut or changed because it would cost more than Mr. Hammond cares to put into it at this time. You know, the Alectrion Corporation is in the field with several big things, and it takes a lot of money."

"Why don't he borry it?" demanded the miller sharply.

"He never does that. The only way in which he accepts outside capital is to let moneyed men buy into a picture he is making, taking their chance along with the

rest of us that the picture will be a success.”

“Yep. An’ if it ain’t a success?” asked the miller shrewdly.

“Then their money is lost.”

“Ahem! That’s a hard sayin’,” muttered the old man. “But if it does make a hit—like that Forty-Niner story of yourn, Niece Ruth—then the feller that buys in makes a nice little pile?”

“Our successes,” Ruth said with pride, “have run from fifty to two hundred per cent profit.”

“My soul! Two hunderd! Ain’t that perfec’ly scand’lous?” muttered Uncle Jabez. “An’ here jest last week I let Amos Blodgett have a thousand dollars on his farm at five an’ a ha’f per cent.”

“But that investment is perfectly safe,” Ruth said slyly.

“My soul! Yes. Blodgett’s lower forty’s wuth more’n the mortgage. But sech winnin’s as you speak of——! Niece Ruth how much is needed to make this picture the kind of a picture you want it to be?”

She told him—as she and Mr. Hammond had already agreed. The idea was to divide the cost in three parts and let Uncle Jabez invest to the amount of one of the shares if he would.

“But, you see, Uncle Jabez, Mr. Hammond does not feel as confident as I do about ‘The Boys of the Draft,’ nor has he the same deep interest in the picture. I want it to be a success—and I believe it will be—because of the good it will do the Red Cross campaign for funds.”

“Humph!” grunted the miller. “I’m bankin’ on your winnin’ anyway.” And perhaps his belief in the efficacy of Aunt Alvirah Boggs’ prayers had something to do with his “buying into” the new picture.

The screening of the great film was rushed. A campaign of advertising was entered into and the fact that a share of the profits from the film was to be devoted to Red Cross work made it popular at once. But Uncle Jabez showed some chagrin.

“What’s the meanin’ of it?” he demanded. “Who’s goin’ to give his share of the profits to any Red Cross? Not me!”

“But I am, Uncle Jabez,” Ruth said lightly. “That was my intention from the first. But, of course, that has nothing to do with you.”

“I sh’d say not! I sh’d say not!” grumbled the miller. “I ain’t likely to git into a good thing an’ then throw the profit away. I sh’d say not!”

The film was shown in New York, in several other big cities, and in Cheslow simultaneously. Ruth arranged for this first production with the proprietor of the best movie house in the local town, because she was anxious to see it and could not spare the time to go to New York.

Mr. Hammond, as though inspired by Ruth’s example, telegraphed on the day of the first exhibition of the film that he would donate his share of the profits as well to the Red Cross.

“‘Nother dern fool!” sputtered Uncle Jabez. “Never see the beat. Wal! if you’n he both want to give ‘way a small fortune, it’s your own business, I suppose. All the less need of me givin’ any of my share.”

He went with Ruth to see the production of the film. Indeed, he would not have missed that “first night” for the world. The pretty picture house was crowded. It had got so that when anything from the pen of the girl of the Red Mill was produced the neighbors made a gala day of it.

Ruth Fielding was proud of her success. And she had nothing on this occasion to be sorry for, the film being a splendid piece of work.

But, aside from this fact, “The Boys of the Draft” was opportune, and the audience was more than usually sensitive. The very next day the first quota of the drafted boys from Cheslow would march away to the training camp.

The hearts of the people were stirred. They saw a faithful reproduction of what the boys would go through in training, what they might endure in the trenches, and particularly what the Red Cross was doing for soldiers under similar conditions elsewhere.

As though spellbound, Uncle Jabez sat through the long reel. The appeal at the end, with the Red Cross nurse in the hospital ward, the dying soldier’s head pillowed upon her breast while she whispered the comfort into his dulling ear that his mother would have whispered——

Ah, it brought the audience to its feet at the “fadeout”—and in tears! It was so human, so real, so touching, that there was little audible comment as they filed out to the soft playing of the organ.

But Uncle Jabez burst out helplessly when they were in the street. He wiped the tears from the hard wrinkles of his old face with frankness and his voice was husky as he declared:

“Niece Ruth! I’m converted to your Red Cross. Dern it all! you kin have ev’ry cent of my share of the profit on that picter—ev’ry cent!”

CHAPTER VII—ON THE WAY

Tom Cameron came home on a furlough from the officers' training camp the day that the boys of the first draft departed from Cheslow. It stabbed the hearts of many mothers and fathers with a quick pain to see him march through the street so jaunty and debonair.

"Why, Tommy!" his sister cried. "You're a *man*!"

"Lay off! Lay off!" begged her twin, not at all pleased. "You might have awakened to the fact that I was out of rompers some years ago. Your eyesight has been bad."

Indeed, he was rather inclined to ignore her and "flock with his father," as Helen put it to Ruth. The father and son had something in common now that the girl could not altogether understand. They sat before the cold grate in the library, their chairs drawn near to each other, and smoked sometimes for an hour without saying a word.

"But, Ruthie," Helen said, her eyes big and moist, "each seems to know just what the other is thinking about. Sometimes papa says a word, and sometimes Tom; and the other nods and there is perfect understanding. It—it's almost uncanny."

"I think I know what you mean," said the more observant girl of the Red Mill. "We grew up some time ago, Helen. And you know we have rather thought of Tom as a boy, still."

"But he is a man now. There is a difference in the sexes in their attitude to this war which should establish in all our minds that we are not equal."

"Who aren't equal?" demanded Helen, almost wrathfully, for she was a militant feminist.

"Men and women are not equal, dear. And they never will be. Wearing mannish clothes and doing mannish labor will never give women the same outlook upon life that men have. And when men encourage us to believe that our minds are the

same as theirs, they do it almost always for their own selfish ends—or because there is something feminine about their minds.”

“Traitor!” cried Helen.

“No,” sighed Ruth. “Only honesty.

“Tom and his father understand each other’s thoughts and feelings as you and your father never could. After all, in the strongest association between father and daughter there is the barrier of sex that cannot be surmounted. You know yourself, Helen, that at a certain point you consider your father much of a big boy and treat him accordingly. That, they tell us, is the ‘mother instinct’ in the female, and I guess it is.

“On the other hand, I have seen girls and their mothers together (we never had mothers after we were little kiddies, Helen, and we’ve missed it) but I have seen such perfect understanding and appreciation between mothers and their daughters that it was as though the same soul dwelt in two bodies.”

Helen sniffed in mingled scorn and doubt over Ruth’s philosophy. Then she said in an aggrieved tone: “But papa and Tom ought not to shut me out of their lives—even in a small way.”

“The penalty of being a girl,” replied Ruth, practically. “Tom doesn’t believe, I suppose, that girls would quite understand his manly feelings,” she added with a sudden elfish smile.

“Cat’s foot!” ejaculated the twin, with scorn.

Tom Cameron, however, did not run altogether true to form if Ruth was right in her philosophy. He had always been used to talking seriously at times with Ruth, and during this furlough he found time to have a long and confidential talk with the girl of the Red Mill. This might be the only furlough he would have before sailing for France, for he had already obtained his commission as second lieutenant.

There was an understanding between the young man and Ruth Fielding—an unspoken and tacit feeling that they were “made for each other.” They were young. Ruth’s thoughts had never dwelt much upon love and marriage. She never looked on each man she met half-wonderingly as a possible husband. She had never met any man with this feeling. Perhaps, in part, that was, unconsciously to herself, because Tom had always been so a part of her life and her thoughts. Lately, however, she had come to the realization that if Tom should really ask her to marry him when his education was completed and he was

established in the world, the girl of the Red Mill would be very likely to consider his offer seriously.

“Things aren’t coming out just as we had planned, Ruth,” the young man said on this occasion. “I guess this war is going to knock a lot of plans in the head. If it lasts several years, many of us fellows, if we come through it safely, will feel that we are too old to go back to college.

“Can you imagine a fellow who has spent months in the trenches, and has done the things that the soldiers are having to do and to endure and to learn over there—can you imagine his coming back here and going to school again?”

“Oh, Tom! I suppose that is so. The returned soldier must feel vastly older and more experienced in every way than men who have never heard the bursting of shells and the rattle of machine guns. Oh, dear, Tommy! Are we going to know you at all when you come back?”

“Maybe not,” grinned Tom. “I may raise whiskers. Most of the poilus do, I understand. But you could not really imagine a regiment of Uncle Sam’s soldiers that were not clean shaven.”

“We want to see it all, too—Helen and I,” Ruth said, sighing. “We are so far away from the front.”

“Goodness!” he exclaimed. “I should think you would be glad.”

“But some women must go,” Ruth told him gravely. “Why not us?”

“You—— Well, I don’t know about you, Ruth. You seem somehow different. I expect you could look out for yourself anywhere. But Helen hasn’t got your sense.”

“Hear him!” gasped Ruth.

“It’s true,” he declared doggedly. “She hasn’t. Father and I have talked it over. Nell is crazy to go—and I tell father he would be crazy to let her. But it may be that he will go to London and Paris himself, for there is some work he can do for the Government. Of course, Helen would insist upon accompanying him in that event.”

“Oh, Tom!” exclaimed Ruth again.

“Why, they’d take you along, of course, if you wanted to go,” said Tom.

“But I don’t wish to go in any such way,” the girl of the Red Mill declared. “I want to go for just one purpose—to *help*. And it must be something worth while.

There will be enough dilettante assistants in every branch of the work. My position must mean something to the cause, as well as to me, or I will stay right here in Cheslow."

He looked at her with the old admiration dawning in his eyes.

"Ah! The same old Ruthie, aren't you?" he murmured. "The same independent, ambitious girl, whose work must *count*. Well, I fancy your chance will come. We all seem to be on our way. I wonder to what end?"

There was no sentimental outcome of their talk. After all they were only over the line between boy-and-girlhood and the grown-up state. Tom was too much of a man to wish to anchor a girl to him by any ties when the future was so uncertain. And nothing had really ever happened to them to stir those deeper passions which must rise to the surface when two people talk of love.

They were merely the best of friends. They had no other ties of a warmer nature than those which bound them in friendship to each other. They felt confidence in each other if the future was propitious; but now——

"I am sure you will make your mark in the army, Tom, dear," Ruth said to him. "And I shall think of you—wherever you are and wherever I am—always!"

CHAPTER VIII—THE NEAREST DUTY

The county drive for Red Cross funds had been a great success; and many people declared that Ruth's work had been that which had told the most in the effort. Uncle Jabez inspired many of the more parsimonious of the county to follow his lead in giving to the cause. And, of course, "The Boys of the Draft" was making money for the Red Cross all over the country, as well as in and about Cheslow.

After Tom Cameron went back to camp Ruth's longing for real service in the war work fairly obsessed her mind. She could, of course, offer herself to do some unimportant work in France, paying her own transportation and expenses, and become one of that small army of women who first went over, many of whom were more ornamental, if the truth were told, than useful in the grim work that was to follow.

But the girl of the Red Mill, as she told Tom Cameron, wished to make whatever she did count. Yet she was spurred by no inordinate desire for praise or adulation. Merely she wanted to feel that she actually was doing her all for Uncle Sam.

Being untrained in nursing it could not be hospital work—not of the usual kind. Ruth wanted something that her capabilities fitted. Something she could do and do well. Something that was of a responsible nature and would count in the long run for the cause of humanity.

Meanwhile she did not refuse the small duties that fell to her lot. She was always ready to "jump in" and do her share in any event. Helen often said that her chum's doctrinal belief was summed up in the quotation from the Sunday school hymn: "You in your small corner, and I in mine!"

One day at the Cheslow chapter it was said that there was need of somebody who could help out in the supply department of the State Headquarters in Robinsburg. A woman or girl was desired who would not have to be paid a salary, and preferably one who could pay her own living expenses.

"That's me!" exclaimed Ruth to Helen. "I certainly can fill that bill."

“But it really amounts to nothing, dear,” her chum said doubtfully. “It seems a pity to waste your brain and perfectly splendid ideas for organization and the like in such a position.”

“Fiddle-de-dee!” ejaculated Ruth, quoting Uncle Jabez. “Nobody has yet appreciated my ‘perfectly splendid ideas of organization,’” and she repeated the phrase with some scorn, “so I would better put forward some of my more simple talents. I have a good head for figures, I can letter packages, I can even stick stamps on letters and do other office work. My capabilities will not be strained. And, then,” she added, “I feel that in State Headquarters I may be in a better position to ‘grab off’ something really worth while.”

“‘Johannah on the spot,’ as it were?” said Helen. “But you’ll have to go down there to live, Ruthie.”

“The Y. W. C. A. will take me in, I am sure,” declared her friend. “I am not afraid of being alone in a great city—at my age and with my experience!”

She telephoned to Robinsburg and was told to come on. Naturally, by this time, the heads of the State Red Cross, at least, knew who Ruth Fielding was.

But every girl who had raised a large sum of money for the cause was not suited to such work as was waiting for her at headquarters. She knew that she must prove her fitness.

Helen took her over in the car the next morning and was inclined to be tearful when they separated.

“Just does seem as though I couldn’t get on without you, Ruthie!” she cried.

“Why, you are worse than poor Aunt Alvirah! Every time I go away from home she acts as though I might never come back again. And as for you, Helen Cameron, you have plenty to do. You have my share of Red Cross work in Cheslow to do as well as your own. Don’t forget that.”

Headquarters was a busy place. The very things Ruth told Helen she could do, she did do—and a multitude besides. Everything was systematized, and the work went on in a businesslike manner. Everybody was working hard and unselfishly.

At least, so Ruth at first thought. Then, before she had been there two days, she chanced into another department upon an errand and came face to face with Mrs. Rose Mantel, the woman in black.

“Oh! How d’do!” said the woman with her set smile. “I heard you were coming here to help us, Miss Fielding. Hope you’ll like it.”

“I hope so,” Ruth returned gravely.

She had very little to say to the woman in black, although the latter, as the days passed, seemed desirous of ingratiating herself into the college girl’s good opinion. But that Mrs. Mantel could not do.

It seemed that Mrs. Mantel was an expert bookkeeper and accountant. She confided to Ruth that, before she had married and “dear Herny” had died, she had been engaged in the offices of one of the largest cotton brokerage houses in New Orleans. She still had a little money left from “poor Herny’s” insurance, and she could live on that while she was “doing her bit” for the Red Cross.

Ruth made no comment. Of a sudden Mrs. Mantel seemed to have grown patriotic. No more did she repeat slanders of the Red Cross, but was working for that organization.

Ruth Fielding would not forbid a person “seeing the light” and becoming converted to the worthiness of the cause; but somehow she could not take Mrs. Mantel and her work at their face value.

Gradually, as the weeks fled, Ruth became acquainted with others of the busy workers; with Mr. Charles Mayo, who governed this headquarters and seldom spoke of anything save the work—so she did not know whether he had a family, or social life, or anything else but just Red Cross.

There was a Mr. Legrand, whom she did not like so well. He seemed to be a Frenchman, although he spoke perfect English. He was a dark man with steady, keen eyes behind thick lenses, and, unusual enough in this day, he wore a heavy beard. His voice was a bark, but it did not seem that he meant to be unpleasant.

Legrand and a man named José, who could be nothing but a Mexican, often were with the woman in black—both in the offices and out of them. Ruth took her meals at a restaurant near by, although she roomed in the Y. W. C. A. building, as she said she should. In that restaurant she often saw the woman in black dining with her two cavaliers, as Ruth secretly termed Legrand and José.

It was a trio that the girl of the Red Mill found herself interested in, but with whom she wished to have nothing to do.

All sorts and conditions of people, however, were turning to Red Cross work. “Why,” Ruth asked herself, “criticize the intentions of any of them?” She felt sometimes as though her condemnation of Mrs. Mantel, even though secret, was really wicked.

But in the bookkeeping and accounting department—handling the funds that

came in, as well as the expense accounts—a dishonest person might do much harm to the cause. And Ruth knew in her heart that Mrs. Mantel was not an honest woman.

Her tale that day at the Ladies' Aid Society, in Cheslow, had been false—strictly false. The woman knew it at the time, and she knew it now. Ruth was sure that every time Mrs. Mantel looked at her with her set smile she was thinking that Ruth had caught her in a prevarication and had not forgotten it.

Yet the girl of the Red Mill felt that she could say nothing about Mrs. Mantel to Mr. Mayo, or to anybody else in authority. She had no proved facts.

Besides, she had never been so busy before in all her life, and Ruth Fielding was no sluggard. It seemed as though every moment of her waking hours was filled and running over with duties.

She often worked long into the evening in her department at the Red Cross bureau. She might have missed the folks at home and her girl friends more had it not been for the work that crowded upon her.

One evening, as she came down from the loft above the business office where she had been working alone, she remarked that there was a light in the office. Mrs. Mantel and her assistants did not usually work at night.

The door stood ajar. Ruth looked in with frank curiosity. She saw Mr. José, the black-looking Mexican, alone in the room. He had taken both of the chemical fire extinguishers from the wall—one had hung at one end of the room and the other at the other end—and was doing something to them. Repairing them, perhaps, or merely cleaning them. He sat there cheerfully whistling in a low tone and manipulating a polishing rag, or something of the kind. He had a bucket beside him.

“I wonder if he can't sleep nights, and that is why he is so busily engaged?” thought Ruth, as she went on out of the building. “I never knew of his being so workative before.”

But the matter made no real impression on her mind. It was a transitory thought entirely. She went to her clean little cell in the Y. W. C. A. home and forgot all about Mr. José and the fire extinguishers.

CHAPTER IX—TOM SAILS, AND SOMETHING ELSE HAPPENS

“You can see your son, Second Lieutenant Thomas Cameron, before he sails for France, if you will be at the Polk Hotel, at eight o’clock to-morrow p. m.”

There have been other telegrams sent and received of more moment than the above, perhaps; but none that could have created a more profound impression in the Cameron household.

There have been not a few similar messages put on the telegraph wires and received by anxious parents during these months since America has really got into the World War.

There is every necessity for secrecy in the sailing of the transports for France. The young officers themselves have sometimes told more to their relatives than they should before the hour of sailing. So the War Department takes every precaution to safeguard the crossing of our boys who go to fight the Huns.

With Mr. Cameron holding an important government position and being ready himself to go across before many weeks, it was only natural that he should have this information sent him that he might say good-bye to Tom. The latter had already been a fortnight with “his boys” in the training camp and was fixed in his assignment to his division of the expeditionary forces.

Ruth chanced to be at the Outlook, as the Cameron home was called, for over Sunday when this telegram was received. Both she and Helen were vastly excited.

“Oh, I’m going with you! I must see Tommy once more,” cried the twin with an outburst of sobs and tears that made her father very unhappy.

“My dear! You cannot,” Mr. Cameron tried to explain.

“I can! I must!” the girl cried. “I know I’ll never see Tommy again. He—he’s going over there to—to be shot——”

“Don’t, dear!” begged Ruth, taking her chum into her arms. “You must not talk that way. This is war——”

“And is war altogether a man’s game? Aren’t we to have anything to say about it, or what the Government shall do with our brothers?”

“It is no game,” sighed Ruth Fielding. “It is a very different thing. And our part in it is to give, and give generously. Our loved ones if we must.”

“I don’t want to give Tom!” Helen declared. “I can never be patriotic enough to give him to the country. And that’s all there is to it!”

“Be a good girl, Helen, and brace up,” advised her father, but quite appreciating the girl’s feelings. There had always been a bond between the Cameron twins stronger than that between most brothers and sisters.

“I know I shall never see him again,” wailed the girl.

“I hope he’ll not hear that you said that, dear,” said the girl of the Red Mill, shaking her head. “We must send him away with cheerfulness. You tell him from me, Mr. Cameron, that I send my love and I hope he will come back a major at least.”

“He’ll be killed!” Helen continued to wail. “I know he will!”

But that did not help things a mite. Mr. Cameron went off late that night and reached the rendezvous called for in the telegram. It was in a port from which several transports were sailing within a few hours, and he came back with a better idea of what it meant for thousands of men under arms to get away on a voyage across the seas.

Tom was busy with his men; but he had time to take supper with his father at the hotel and then got permission for Mr. Cameron to go aboard the ship with him and see how comfortable the War Department had made things for the expeditionary force.

Mr. Cameron stopped at Robinsburg on his return to tell Ruth about it, for she had returned to Headquarters, of course, on Monday, and was working quite as hard as before. He brought, too, a letter for Ruth from Tom, and just what their soldier-boy said in that missive the girl of the Red Mill never told.

Ruth was left, when her friends’ father went on to Cheslow, with a great feeling of emptiness in her life. It was not alone because of Tom’s departure for France; Mr. Cameron and Helen, too, would soon go across the sea.

Mr. Cameron had repeated Helen’s offer—that Ruth should accompany them. But the girl, though grateful, refused. She did not for a moment belittle his efforts for the Government, or Helen’s interest in the war.

But Mr. Cameron was a member of a commission that was to investigate certain matters and come back to make report. He would not be over there long.

As for Helen, Ruth was quite sure she would join some association of wealthy women and girls in Paris, as Jennie Stone had, and consider that she was “doing her bit.” Ruth wanted something more real than that. She was in earnest. She did not wish to be carefully sheltered from all hard work and even from the dangers “over there.” She desired a real part in what was going forward.

Nevertheless, while waiting her chance, she did not allow herself to become gloomy or morose. That was not Ruth Fielding’s way.

“I always know where to come when I wish to see a cheerful face,” Mr. Mayo declared, putting his head in at her door one day. “You always have a smile on tap. How do you do it?”

“I practice before my glass every morning,” Ruth declared, laughing. “But sometimes, during the day, I’m afraid my expression slips. I can’t always remember to smile when I am counting and packing these sweaters, and caps, and all, for the poor boys who, some of them, are going to stand up and be shot, or gassed, or blinded by liquid fire.”

“It is hard,” sighed the chief, wagging his head. “If it wasn’t knowing that we are doing just a little good——But not as much as I could wish! Collections seem very small. Our report is not going to be all I could wish this month.”

He went away, leaving Ruth with a thought that did not make it any easier for her to smile. She saw people all day long coming into the building and seeking out the cashier’s desk, where Mrs. Mantel sat, to hand over contributions of money to the Red Cross. If only each brought a dollar there should be a large sum added to the local treasury each day.

There was no way of checking up these payments. The money passed through the hands of the lady in black and only by her accounts on the day ledger and a system of card index taken from that ledger by Mr. Legrand, who worked as her assistant, could the record be found of the moneys contributed to the Red Cross at this station.

Ruth Fielding was not naturally of a suspicious disposition; but the honesty of Mrs. Mantel and the real interest of that woman in the cause were still keenly questioned in Ruth’s mind.

She wondered if Mr. Mayo knew who the woman really was. Was her story of widowhood, and of her former business experience in New Orleans strictly

according to facts? What might be learned about the woman in black if inquiry was made in that Southern city?

Yet at times Ruth would have felt condemned for her suspicions had it not been for the daily sight of Mrs. Mantel's hard smile and her black, glittering eyes.

"Snakes' eyes," thought the girl of the Red Mill. "Quite as bright and quite as malevolent. Mrs. Mantel certainly does not love me, despite her soft words and sweet smile."

There was some stir in the headquarters at last regarding a large draft of Red Cross workers to make up another expeditionary force to France. Two full hospital units were going and a base supply unit as well. Altogether several hundred men and women would sail in a month's time for the other side.

Ruth's heart beat quicker at the thought. Was there a prospect for her to go over in some capacity with this quota?

Most of the candidates for all departments of the expeditionary force were trained in the work they were to do. It was ridiculous to hope for an appointment in the hospital force. No nurse among them all had served less than two years in a hospital, and many of them had served three and four.

She asked Mr. Mayo what billets there were open in the supply unit; but the chief did not know. The State had supplied few workers as yet who had been sent abroad; Robinsburg, up to this time, none at all.

"Why, Miss Fielding, you must not think of going over there!" he cried. "We need you here. If all our dependable women go to France, how shall we manage here?"

"You would manage very well," Ruth told him. "This should be a training school for the work over there. I know that I can give any intelligent girl such an idea of my work in three weeks that you would never miss me."

"Impossible, Miss Fielding!"

"Quite possible, I assure you. I want to go. I feel I can do more over there than I can here. A thousand girls who can't go could be found to do what I do here. Approve my application, will you please, Mr. Mayo?"

He did this after some hesitation. "Am I going to lose everybody at once?" he grumbled.

"Why, only poor little me," laughed Ruth Fielding.

“Yours is the seventh application I have O.K.’d. And several others may ask yet. The fire is spreading.”

“Oh! Who?”

“We are going to lose Mrs. Mantel for one. I understand that the Red Cross wants her for a much more important work in France.”

For a little while Ruth doubted after all if she so much desired to go to France. The fact that Mrs. Mantel was going came as a shock to her mind and made her hesitate. Suppose she should meet the woman in black over there? Suppose her work should be connected with that of the woman whom she so much suspected and disliked?

Then her better sense and her patriotism came to the force. What had she to do with Mrs. Mantel, after all? She was not the woman’s keeper. Nor could it be possible that Mrs. Mantel would disturb herself much over Ruth Fielding, no matter where they might meet.

Was Ruth Fielding willing to work for the Red Cross only in ways that would be wholly pleasant and with people of whom she could entirely approve? The girl asked herself this seriously.

She put the thought behind her with distaste at her own narrowness of vision. Born of Yankee stock, she was naturally conservative to the very marrow of her bones. This New England attitude is not altogether a curse; but it sometimes leads one out of broad paths.

Surely the work was broad enough for both her and the woman in black to do what they might without conflict. “I’ll do my part; what has Mrs. Mantel to do with me?” she determined.

Before Ruth had a chance to tell her chum of the application she had put in, Helen wrote her hurriedly that Mr. Cameron’s commission was to sail in two days from Boston. Ruth could not leave her work, but she wrote a long letter to her dearest chum and sent it by special delivery to the Boston hotel, where she knew the Camerons would stop for a night.

It really seemed terrible, that her chum and her father should go without Ruth seeing them again; but she did not wish to leave her work while her application for an assignment to France was pending. It might mean that she would lose her chance altogether.

She only told Helen in the letter that she, too, hoped to be “over there” some day soon.

But several days slipped by and her case was not mentioned by Mr. Mayo. It seemed pretty hard to Ruth. She was ready and able to go and nobody wanted her!

The weather chanced to be unpleasant, too, and that is often closely linked up to one's very deepest feelings. Ruth's philosophy could not overcome the effect of a foggy, dripping day. Her usual cheerfulness dropped several degrees.

It drew on toward evening, and the patter of raindrops on the panes grew louder. The glistening umbrellas in the street, as she looked down upon them from the window, looked like many, many black mushrooms. Ruth knew she would have a dreary evening.

Suddenly she heard a door bang on the floor below—a shout and then a crash of glass. Next——

“Fire! Fire! Fire!”

In an instant she was out of her room and at the head of the stairs. It was an old building—a regular firetrap. Mr. Mayo had dashed out of his office and was shouting up the stairs:

“Come down! Down, every one of you! Fire!”

Through the open transom over the door of Mrs. Mantel's office Ruth saw that one end of the room was ablaze.

CHAPTER X—SUSPICIONS

There was a patter of feet overhead and racing down the stairway came half a dozen frightened people. They had been aroused by Mr. Mayo's shout, and they knew that if the flames reached the stairway first they would be driven to the fire escape.

There seemed little danger of the fire reaching the stairs, however; for when Ruth got to the lower hall the door of the burning office had been opened again, and she saw one of the porters squirting the chemical fire extinguisher upon the blaze.

Mr. Legrand had flung open the door, and he was greatly excited. He held his left hand in his right, as though it were hurt.

"Where is Mrs. Mantel?" demanded Mr. Mayo.

"Gone!" gasped Legrand. "Lucky she did. That oil spread all over her desk and papers. It's all afire."

"I was opening a gallon of lubricating oil. It broke and spurted everywhere. I cut myself—see?"

He showed his hand. Ruth saw that blood seemed to be running from the cut freely. But she was more interested in the efforts of the porter. His extinguisher seemed to be doing very little good.

Ruth heard Mr. Mayo trying to discover the cause of the fire; but Mr. Legrand seemed unable to tell that. He ran out to a drugstore to have his hand attended to.

Mr. Mayo seized the second extinguisher from the wall. The porter flung his down, at the same time yelling:

"No good! No good, I tell you, Mr. Mayo! Everything's got to go. Those extinguishers must be all wrong. The chemicals have evaporated, or something."

Mr. Mayo tried the one he had seized with no better result. While this was going on Ruth Fielding suddenly remembered something—remembered it with a shock. She had seen the man, José, tampering with those same extinguishers

some days before.

While a certain spray was puffed forth from the nozzle of the extinguisher, it seemed to have no effect on the flames which were, as the porter declared, spreading rapidly.

Mrs. Mantel's big desk and the file cabinet were all afire. Nothing could save the papers and books.

An alarm had been turned in by somebody, and now the first of the fire department arrived. These men brought in extinguishers that had an effect upon the flames at once. The fire was quite quenched in five minutes more.

Ruth had retreated to Mr. Mayo's office. She heard one of the fire chiefs talking to the gentleman at the doorway.

"What caused that blaze anyway?" the fireman demanded.

"I understand some oil was spilled."

"What kind of oil?" snapped the other.

"Lubricating oil."

"Nonsense! It acted more like benzine or naphtha to me. But you haven't told me how it got lit up?"

"I don't know. The porter says he first saw flames rising from the waste basket between the big desk and the file cabinet," Mr. Mayo said. "Then the fire spread both ways."

"Well! The insurance adjusters will be after you. I've got to report my belief. Looks as though somebody had been mighty careless with some inflammable substance. What were you using oil at all for here?"

"I—I could not tell you," Mr. Mayo said. "I will ask Mr. Legrand when he comes back."

But Ruth learned in the morning that Legrand had not returned. Nobody seemed to know where he lived. Mrs. Mantel said he had moved recently, but she did not know where to.

The insurance adjusters did make a pertinent inquiry about the origin of the fire. But nobody had been in the office with Legrand when it started save the porter, and he had already told all he had seen. There was no reason for charging anybody else with carelessness but the missing man.

Save in one particular. Mrs. Mantel seemed horror-stricken when she saw the

charred remains of her desk and the file cabinet. The files of cards were completely destroyed. The cards were merely brown husks—those that were not ashes. The records of contributions for six months past were completely burned.

“But you, fortunately, have the ledgers in the safe, have you not, Mrs. Mantel?” the Chief said.

The woman in black broke down and wept. “How careless you will think me, Mr. Mayo,” she cried. “I left the two ledgers on my desk. Legrand said he wished to compare certain figures——”

“The ledgers are destroyed, too?” gasped the man.

“There are their charred remains,” declared the woman, pointing dramatically to the burned debris where her desk had stood.

There was not a line to show how much had been given to the Red Cross at this station, or who had given it! When Mr. Mayo opened the safe he found less than two thousand dollars in cash and checks and noted upon the bank deposit book; and the month was almost ended. Payment was made to Headquarters of all collections every thirty days.

Mrs. Mantel seemed heartbroken. Legrand did not appear again at the Red Cross rooms. But the woman in black declared that the funds as shown in the safe must be altogether right, for she had locked the safe herself and remembered that the funds were not more than the amount found.

“But we have had some large contributions during the month, Mrs. Mantel,” Mr. Mayo said weakly.

“Not to my knowledge, Mr. Mayo,” the woman declared, her eyes flashing. “Our contributions for some weeks have been scanty. People are getting tired of giving to the Red Cross, I fear.”

Ruth heard something of this discussion, but not all. She did not know what to think about Mrs. Mantel and Legrand. And then, there was José, the man whom she had seen tampering with the fire extinguishers!

Should she tell Mr. Mayo of her suspicions? Or should she go to the office of the fire insurance adjustors? Or should she keep completely out of the matter?

Had Mr. Mayo been a more forceful man Ruth might have given him her confidence. But she feared that, although he was a hard-working official and loyal to the core, he did not possess the quality of wisdom necessary to enable him to handle the situation successfully.

Besides, just at this time, she heard from New York. Her application had been investigated and she was informed that she would be accepted for work with the base supply unit about to sail for France, with the proviso, of course, that she passed the medical examination and would pay her share of the unit's expenses and for her own support.

She had to tell Mr. Mayo, bid good-bye to her fellow workers, and leave Robinsburg within two hours. She had only three days to make ready before going to New York, and she wished to spend all of that time at the Red Mill.

Chapter XI—SAID IN GERMAN

Ruth Fielding had made preparations for travel many times before; but this venture she was about to undertake was different from her previous flights from the Red Mill.

“Oh, my pretty! Oh, my pretty!” sighed Aunt Alvira Boggs. “It seems as though this life is just made up of partings. You ain’t no more to home than you’re off again. And how do I know I shall ever set my two eyes on you once more, Ruthie?”

“I’ve always come back so far, Aunt Alvira—like the bad penny that I am,” Ruth told her cheerfully.

“Oh, my back! and oh, my bones!” groaned Aunt Alvira, sinking into her chair by the sunny window. “No bad penny in your case, my pretty. Your returns air always like that of the bluebird’s in the spring—and jest as much for happiness as they say the bluebird is. What would your Uncle Jabez and me do without you?”

“But it will be only for a few months. I might remain away as long if I returned to Ardmore for my junior year.”

“Ah, but that’s not like going away over to France where there is so much danger and trouble,” the little old woman objected.

“Don’t worry about me, dear,” urged Ruth, with great gentleness.

“We don’t know what may happen,” continued Aunt Alvira. “A single month at my time o’ life is longer’n a year at your age, my pretty.”

“Oh, I am sure to come back,” Ruth cried.

“We’ll hope so. I shall pray for you, my pretty. But there’ll be fear eatin’ at our hearts every day that you are so far from us.”

Uncle Jabez likewise expressed himself as loath to have her go; yet his extreme patriotism inspired him to wish her Godspeed cheerfully.

“I vum! I’d like to be goin’ with you. Only with Old Betsey on my shoulder!” declared the miller. “You don’t want to take the old gun with you, do you, Niece Ruth?” he added, with twinkling eyes. “I’ve had her fixed. And she ought to be able to shoot a Hun or two yet.”

“I am not going to shoot Germans,” said Ruth, shaking her head. “I only hope to do what I can in saving our boys after the battles. I can’t even nurse them—poor dears! My all that I do seems so little.”

“Ha!” grunted Uncle Jabez. “I reckon you’ll do full and plenty. If you don’t it’ll be the first time in your life that you fall down on a job.”

Which was remarkably warm commendation for the miller to give, and Ruth appreciated it deeply.

He drove her to town himself and put her on the train for New York. “Don’t you git into no more danger over there than you kin help, Niece Ruth,” he urged. “Good-bye!”

She traveled alone to the metropolis, and that without hearing from or seeing any of her fellow-workers at the Red Cross rooms in Robinsburg. She did wonder much, however, what the outcome of the fire had been.

What had become of Mrs. Rose Mantel, the woman in black? Had she been finally suspected by Mr. Mayo, and would she be refused further work with the organization because of the outcome of the fire? Ruth could not but believe that the conflagration had been caused to cover shortages in the Red Cross accounts.

At the Grand Central Terminal Ruth was met by a very lovely lady, a worker in the Red Cross, who took her home to her Madison Avenue residence, where Ruth was to remain for the few days she was to be in the city.

“It is all I can do,” said the woman smiling, when Ruth expressed her wonder that she should have turned her beautiful home into a clearing house for Red Cross workers. “It is all I can do. I am quite alone now, and it cheers me and gives me new topics of interest to see and care for the splendid girls who are really going over there to help our soldiers.”

Later Ruth Fielding learned that this woman’s two sons were both in France—one in a medical corps and the other in the trenches. She had already given her all, it seemed; but she could not do too much for the country.

The several girls the lady entertained at this time had little opportunity for amusement. The Red Cross ship was to sail within forty-eight hours.

Ruth was able to meet many of the members of her supply unit, and found them a most interesting group. They had come from many parts of the country and had brought with them varied ideas about the work and of what they were “going up against.”

All, however, seemed to be deeply interested in the Red Cross and the burden the war had laid upon them. They were not going to France to play, but to serve in any way possible.

There was a single disturbing element in the bustling hurry of getting under way. At this late moment the woman who had been chosen as chief of the supply unit was deterred from sailing. Serious illness in her family forced her to resign her position and remain to nurse those at home. It was quite a blow to the unit and to the Commissioner himself.

The question, Who will take her place? became the most important thought in the minds of the members of the unit. Ruth fully understood that to find a person as capable as the woman already selected would not be an easy matter.

Until the hour the party left New York for Philadelphia, the port of sail for the Red Cross ship, no candidate had been settled on by the Commissioner to head the supply unit.

“We shall find somebody. I have one person in mind right now who may be the very one. If so, this person will be shipped by a faster vessel and by another convoy than yours,” and he laughed. “You may find your chief in Paris when you get there.”

Ruth wondered to herself if they really would get there. At this time the German submarines were sinking even the steamships taking Red Cross workers and supplies across. The Huns had thrown over their last vestige of humanity.

The ship which carried the Red Cross units joined a squadron of other supply ships outside Cape May. The guard ships were a number of busy and fast sailing torpedo boat destroyers. They darted around the slower flotilla of merchant steamships like “lucky-bugs” on a millpond.

Ruth shared her outside cabin with a girl from Topeka, Kansas—an exceedingly blithe and boisterous young person.

“I never imagined there was so much water in the ocean!” declared this young woman, Clare Biggars. “Look at it! Such a perfectly awful waste of it. If the ocean is just a means of communication between countries, it needn’t be any wider than the Missouri River, need it?”

“I am glad the Atlantic is a good deal wider than that,” Ruth said seriously. “The Kaiser and his armies would have been over in our country before this in that case.”

Clare chuckled. “Lots of the farming people in my section are Germans, and three months ago they noised it abroad that New York had been attacked by submarines and flying machines and that a big army of their fellow-countrymen were landing in this country at a place called Montauk Point——”

“The end of Long Island,” interposed Ruth.

“And were going to march inland and conquer the country as they marched. They would do to New York State just what they have done to Belgium and Northern France. It was thought, by their talk, that all the Germans around Topeka would rise and seize the banks and arsenals and all.”

“Why didn’t they?” asked Ruth, much amused.

“Why,” said Clare, laughing, too, “the police wouldn’t let them.”

The German peril by sea, however, was not to be sneered at. As the fleet approached the coast of France it became evident that the officers of the Red Cross ship, as well as those of the convoy, were in much anxiety.

There seems no better way to safeguard the merchant ships than for the destroyers to sail ahead and “clear the way” for the unarmored vessels. But a sharp submarine commander may spy the coming flotilla through his periscope, sink deep to allow the destroyers to pass over him, and then rise to the surface between the destroyers and the larger ships and torpedo the latter before the naval vessels can attack the subsea boat.

For forty-eight hours none of the girls of the Red Cross supply unit had their clothing off or went to bed. They were advised to buckle on life preservers, and most of them remained on deck, watching for submarines. It was scarcely possible to get them below for meals.

The strain of the situation was great. And yet it was more excitement over the possibility of being attacked than actual fear.

“What’s the use of going across the pond at such a time if we’re not even to see a periscope?” demanded Clare. “My brother, Ben, who is coming over with the first expedition of the National Army, wagered me ten dollars I wouldn’t know a periscope if I saw one. I’d like to earn that ten. Every little bit adds to what you’ve got, you know.”

It was not the sight of a submarine periscope that startled Ruth Fielding the evening of the next-to-the-last day of the voyage. It was something she heard as she leaned upon the port rail on the main deck, quite alone, looking off across the graying water.

Two people were behind her, and out of sight around the corner of the deckhouse. One was a man, with a voice that had a compelling bark. Whether his companion was a man or a woman Ruth could not tell. But the voice she heard so distinctly began to rasp her nerves—and its familiarity troubled her, too.

Now and then she heard a word in English. Then, of a sudden, the man ejaculated in German:

“The foolish ones! As though this boat would be torpedoed with us aboard! These Americans are crazy.”

Ruth wheeled and walked quickly down the deck to the corner of the house. She saw the speaker sitting in a deck chair beside another person who was so wrapped in deck rugs that she could not distinguish what he or she looked like.

But the silhouette of the man who had uttered those last words stood out plainly between Ruth and the fading light. He was tall, with heavy shoulders, and a fat, beefy face. That smoothly shaven countenance looked like nobody that she had ever seen before; but the barking voice sounded exactly like that of Legrand, Mrs. Rose Mantel’s associate and particular friend!

CHAPTER XII—THROUGH DANGEROUS WATERS

There were a number of people aboard ship whom Ruth Fielding had not met, of course; some whom she had not even seen. And this was not to be wondered at, for the feminine members of the supply unit were grouped together in a certain series of staterooms; and they even had their meals in a second cabin saloon away from the hospital units.

She looked, for some moments, at the huge shoulders of the man who had spoken in German, hoping he would turn to face her. She had not observed him since coming aboard the ship at Philadelphia.

It seemed scarcely possible that this could be Legrand, the man who she had come to believe was actually responsible for the fire in the Robinsburg Red Cross rooms. If he was a traitor to the organization—and to the United States as well—how dared he sail on this ship for France, and with an organization of people who were sworn to work for the Red Cross?

Was he sufficiently disguised by the shaving of his beard to risk discovery? And with that peculiar, sharp, barking voice! “A Prussian drill master surely could be no more abrupt,” thought Ruth.

As the ship in these dangerous waters sailed with few lamps burning, and none at all had been turned on upon the main deck, it was too dark for Ruth to see clearly either the man who had spoken or the person hidden by the wraps in the deck chair.

She saw the spotlight in the hand of an officer up the deck and she hastened toward him. The passengers were warned not to use the little electric hand lamps outside of the cabins and passages. She was not mistaken in the identity of this person with the lamp. It was the purser.

“Oh, Mr. Savage!” she said. “Will you walk with me?”

“Bless me, Miss Fielding! you fill me with delight. This is an unexpected proposal I am sure,” he declared in his heavy, English, but good-humored way.

“‘Fash not yoursel’ wi’ pride,’ as Chief Engineer Douglas would say,” laughed Ruth. “I am going to ask you to walk with me so that you can tell me the name of another man I am suddenly interested in.”

“What! What!” cried the purser. “Who is that, I’d like to know. Who are you so suddenly interested in?”

She tried to explain the appearance of the round-shouldered man as she led the purser along the deck. But when they reached the spot where Ruth had left the individuals both had disappeared.

“I don’t know whom you could have seen,” the purser said, “unless it was Professor Perry. His stateroom is yonder—A-thirty-four. And the little chap in the deck chair might be Signor Aristo, an Italian, who rooms next door, in thirty-six.”

“I am not sure it was a man in the other chair.”

“Professor Perry has nothing to do with the ladies aboard, I assure you,” chuckled the purser. “A dry-as-dust old fellow, Perry, going to France for some kind of research work. Comes from one of your Western universities. I believe they have one in every large town, haven’t they?”

“One what?” Ruth asked.

“University,” chuckled the Englishman. “You should get acquainted with Perry, if his appearance so much interests you, Miss Fielding.”

But Ruth was in no mood for banter about the man whose appearance and words had so astonished her. She said nothing to the purser or to anybody else about what she had heard the strange man say in German. No person who belonged—really *belonged*—on this Red Cross ship, should have said what he did and in that tone!

He spoke to his companion as though there was a settled and secret understanding between them. And as though, too, he had a power of divination about what the German U-boat commanders would do, beyond the knowledge possessed by the officers of the steamship.

What could a “dry-as-dust” professor from a Western university have in common with the person known as Signor Aristo, who Ruth found was down on the ship’s list as a chef of a wealthy Fifth Avenue family, going back to his native Italy.

It was said the Signor had had a very bad passage. He had kept to his room entirely, not even appearing on deck. *Was he a man at all?*

The thought came to Ruth Fielding and would not be put away, that this small, retiring person known as Signor Aristo might be a woman. If Professor Perry was the distinguished Legrand what was more possible than that the person Ruth had seen in the deck chair was Mrs. Rose Mantel, likewise in disguise?

“Oh, dear me!” she told herself at last, “I am getting to be a regular sleuth. But my suspicions do point that way. If that woman in black and Legrand robbed the Red Cross treasury at Robinsburg, and covered their stealings by burning the records, would they be likely to leave the country in a Red Cross ship?

“That would seem preposterous. And yet, what more unlikely method of departure? It might be that such a course on the part of two criminals would be quite sure to cover their escape.”

She wondered about it much as the ship sailed majestically into the French port, safe at last from any peril of being torpedoed by the enemy. And Professor Perry had been quite sure that she was safe in any case!

Ruth saw the professor when they landed. The Italian chef she did not see at all. Nor did Ruth Fielding see anybody who looked like Mrs. Rose Mantel.

“I may be quite wrong in all my suspicions,” she thought. “I would better say nothing about them. To cause the authorities to arrest entirely innocent people would be a very wicked thing, indeed.”

Besides, there was so much to do and to see that the girl of the Red Mill could not keep her suspicions alive. This unknown world she and her mates had come to quite filled their minds with new thoughts and interests.

Their first few hours in France was an experience long to be remembered. Ruth might have been quite bewildered had it not been that her mind was so set upon the novel sights and sounds about her.

“I declare I don’t know whether I am a-foot or a-horseback!” Clare Biggars said. “Let me hang on to your coat-tail, Ruth. I know you are real and United Statesy. But these funny French folk——

“My! they are like people out of a story book, after all, aren’t they? I thought I’d seen most every kind of folk at the San Francisco Fair; but just nobody seems familiar looking here!”

Before they were off the quay, several French women, who could not speak a word of English save “’Ello!” welcomed the Red Cross workers with joy. At this time Americans coming to help France against her enemies were a new and very wonderful thing. The first marching soldiers from America were acclaimed

along the streets and country roads as heroes might have been.

An old woman in a close-fitting bonnet and ragged shawl—not an over-clean person—took Ruth's hand in both hers and patted it, and said something in her own tongue that brought the tears to the girl's eyes. It was such a blessing as Aunt Alvira had murmured over her when the girl had left the Red Mill.

She and Clare, with several of the other feminine members of the supply unit were quartered in an old hotel almost on the quay for their first night ashore. It was said that some troop trains had the right-of-way; so the Red Cross workers could not go up to Paris for twenty-four hours.

Somebody made a mistake. It could not be expected that everything would go smoothly. The heads of the various Red Cross units were not infallible. Besides, this supply unit to which Ruth belonged really had no head as yet. The party at the seaside hotel was forgotten.

Nobody came to the hotel to inform them when the unit was to entrain. They were served very well by the hotel attendants and several chatty ladies, who could speak English, came to see them. But Ruth and the other girls had not come to France as tourists.

Finally, the girl of the Red Mill, with Clare Biggars, sallied forth to find the remainder of their unit. Fortunately, Ruth's knowledge of the language was not superficial. Madame Picolet, her French teacher at Briarwood Hall, had been most thorough in the drilling of her pupils; and Madame was a Parisienne.

But when Ruth discovered that she and her friends at the seaside hotel had been left behind by the rest of the Red Cross contingent, she was rather startled, and Clare was angered.

"What do they think we are?" demanded the Western girl. "Of no account at all? Where's our transportation? What do they suppose we'll do, dumped down here in this fishing town? What——"

"Whoa! Whoa!" Ruth laughed. "Don't lose your temper, my dear," she advised soothingly. "If nothing worse than this happens to us——"

She immediately interviewed several railroad officials, arranged for transportation, got the passports of all viséed, and, in the middle of the afternoon, they were off by slow train to the French capital.

"We can't really get lost, girls," Ruth declared. "For we are Americans, and Americans, at present, in France, are objects of considerable interest to everybody. We'll only be a day late getting to the city on the Seine."

When they finally arrived in Paris, Ruth knew right where to go to reach the Red Cross supply department headquarters. She had it all written down in her notebook, and taxicabs brought the party in safety to the entrance to the building in question.

As the girls alighted from the taxis Clare seized Ruth's wrist, whispering:

"Why! there's that Professor Perry again—the one that came over with us on the steamer. You remember?"

Ruth saw the man whose voice was like Legrand's, but whose facial appearance was nothing at all like that suspected individual. But it was his companion that particularly attracted the attention of the girl of the Red Mill.

This was a slight, dark man, who hobbled as he walked. His right leg was bent and he wore a shoe with a four-inch wooden sole.

"Who is that, I wonder?" Ruth murmured, looking at the crippled man.

"That is Signor Aristo," Clair said. "He's an Italian chef I am told."

Signor Aristo was, likewise, smoothly shaven; but Ruth remarked that he looked much like the Mexican, José, who had worked with Legrand at the Red Cross rooms in Robinsburg.

CHAPTER XIII—THE NEW CHIEF

Ruth Fielding was troubled by her most recent discovery. Yet she was in no mind to take Clare into her confidence—or anybody else.

She was cautious. With nothing but suspicions to report to the Red Cross authorities, what could she really say? What, after all, do suspicions amount to?

If the man calling himself Professor Perry was really Legrand, and the Italian chef, Signor Aristo the lame man, was he who had been known as Mr. José at the Robinsburg Red Cross headquarters, her identification of them must be corroborated. How could she prove such assertions?

It was a serious situation; but one in which Ruth felt that her hands were tied. She must wait for something to turn up that would give her a sure hold on these people whom she believed to be out and out crooks.

Ruth accompanied the remainder of the “left behind” party of workers into the building, and they found the proper office in which to report their arrival in Paris. The other members of the supply unit met the delayed party with much hilarity; the joke of their having been left behind was not soon to be forgotten.

The hospital units, better organized, and with their heads, or chiefs, already trained and on the spot, went on toward the front that very day. But Ruth’s battalion still lacked a leader. They were scattered among different hotels and pensions in the vicinity of the Red Cross offices, and spent several days in comparative idleness.

It gave the girls an opportunity of going about and seeing the French capital, which, even in wartime, had a certain amount of gayety. Ruth searched out Madame Picolet, and Madame was transported with joy on seeing her one-time pupil.

The Frenchwoman held the girl of the Red Mill in grateful remembrance, and for more than Ruth’s contribution to Madame Picolet’s work among the widows and orphans of her dear poilus. In “Ruth Fielding at Briarwood Hall,” Madame Picolet’s personal history is narrated, and how Ruth had been the means of

aiding the lady in a very serious predicament is shown.

“Ah, my dear child!” exclaimed the Frenchwoman, “it is a blessing of *le bon Dieu* that we should meet again. And in this, my own country! I love all Americans for what they are doing for our poor poilus. Your sweet and volatile friend, Helen, is here. She has gone with her father just now to a southern city. And even that mischievous Mam’zelle Stone is working in a good cause. She will be delight’ to see you, too.”

This was quite true. Jennie Stone welcomed Ruth in the headquarters of the American Women’s League with a scream of joy, and flew into the arms of the girl of the Red Mill.

The latter staggered under the shock. Jennie looked at her woefully.

“*Don’t* tell me that work agrees with me!” she wailed. “*Don’t* say that I am getting fat again! It’s the cooking.”

“What cooking? French cooking will never make you fat in a hundred years,” declared Ruth, who had had her own experiences in the French hotels in war times. “Don’t tell me that, Jennie.

“I don’t. It’s the diet kitchen. I’m in that, you know, and I’m tasting food all the time. It—it’s *dreadful* the amount I manage to absorb without thinking every day. I know, before this war is over, I shall be as big as one of those British tanks they talk about.”

“My goodness, girl!” cried Ruth. “You don’t have to make a tank of yourself, do you? Exercise——”

“Now stop right there, Ruth Fielding!” cried Jennie Stone, with flashing eyes. “You have as little sense as the rest of these people. They tell me to exercise, and don’t you know that every time I go horseback riding, or do anything else of a violent nature, that I have to come right back and eat enough victuals to put on twice the number of pounds the exercise is supposed to take off? Don’t—tell—me! It’s impossible to reduce and keep one’s health.”

Jennie was doing something besides putting on flesh, however. Her practical work in the diet kitchen Ruth saw was worthy, indeed.

The girl of the Red Mill could not see Helen at this time, but she believed her chum and Mr. Cameron would look her up, wherever the supply unit to which Ruth belonged was ultimately assigned.

She received a letter from Tom Cameron about this time, too, and found that he

was hard at work in a camp right behind the French lines and had already made one step in the line of progress, being now a first lieutenant. He expected, with his force of Pershing's boys, to go into the trenches for the first time within a fortnight.

She wished she might see Tom again before his battalion went into action; but she was under command of the Red Cross; and, in any case, she could not have got her passport viséed for the front. Mr. Cameron, as a representative of the United States Government, with Helen, had been able to visit Tom in the training camp over here.

Ruth wrote, however—wrote a letter that Tom slipped into the little leather pouch he wore inside his shirt, and which he would surely have with him when he endured his first round of duty in the trenches. With the verities of life and death so near to them, these young people were very serious, indeed.

Yet the note of cheerfulness was never lost among the workers of the Red Cross with whom Ruth Fielding daily associated. While she waited for her unit to be assigned to its place the girl of the Red Mill did not waste her time. There was always something to see and something to learn.

When congregated at the headquarters of the Supply Department one day, the unit was suddenly notified that their new chief had arrived. They gathered quickly in the reception room and soon a number of Red Cross officials entered, headed by one in a major's uniform and with several medals on the breast of his coat. He was a medical army officer in addition to being a Red Cross commissioner.

"The ladies of our new base supply unit," said the commissioner, introducing the workers, "already assigned to Lyse. That was decided last evening.

"And it is my pleasure," he added, "to introduce to you ladies your new chief. She has come over especially to take charge of your unit. Madame Mantel, ladies. Her experience, her executive ability, and her knowledge of French makes her quite the right person for the place. I know you will welcome her warmly."

Even before he spoke Ruth Fielding had recognized the woman in black. Nor did she feel any overwhelming surprise at Rose Mantel's appearance. It was as though the girl had expected, back in her mind, something like this to happen.

The man who spoke like Legrand and the one who looked like José, appearing at the Paris Red Cross offices, had prepared Ruth for this very thing. "Madame"

Mantel had crossed the path of the girl of the Red Mill again. Ruth crowded behind her companions and hid herself from the sharp and “snaky” eyes of the woman in black.

The question of how Mrs. Mantel had obtained this place under the Red Cross did not trouble Ruth at all. She had gained it. The thing that made Ruth feel anxious was the object the woman in black had in obtaining her prominent position in the organization.

The girl could not help feeling that there was something crooked about Rose Mantel, about Legrand, and about José. These three had, she believed, robbed the organization in Robinsburg. Their “pickings” there had perhaps been small beside the loot they could obtain with the woman in black as chief of a base supply unit.

Her first experience with Mrs. Mantel in Cheslow had convinced Ruth Fielding that the woman was dishonest. The incident of the fire at Robinsburg seemed to prove this belief correct. Yet how could she convince the higher authorities of the Red Cross that the new chief of this supply unit was a dangerous person?

At least, Ruth was not minded to face Mrs. Mantel at this time. She managed to keep out of the woman’s way while they remained in Paris. In two days the unit got their transportation for Lyse, and it was not until they were well settled in their work at the base hospital in that city that Ruth Fielding came in personal contact with the woman in black, her immediate superior.

Ruth had charge of the linen department and had taken over the supplies before speaking with Mrs. Mantel. They met in one of the hospital corridors—and quite suddenly.

The woman in black, who still dressed so that this nickname was borne out by her appearance, halted in amazement, and Ruth saw her hand go swiftly to her bosom—was it to still her heart’s increased beat, or did she hide some weapon there? The malevolent flash of Rose Mantel’s eyes easily suggested the latter supposition.

“Miss Fielding!” she gasped.

“How do you do, Mrs. Mantel?” the girl of the Red Mill returned quietly.

“How—— I had no idea you had come across. And in my unit?”

“I was equally surprised when I discovered you, Mrs. Mantel,” said the girl.

“You—— How odd!” murmured the woman in black. “Quite a coincidence. I

had not seen you since the fire——”

“And I hope there will be no fire here—don’t you, Madame Mantel?” interrupted Ruth. “That would be too dreadful.”

“You are right. Quite too dreadful,” agreed Mrs. Mantel, and swept past the girl haughtily.

CHAPTER XIV—A CHANGE OF BASE

Ruth's daily tasks did not often bring her into contact with the chief of her unit. This was a very large hospital—one of the most extensive base hospitals in France. There were thousands of dollars' worth of supplies in Ruth's single department.

At present the American Red Cross at this point was caring for French and Canadian wounded. As the American forces came over, were developed into fighting men, and were brought back from the battlefield hospitals as *grands blessés*, as the French call the more seriously wounded, this base would finally handle American wounded only.

Ruth went through some of the wards in her spare hours, for she had become acquainted with several of the nurses coming over. The appeal of the helpless men (some of them blinded) wrenched the tender heart of the girl of the Red Mill as nothing she had ever before experienced.

She found that in her off hours she could be of use in the hospital wards. So many of the patients wished to write home, but could do so only through the aid of the Red Cross workers. This task Ruth could perform, for she could write and speak French.

Nobody interfered with her when she undertook these extra tasks. She saw that many of the girls in her own unit kept away from the wards because the sight of the wounded and crippled men was hard to bear. Even Clare Biggars had other uses for her spare moments than writing letters for helpless *blessés*.

Ruth was not forced into contact with the chief of her unit, and was glad thereof. Her weekly reports went up to Madame Mantel, and that was quite all Ruth had to do with the woman in black.

But the girl heard her mates talking a good deal about the woman. The latter seemed to be a favorite with most of the unit. Clare Biggars quite "raved" about Madame Mantel.

"And she knows so many nice people!" Clare exclaimed. "I wish my French was

better. I went to dinner last night with Madame Mantel at that little café of the Chou-rouge. Half the people there seemed to know her. And Professor Perry _____”

“Not the man who came over on the steamer with us?” Ruth asked with sudden anxiety.

“The very same,” said Clare. “He ate at our table.”

“I don’t suppose that little Italian chef, Signor Aristo, was among those present, too?” Ruth asked suspiciously.

“No. The only Italian I saw was not lame like Signor Aristo. Madame said he was an Italian commissioner. He was in uniform.”

“Who was in uniform? Aristo?”

“Why, no! How you talk! The Italian gentleman at the restaurant. Aristo had a short leg, don’t you remember? This man was dressed in an Italian uniform—all red and green, and medals upon his coat.”

“I think I will go to the Chou-rouge myself,” Ruth said dryly. “It must be quite a popular place. But I hope they serve something to eat besides the red cabbage the name signifies.”

Again her suspicions were aroused to fever heat. If Professor Perry was Legrand disguised, he and Mrs. Mantel had got together again. And Clare’s mention of the Italian added to Ruth’s trouble of mind, too.

José could easily have assumed the heavy shoe and called himself “Aristo.” Perhaps he was an Italian, and not a Mexican, after all. The trio of crooks, if such they were, had not joined each other here in Lyse by accident. There was something of a criminal nature afoot, Ruth felt sure. And yet with what evidence could she go to the Red Cross authorities?

Besides, something occurred to balk her intention of going to the café of the Chou-rouge to get a glimpse of the professor and the Italian commissioner. That day, much to her surprise, the medical major at the head of the great hospital sent for the girl of the Red Mill.

“Miss Fielding,” he said, upon shaking hands with her, “you have been recommended to me very highly as a young woman to fill a certain special position now open at Clair. Do you mind leaving your present employment?”

“Why, no,” the girl said slowly.

“I think the work at Clair will appeal to you,” the major continued. “I understand that you have been working at off hours in the convalescent wards. That is very commendable.”

“Oh, several of the other girls have been helping there as well as I.”

“I do not doubt it,” he said with a smile. “But it is reported to me that your work is especially commendable. You speak very good French. It is to a French hospital at Clair I can send you. A representative of the Red Cross is needed there to furnish emergency supplies when called upon, and particularly to communicate with the families of the *blessés*, and to furnish special services to the patients. You have a way with you, I understand, that pleases the poor fellows and that fits you for this position of which I speak.”

“Oh, I believe I should like it!” the girl cried, her eyes glistening. It seemed to be just the work she had hoped for from the beginning—coming in personal touch with the wounded. A place where her sympathies would serve the poor fellows.

“The position is yours. You will start to-night,” declared the major. “Clair is within sound of the guns. It has been bombarded twice; but we shall hope the *Boches* do not get so near again.”

Ruth was delighted with the chance to go. But suddenly a new thought came to her mind. She asked:

“Who recommended me, sir?”

“You have the very best recommendation you could have, Miss Fielding,” he said pleasantly. “Your chief seems to think very highly of your capabilities. Madame Mantel suggested your appointment.”

Fortunately, the major was not looking at Ruth as he spoke, but was filling out her commission papers for the new place she had accepted. The girl’s emotion at that moment was too great to be wholly hidden.

Rose Mantel to recommend her for any position! It seemed unbelievable! Unless

The thought came to Ruth that the woman in black wished her out of the way. She feared the girl might say something regarding the Robinsburg fire that would start an official inquiry here in France regarding Mrs. Mantel and her particular friends. Was that the basis for the woman in black’s desire to get Ruth out of the way? Should the latter tell this medical officer, here and now, just what she thought of Mrs. Mantel?

How crass it would sound in his ears if she did so! Rose Mantel had warmly recommended Ruth for a position that the girl felt was just what she wanted.

She could not decide before the major handed her the papers and an order for transportation in an ambulance going to Clair. He again shook hands with her. His abrupt manner showed that he was a busy man and that he had no more time to give to her affairs.

“Get your passport viséed before you start. Never neglect your passport over here in these times,” advised the major.

Should she speak? She hesitated, and the major sat down to his desk and took up his pen again.

“Good-day, Miss Fielding,” he said. “And the best of luck!”

The girl left the office, still in a hesitating frame of mind. There were yet several hours before she left the town. Her bags were quickly packed. All the workers of the Red Cross “traveled light,” as Clare Biggars laughingly said.

Ruth decided that she could not confide in Clare. Already the Western girl was quite enamored of the smiling, snaky Rose Mantel. It would be useless to ask Clare to watch the woman. Nor could Ruth feel that it would be wise to go to the French police and tell them of her suspicions concerning the woman in black.

The French have a very high regard for the American Red Cross—as they have for their own *Croix Rouge*. They can, and do, accept assistance for their needy *poilus* and for others from the American Red Cross, because, in the end, the organization is international and is not affiliated with any particular religious sect.

To accuse one of the Red Cross workers in this great hospital at Lyse would be very serious—no matter to what Ruth’s suspicions pointed. The girl could not bring herself to do that.

When she went to the prefect of police to have her passport viséed she found a white-mustached, fatherly man, who took a great interest in her as an *Americaine mademoiselle* who had come across the ocean to aid France.

“I kiss your hand, Mademoiselle!” he said. “Your bravery and your regard for my country touches me deeply. Good fortune attend your efforts at Clair. You may be under bombardment there, my child. It is possible. We shall hope for your safety.”

Ruth thanked him for his good wishes, and, finally, was tempted to give some

hint of her fears regarding the supposed Professor Perry and the Italian Clare had spoken of.

“They may be perfectly straightforward people,” Ruth said; “but where I was engaged in Red Cross work in America these two men—I am almost sure they are the same—worked under the names of Legrand and José, one supposedly a Frenchman and the other a Mexican. There was a fire and property was destroyed. Legrand and José were suspected in the matter, but I believe they got away without being arrested.”

“Mademoiselle, you put me under further obligations,” declared the police officer. “I shall make it my business to look up these two men—and their associates.”

“But, Monsieur, I may be wrong.”

“If it is proved that they are in disguise, that is sufficient. We are giving spies short shrift nowadays.”

His stern words rather troubled Ruth. Yet she believed she had done her duty in announcing her suspicions of the two men. Of Rose Mantel she said nothing. If the French prefect made a thorough investigation, as he should, he could not fail to discover the connection between the men and the chief of the Red Cross supply unit at the hospital.

Ruth’s arrangements were made in good season, and Clare and the other girls bade her a warm good-bye at the door of their pension. The ambulance that was going to Clair proved to be an American car of famous make with an ambulance body, and driven by a tall, thin youth who wore shell-bowed glasses. He was young and gawky and one could see hundreds of his like leaving the city high schools in America at half-past three o’clock, or pacing the walks about college campuses.

He looked just as much out of place in the strenuous occupation of ambulance driver as anyone could look. He seemingly was a “bookish” young man who would probably enjoy hunting a Greek verb to its lair. Tom Cameron would have called him “a plug”—a term meaning an over-faithful student.

Ruth climbed into the seat beside this driver. She then had no more than time to wave her hand to the girls before the ambulance shot away from the curb, turned a corner on two wheels, and, with the staccato blast of a horn that sounded bigger than the car itself, sent dogs and pedestrians flying for their lives.

“Goodness!” gasped Ruth when she caught her breath. Then she favored the

bespectacled driver with a surprised stare. He looked straight ahead, and, as they reached the edge of the town, he put on still more speed, and the girl began to learn why people who can afford it buy automobiles that have good springs and shock absorbers.

“Do—do you *have* to drive this way?” she finally shrilled above the clatter of the car.

“Yes. This is the best road—and that isn’t saying much,” the bespectacled driver declared.

“No! I mean so fa-a-ast!”

“Oh! Does it jar you? I’ll pull her down. Got so used to getting over all the ground I can before I break something—or a shell comes——”

He reduced speed until they could talk to each other. Ruth learned all in one gush, it seemed, that his name was Charlie Bragg, that he had been on furlough, and that they had given him a “new second-hand flivver” to take up to Clair and beyond, as his old machine had been quite worn out.

He claimed unsmilingly to be more than twenty-one, that he had left a Western college in the middle of his freshman year to come over to drive a Red Cross car, and that he was writing a book to be called “On the Battlefront with a Flivver,” in which his brother in New York already had a publisher interested.

“Gee!” said this boy-man, who simply amazed Ruth Fielding, “Bob’s ten years older than I am, and he’s married, and his wife makes him put on rubbers and take an umbrella if it rains when he starts for his office. And they used to call me ‘Bubby’ before I came over here.”

Ruth could appreciate that! She laughed and they became better friends.

CHAPTER XV—NEW WORK

The prefect of police at Lyse was quite right. Clair was within sound of the big guns. Indeed, Ruth became aware of their steady monotone long before the rattling car reached its destination.

As the first hour sped by and the muttering of the guns came nearer and nearer, the girl asked Charlie Bragg if there was danger of one of the projectiles, that she began faintly to hear explode individually, coming their way. Was not this road a perilous one?

“Oh, no, ma’am!” he declared. “Oh, yes, this road has been bombarded more than once. Don’t you notice how crooked it is? We turn out for the shell holes and make a new road, that’s all. But there’s no danger.”

“But aren’t you frightened at all—ever?” murmured the girl of the Red Mill.

“What is there to be afraid of?” asked the boy, whom his family called “Bubby.” “If they get you they get you, and that’s all there is to it.

“We have to stop here and put the lights out,” he added, seeing a gaunt post beside the road on which was a half-obliterated sign.

“If you have to do that it must be perilous,” declared Ruth.

“No. It’s just an order. Maybe they’ve forgotten to take the sign down. But I don’t want to be stopped by one of these old territorials—or even by one of our own military police. You don’t know when you’re likely to run into one of them. Or maybe it’s a marine. Those are the boys, believe me! They’re on the job first and always.”

“But this time you boys who came to France to run automobiles got ahead of even the marine corps,” laughed Ruth. “Oh! What’s that?”

They were then traveling a very dark bit of road. Right across the gloomy way and just ahead of the machine something white dashed past. It seemed to cross the road in two or three great leaps and then sailed over the hedge on the left into a field.

“Did you see it?” asked Charlie Bragg, and there was a queer shake in his voice.

“Why, what is it? There it goes—all white!” and the excited girl pointed across the field, half standing up in the rocking car to do so.

“Going for the lines,” said the young driver.

“Is it a dog? A big dog? And he didn’t bark or anything!”

“Never does bark,” said her companion. “They say they can’t bark.”

“Then it’s a wolf! Wolves don’t bark,” Ruth suggested.

“I guess that’s right. They say they are dumb. Gosh! I don’t know,” Charlie said.

“You didn’t really see anything, did you?” and he said it so very oddly that Ruth Fielding was perfectly amazed.

“What do you mean by that?” she demanded. “I saw just as much as you did.”

“Well, I’m not sure that I saw anything,” he told her slowly. “The French say it’s the werewolf—and that means just nothing at all.”

“Goodness!” exclaimed Ruth, repeating the word. “What old-world superstition is that? The ghost of a wolf?”

“They have a story that certain people, selling themselves to the Devil, can change at will into the form of a wolf,” went on Charlie.

“Oh, I know! They have that legend in every language there is, I guess,” Ruth returned.

“Now you’ve said it!”

“How ridiculous that sounds—in this day and generation. You don’t mean that people around here believe such stories?”

“They do.”

“And you half believe it yourself, Mr. Bragg,” cried Ruth, laughing.

“I tell you what it is,” the young fellow said earnestly, while still guiding the car through the dark way with a skill that was really wonderful. “There are a whole lot of things I don’t know in this world. I didn’t used to think so; but I do now.”

“But you don’t believe in magic—either black or white?”

“I know that that thing you saw just now—and that I have seen twice before—flies through this country just like that, and at night. It never makes a sound. Soldiers have shot at it, and either missed—or their bullets go right through it.”

“Oh, how absurd!”

“Isn’t it?” and perhaps Charlie Bragg grinned. But he went on seriously enough: “I don’t know. I’m only telling you what they say. If it is a white or gray dog, it leaps the very trenches and barbed-wire entanglements on the front—so they say. It has been seen doing so. No one has been able to shoot it. It crosses what they call No Man’s Land between the two battlefronts.”

“It carries despatches to the Germans, then!” cried Ruth.

“That is what the military authorities say,” said Charlie. “But these peasants don’t believe that. They say the werewolf was here long before the war. There is a chateau over back here—not far from the outskirts of Clair. The people say that *the woman* lives there.”

“What do you mean—the woman?” asked Ruth, between jounces, as the car took a particularly rough piece of the road on high gear.

“The one who is the werewolf,” said Charlie, and he tried to laugh.

“Mr. Bragg!”

“Well, I’m only telling you what they say,” he explained. “Lots of funny things are happening in this war. But *this* began before August, nineteen-fourteen, according to their tell.”

“Whose tell? And what other ‘funny’ things do you believe have happened?” the girl asked, with some scorn.

“That’s all right,” he declared more stoutly. “When you’ve been here as long as I have you’ll begin to wonder if there isn’t something in all these things you hear tell of. Why, don’t you know that fifty per cent, at least, of the French people—poilus and all—believe that the spirit of Joan of Arc led them to victory against the Boches in the worst battle of all?”

“I have heard something of that,” Ruth admitted quietly. “But that does not make me believe in werewolves.”

“No. But you should hear old Gaston Pere tell about this dog, or wolf, or ghost, or whatever it is. Gaston keeps the toll-bridge just this side of Clair. You’ll likely see him to-night. He told me all about the woman.”

“For pity’s sake, Mr. Bragg!” gasped Ruth. “Tell me more. You have got my feelings all harrowed up. You can’t possibly believe in such things—not really?”

“I’m only saying what Gaston—and others—say. This woman is a very great

lady. A countess. She is an Alsatian—but not the right kind.”

“What do you mean by that?” interrupted Ruth.

“All Alsations are not French at heart,” said the young man. “This French count married her years ago. She has two sons and both are in the French army. But it is said that she has had influence enough to keep them off the battle front.

“Oh, it sounds queer, and crazy, and all!” he added, with sudden vehemence. “But you saw that white thing flashing by yourself. It is never seen save at night, and always coming or going between the chateau and the battle lines, or between the lines themselves—out there in No Man’s Land.

“It used to race the country roads in the same direction—only as far as the then frontier—before the war. So they say. Months before the Germans spilled over into this country. There you have it.

“The military authorities believe it is a despatch-carrying dog. The peasants say the old countess is a werwolf. She keeps herself shut in the chateau with only a few servants. The military authorities can get nothing on her, and the peasants cross themselves when they pass her gate.”

Ruth said nothing for a minute or two. The guns grew louder in her ears, and the car came down a slight hill to the edge of a river. Here was the toll-bridge, and an old man came out with a shrouded lantern to take toll—and to look at their papers, too, for he was an official.

“Good evening, Gaston,” said Charlie Bragg.

“Evening, Monsieur,” was the cheerful reply.

The American lad stooped over his wheel to whisper: “Gaston! the werwolf just crossed the road three miles or so back, going toward——” and he nodded in the direction of the grumbling guns.

“*Ma foi!*” exclaimed the old man. “It forecasts another bombardment or air attack. Ah-h! La-la!”

He sighed, nodded to Ruth, and stepped back to let the car go on. The girl felt as though she were growing superstitious herself. This surely was a new and strange world she had come to—and a new and strange experience.

“Do you really believe all that?” she finally asked Charlie Bragg, point-blank.

“I tell you I don’t know what I believe,” he said. “But you saw the werwolf as well as I. Now, didn’t you?”

“I saw a light-colored dog of large size that ran across the track we were following,” said Ruth Fielding decisively, almost fiercely. “I’ll confess to nothing else.”

But she liked Charlie Bragg just the same, and thanked him warmly when he set her down at the door of the Clair Hospital just before midnight. He was going on to the ambulance station, several miles nearer to the actual front.

There were no street lights in Clair and the windows of the hospital were all shrouded, as well as those of the dwellings left standing in the town. Airplanes of the enemy had taken to bombing hospitals in the work of “frightfulness.”

Ruth was welcomed by a kindly Frenchwoman, who was matron, or *directrice*, and shown to a cell where she could sleep. Her duties began the next morning, and it was not long before the girl of the Red Mill was deeply engaged in this new work—so deeply engaged, indeed, that she almost forgot her suspicions about the woman in black, and Legrand and José, or whatever their real names were.

However, Charlie Bragg’s story of the werwolf, of the suspected countess in her chateau behind Clair, and Gaston’s prophecy regarding the meaning of the ghostly appearance, were not easily forgotten. Especially, when, two nights following Ruth’s coming to the hospital, a German airman dropped several bombs near the institution. Evidently he was trying to get the range of the Red Cross hospital.

CHAPTER XVI—THE DAYS ROLL BY

Ruth Fielding had already become inured to the sights and sounds of hospital life at Lyse, and to its work as well. Of course she was not under the physical strain that the Red Cross nurses endured; but her heart was racked by sympathy for the *blessés* as greatly as the nurses' own.

Starting without knowing anyone in the big hospital, she quickly learned her duties, and soon showed, too, her fitness for the special work assigned her. Her responsibilities merely included the arranging of special supplies and keeping the key of her supply room; but the particular strain attending her work was connected with the spiritual needs of the wounded.

Their gratitude, she soon found, was a thing to touch and warm the heart. Fretful they might be, and as unreasonable as children at times. But in the last count they were all—even the hardest of them—grateful for what she could do for them.

She had read (who has not?) of the noble sacrifices of that great woman whose work for the helpless soldiers in hospital antedates the Red Cross and its devoted workers—Florence Nightingale. She knew how the sick and dying soldiers in the Crimea kissed her shadow on their pillows as she passed their cots, and blessed her with their dying breaths.

The roughest soldier, wounded unto death, turns to the thought of mother, of wife, of sweetheart, of sister—indeed, turns to any good woman whose voice soothes him, whose hand cools the fever of his brow.

Ruth Fielding began to understand better than ever before this particular work that she was now called upon to perform, and that she was so well fitted to perform.

She was cheerful as well as sympathetic; she was sane beyond most young girls in her management of men—many men.

“Bless you, Mademoiselle!” declared the matron, “of course they will make love to you. Let them. It will do them good—the poor *blessés*—and do you no harm.

And you have a way with you!”

Ruth got over being worried by amatory bouts with the wounded poilus after a while. Her best escape was to offer to write letters to the afflicted one’s wife or sweetheart. That was part of her work—to attend to as much of the correspondence of the helplessly wounded as possible.

And all the time she gave sympathy and care to these strangers she hoped, if Tom Cameron should chance to be wounded, some woman would be as kind to him!

She had not received a second letter from Tom; but after a fortnight Mr. Cameron and Helen came unexpectedly to Clair. Helen spent two days with her while Mr. Cameron attended to some important business connected with his mission in France.

They had seen Tom lately, and reported that the boy had advanced splendidly in his work. Mr. Cameron declared proudly that his son was a born soldier.

He had already been in the trenches held by both the French and British to study their methods of defence and offence. This training all the junior, as well as senior, officers of the American expeditionary forces were having, for this was an altogether new warfare that was being waged on the shell-swept fields of France and Belgium.

Helen had arranged to remain in Paris with Jennie Stone when her father went back to the States. She expressed herself as rather horrified at some of the things she learned Ruth did for and endured from the wounded men.

“Why, they are not at all nice—some of them,” she objected with a shudder. “That great, black-whiskered man almost swore in French just now.”

“Jean?” laughed Ruth. “I presume he did. He has terrible wounds, and when they are dressed he lies with clenched hands and never utters a groan. But when a man does *that*, keeping subdued the natural outlet of pain through groans and tears, his heart must of necessity, Helen, become bitter. His irritation spurts forth like the rain, upon the unjust and the just—upon the guilty and innocent alike.”

“But he should consider what you are doing for him—how you step out of your life down into his——”

“Up into his, say, rather,” Ruth interrupted, flushing warmly. “It is true he of the black beard whom you are taking exception to, is a carter by trade. But next to him lies a count, and those two are brothers. Ah, these Frenchmen in this trial of their patriotism are wonderful, Helen!”

“Some of them are very dirty, unpleasant men,” sighed Helen, shaking her head.

“You must not speak that way of my children. Sometimes I feel jealous of the nurses,” said Ruth, smiling sadly, “because they can do so much more for them than I. But I can supply them with some comforts which the nurses cannot.”

They were, indeed, like children, these wounded, for the most part. They called Ruth “sister” in their tenderest moments; even “maman” when they were delirious. The touch of her hand often quieted them when they were feverish. She read to them when she could. And she wrote innumerable letters—intimate, family letters that these wounded men would have shrunk from having their mates know about.

Ruth, too, had to share in all the “news from home” that came to the more fortunate patients. She unpacked the boxes sent them, and took care of such contents as were not at once gobbled down—for soldiers are inordinately fond of “goodies.” She had to obey strictly the doctors’ orders about these articles of diet, however, or some of the patients would have failed to progress in their convalescence.

Nor were all on the road to recovery; yet the spirit of cheerfulness was the general tone of even the “dangerous” cases. Their unshaken belief was that they would get well and, many of them, return to their families again.

“*Chère petite mère,*” Louis, the little Paris tailor, shot through both lungs, whispered to Ruth as she passed his bed, “see! I have something to show you. It came to me only to-day in the mail. Our first—and born since I came away. The very picture of his mother!”

The girl looked, with sympathetic eyes, at the postcard photograph of a very bald baby. Her ability to share in their joys and sorrows made her work here of much value.

“I feel now,” said Louis softly, “that *le bon Dieu* will surely let me live—I shall live to see the child,” and he said it with exalted confidence.

But Ruth had already heard the head physician of the hospital whisper to the nurse that Louis had no more than twenty-four hours to live. Yet the poilu’s sublime belief kept him cheerful to the end.

Many, many things the girl of the Red Mill was learning these days. If they did not exactly age her, she felt that she could never again take life so thoughtlessly and lightly. Her girlhood was behind her; she was facing the verities of existence.

CHAPTER XVII—AT THE GATEWAY OF THE CHATEAU

Ruth heard from Clare Biggars and the other girls at the Lyse Hospital on several occasions; but little was said in any of their letters regarding Mrs. Mantel, and, of course, nothing at all of the woman's two friends, who Ruth had reason to suspect were dishonest.

She wondered if the prefect of police had looked up the records of "Professor Perry" and the Italian commissioner, the latter who, she was quite sure, could be identified as "Signor Aristo," the chef, and again as "José," who had worked for the Red Cross at Robinsburg.

France was infested, she understood, with spies. It was whispered that, from highest to lowest, all grades of society were poisoned by the presence of German agents.

Whether Rose Mantel and her two friends were actually working for the enemy or not, Ruth was quite sure they were not whole-heartedly engaged in efforts for the Red Cross, or for France.

However, her heart and hands were so filled with hourly duties that Ruth could not give much thought to the unsavory trio. Rose Mantel, the woman in black, and the two men Ruth feared and suspected, must be attended to by the proper authorities. The girl of the Red Mill had done quite all that could be expected of her when she warned the police head at Lyse to be on his guard.

Her work in the hospital and supply room engaged so much of her time that for the first few weeks Ruth scarcely found opportunity to exercise properly. *Madame, la Directrice*, fairly had to drive her out of the hospital into the open air.

The fields and lanes about the town were lovely. Here the Hun had not seized and destroyed everything of beauty. He had been driven back too quickly in the early weeks of the war to have wreaked vengeance upon all that was French.

Clair was the center of a large agricultural community. The farmers dwelt together in the town and tilled the fields for several miles around. This habit had

come down from feudal times, for then the farmers had to abide together for protection. And even now the inhabitants of Clair had the habit of likewise dwelling with their draft animals and cattle!

The narrow courts between the houses and stables were piled high with farm fertilizer, and the flies were a pest. The hospital authorities could not get the citizens to clean up the town. What had been the custom for centuries must always be custom, they thought.

The grumbling of the big guns on the battlefield was almost continuous, day and night. It got so that Ruth forgot the sound. At night, from the narrow window of her cell, she could see the white glare over the trenches far away. By day black specks swinging to and fro in the air marked the observation balloons. Occasionally a darting airplane attracted her to the window of her workroom.

Clair was kept dark at night. Scarcely the glimmer of a candle was allowed to shine forth from any window or doorway. There was a motion picture theater in the main street; but one had to creep to it by guess, and perhaps blunder in at the door of the grocer's shop, or the wine merchant's, before finding the picture show.

By day and night the French aircraft and the anti-aircraft guns were ready to fight off enemy airplanes. During the first weeks of Ruth Fielding's sojourn in the town there were two warnings of German air raids at night. A deliberate attempt more than once had been made to bomb the Red Cross hospital.

Ruth was frightened. The first alarm came after she was in bed. She dressed hurriedly and ran down into the nearest ward. But there was no bustle there. The ringing of the church bells and the blowing of the alarm siren had not disturbed the patients here, and she saw Miss Simone, the night nurse, quietly going about her duties as though there was no stir outside.

Ruth remembered Charlie Bragg's statement of the case: "If they get you they get you, and that's all there is to it!" And she was ashamed to show fear in the presence of the nurse.

The French drove off the raider that time. The second time the German dropped bombs in the town, but nobody was hurt, and he did not manage to drop the bombs near the hospital. Ruth was glad that she felt less panic in this second raid than before.

Thinking of Charlie Bragg must have brought that young man to see her. He came to the hospital on his rest day; and then later appeared driving his

ambulance and asked her to ride.

The red cross she wore gave authority for Ruth's presence in the ambulance, and nobody questioned their object in driving through the back roads and lanes beyond Clair.

The country here was not torn up by marmite holes, or the chasms made by the Big Berthas. Such a lovely, quiet country as it was! Were it not for the steady grumbling of the guns Ruth Fielding could scarcely have believed that there was such a thing as war.

But it was not likely that Ruth would ride much with Charlie Bragg for the mere pleasure of it. The young fellow drove at top speed at all times, whether the road was smooth or rutted.

"Really, I can't help it, Miss Ruth," he declared. "Got the habit. We fellows want always to get as far as we can with our loads before something breaks down, or a shell gets us.

"By the way, seen anything of the werwolf again?"

"Mercy! No. Do you suppose we did really see anything that night?"

"Don't know. I know there was an attack made upon this sector two nights after that, and a raid on an artillery base that we were keeping particularly secret from the Boches. Somebody must have told them."

"The Germans are always flying over and photographing everything," said Ruth doubtfully.

"Not that battery. Had it camouflaged and only worked on it nights. The Boches put a barrage right behind it and sent over troops who did a lot of damage.

"Believe me! You don't know to what lengths these German spies and German-lovers go. You don't know who is true and who is false about you. And the most ingenious schemes they have," added Charlie.

"They have tried secret wireless right here—within two miles. But the radio makes too much noise and is sure to be spotted at last. In one place telegraph wires were carried for several miles through the bed of a stream and the spy on this side walked about with the telegraph instrument in his pocket. When he got a chance he went to the hut near the river bank, where the ends of the wire were insulated, and tapped out his messages.

"And pigeons! Don't say a word. They're flying all the time, and sometimes they are shot and the quills found under their wings. I tell you spies just swarm all

along this front.”

“Then,” Ruth said, ruminatingly, “it must have been a dog we saw that night.”

“The werwolf?” asked Charlie, with a grin.

“That is nonsense. It is a dog trained to run between the spy on this side and somebody behind the German lines. Poor dog!”

“Wow!” ejaculated the young fellow with disgust. “Isn’t that just like a girl? ‘Poor dog,’ indeed!”

“Why! you don’t suppose that a noble dog would *want* to be a spy?” cried Ruth. “You can scarcely imagine a dog choosing any tricky way through life. It is only men who deliberately choose despicable means to despicable ends.”

“Hold on! Hold on!” cried Charlie Bragg. “Spies are necessary—as long as there is going to be war, anyway. The French have got quite as brave and successful spies beyond the German lines as the Germans have over here; only not so many.”

“Well—I suppose that’s so,” admitted Ruth, sighing. “There must be these terrible things as long as the greater terrible thing, war, exists. Oh! There is the chateau gateway. Drive slower, Mr. Bragg—do, please!”

They mounted a little rise in the road. Above they had seen the walls and towers of the chateau, and had seen them clearly for some time. But now the boundary wall of the estate edged the road, and an arched gateway, with high grilled gates and a small door set into the wall beside the wider opening, came into view.

A single thought had stung Ruth Fielding’s mind, but she did not utter it. It was: Why had none of the German aviators dropped bombs upon the stone towers on the hill? Was it a fact that the enemy deliberately ignored the existence of the chateau—that somebody in that great pile of masonry won its immunity from German bombs by playing the traitor to France and her cause?

Charlie had really reduced the speed of the car until it was now only crawling up the slope of the road. Something fluttered at the postern-gate—a woman’s petticoat.

“There’s the old woman,” said Charlie, “Take a good look at her.”

“You don’t mean the countess?” gasped Ruth.

“Whiskers! No!” chuckled the young fellow. “She’s a servant—or something. Dresses like one of these French peasants about here. And yet she isn’t French!”

“You have seen her before, then,” murmured Ruth.

“Twice. There! Look at her mustache, will you? She looks like a grenadier.”

The woman at the gate was a tall, square-shouldered woman, with a hard, lined and almost masculine countenance. She stared with gloomy look as the Red Cross ambulance rolled by. Ruth caught Charlie’s arm convulsively.

“Oh! what was that?” she again whispered, looking back at the woman in the gateway.

“What was what?” he asked.

“That—something white—behind her—inside the gate! Why, Mr. Bragg! was it a dog?”

“The werwolf,” chuckled the young chauffeur.

CHAPTER XVIII—SHOCKING NEWS

From both Helen and Jennie letters reached the girl of the Red Mill quite frequently. Ruth saw that always her correspondence was opened and read by the censor; but that was the fate of all letters that came to Clair.

“We innocents,” said the matron of the hospital, “are thus afflicted because of the plague of spies—a veritable Egyptian plague!—that infests this part of my country. Do not be troubled, Mam’zelle Americaine. You are not singled out as though your friendliness to France was questioned.

“And yet there may be those working in the guise of the Red Cross who betray their trust,” the woman added. “I hear of such.”

“Who are they? Where?” Ruth asked eagerly.

“It is said that at Lyse many of the supplies sent to the Red Cross from your great and charitable country, Mam’zelle, have been diverted to private dealers and sold to the citizens. Oh, our French people—some of them—are hungry for the very luxuries that the *blessés* should have. If they have money they will spend it freely if good things are to be bought.”

“At Lyse!” repeated Ruth. “Where I came from?”

“Fear not that suspicion rests on you, *ma chère amie*,” cooed the Frenchwoman. “Indeed, no person in the active service of the Red Cross at Lyse is suspected.”

“Nobody suspected in the supply department?” asked Ruth doubtfully.

“Oh, no! The skirts of all are clear, I understand.”

Ruth said no more, but she was vastly worried by what she had heard. What, really, had taken place at Lyse? If a conspiracy had been discovered for the robbing of the Red Cross Supply Department, were not Mrs. Mantel and Legrand and José engaged in it?

Yet it seemed that the woman in black was not suspected. Ruth tried to learn more of the particulars, but the matron of the Clair hospital did not appear to know more than she had already stated.

Ruth wrote to Clare Biggars immediately, asking about the rumored trouble in their department of the Red Cross at Lyse; but naturally there would be delay before she could receive a reply, even if the censor allowed the information to go through the mails.

Meanwhile Clair was shaken all through one day and night by increased artillery fire on the battle front. Never had Ruth Fielding heard the guns roll so terribly. It was as though a continuous thunderstorm shook the heavens and the earth.

The Germans tried to drive back the reserves behind the French trenches with the heaviest barrage fire thus far experienced along this sector, while they sent forward their shock troops to overcome the thin French line in the dugouts.

Here and there the Germans gained a footing in the front line of the French trenches; but always they were driven out again, or captured.

The return barrage from the French guns at last created such havoc among the German troops that what remained of the latter were forced back beyond their own front lines.

The casualties were frightful. News of the raging battle came in with every ambulance to the Clair Hospital. The field hospitals were overcrowded and the wounded were being taken immediately from the dressing stations behind the trenches to the evacuation hospitals, like this of Clair, before being operated upon.

This well-conducted institution, in which Ruth had been busy for so many weeks, became in a few hours a bustling, feverish place, with only half enough nurses and fewer doctors than were needed.

Ruth offered herself to the matron and was given charge of one ward for all of one night, while the surgeons and nurses battled in the operating room and in the dangerous wards, with the broken men who were brought in.

Ruth's ward was a quiet one. She had already learned what to do in most small emergencies. Besides, these patients were, most of them, well on toward recovery, and they slept in spite of what was going on downstairs.

On this night Clair was astir and alight. The peril of an air raid was forgotten as the ambulances rolled in from the north and east. The soft roads became little better than quagmires for it had rained during a part of the day.

Occasionally Ruth went to an open window and looked down at the entrance to the hospital yard, where the lantern light danced upon the glistening cobblestones. Here the ambulances, one after another, halted, while the stretcher-

bearers and guards said but little; all was in monotone. But the steady sound of human voices in dire pain could not be hushed.

Some of the wounded were delirious when they were brought in. Perhaps they were better off.

Nor was Ruth Fielding's sympathy altogether for the wounded soldiers. It was, as well, for these young men who drove the ambulances—who took their lives in their hands a score of times during the twenty-four hours as they forced their ambulances as near as possible to the front to recover the broken men. She prayed for the ambulance drivers.

Hour after hour dragged by until it was long past midnight. There had been a lull in the procession of ambulances for a time; but suddenly Ruth saw one shoot out of the gloom of the upper street and come rushing down to the gateway of the hospital court.

This machine was stopped promptly and the driver leaned forward, waving something in his hand toward the sentinel.

"Hey!" cried a voice that Ruth recognized—none other than that of Charlie Bragg. "Is Miss Fielding still here?"

He asked this in atrocious French, but the sentinel finally understood him.

"I will inquire, Monsieur."

"Never mind the inquiring business," declared Charlie Bragg. "I've got to be on my way. I *know* she's here. Get this letter in to her, will you? We're taking 'em as far as Lyse now, old man. Nice long roll for these poor fellows who need major operations."

He threw in his clutch again and the ambulance rocked away. Ruth left the window and ran down to the entrance hall. The sentinel was just coming up the steps with the note in his hand. Before Ruth reached the man she saw that the envelope was stained with blood!

"Oh! Is that for *me*?" the girl gasped, reaching out for it.

"Quite so, Mam'zelle," and the man handed it to her with a polite gesture.

Ruth seized it, and, with only half-muttered thanks, ran back to her ward. Her heart beat so for a minute that she felt stifled. She could not imagine what the note could be, or what it was about.

Yet she had that intuitive feeling of disaster that portends great and

overwhelming events. Her thought was of Tom—Tom Cameron! Who else would send her a letter from the direction of the battle line?

She sank into her chair by the shaded lamp behind the nurse's screen. For a time she could not even look at the letter again, with its stain of blood so plain upon it!

Then she brought it into line with her vision and with the lamplight streaming upon it. The bloody finger marks half effaced something that was written upon the face of the envelope in a handwriting strange to Ruth.

“This was found in tunic pocket of an American—badly wounded—evacuated to L——. His identification tag lost, as his arm was torn off at elbow, and no tag around his neck.”

This brief statement was unsigned. Some kindly Red Cross worker, perhaps, had written it. Charlie Bragg must have known that the letter was addressed to Ruth and offered to bring it to her at Clair, the American on whom the letter was found having been unconscious.

The flap on the envelope had not been sealed. With trembling fingers the girl drew the paper forth. Yes! It was in Tom Cameron's handwriting, and it began: “Dear Ruth Fielding.”

In his usual jovial style the letter proceeded. It had evidently been written just before Tom had been called to active duty in the trenches.

There were no American troops in the battle line, as yet, Ruth well knew. But their officers, in small squads, were being sent forward to learn what it meant to be in the trenches under fire.

And Tom had been caught in this sudden attack! Evacuated to Lyse! The field hospitals, as well as this one at Clair, were overcrowded. It was a long way to take wounded men to Lyse to be operated upon.

“Operated upon!” The thought made Ruth shudder. She turned sick and dizzy. Tom Cameron crippled and unconscious! An arm torn off! A cripple for the rest of his life!

She looked at the bloody fingerprints on the envelope. Tom's blood, perhaps.

He was being taken to Lyse, where nobody would know him and he would know nobody! Oh, why had it not been his fate to be brought to this hospital at Clair where Ruth was stationed?

There was a faint call from one of the patients. It occurred twice before the girl

aroused to its significance.

She must put aside her personal fears and troubles. She was here to attend to the ward while the regular night nurse was engaged elsewhere.

Because Tom Cameron was wounded—perhaps dying—she could not neglect her duty here. She went quietly and brought a drink of cool water to the feverish and restless *blessé* who had called.

CHAPTER XIX—AT THE WAYSIDE CROSS

The early hours of that morning were the most tedious that Ruth Fielding ever had experienced. She was tied here to the convalescent ward of the Clair Hospital, while her every thought was bent upon that rocking ambulance that might be taking the broken body of Tom Cameron to the great base hospital at Lyse.

Was it possible that Tom was in Charlie Bragg's car? What might not happen to the ambulance on the dark and rough road over which Ruth had once ridden with the young American chauffeur.

While she was looking out of the window at the ambulance as it halted at the gateway of the hospital court, was poor Tom, unconscious and wounded, in Charlie's car? Oh! had she but suspected it! Would she not have run down and insisted that Tom be brought in here where she might care for him?

Her heart was wrung by this possibility. She felt condemned that she had not suspected Tom's presence at the time! Had not felt his nearness to her!

Helen was far away in Paris. Already Mr. Cameron was on the high seas. There was nobody here so close to Tom as Ruth herself. Nor could anybody else do more for him than Ruth, if only she could find him!

The battle clouds and storm clouds both broke in the east with the coming of the clammy dawn. She saw the promise of a fair day just before sunrise; then the usual morning fog shut down, shrouding all the earth about the town. It would be noon before the sun could suck up this moisture.

Two hours earlier than expected the day nurse came to relieve her. Ruth was thankful to be allowed to go. Having spent the night here she would not be expected to serve in her own department that day. Yet she wished to see the matron and put to her a request.

It was much quieter downstairs when she descended. A nodding nurse in the hall told her that every bed and every cot in the hospital was filled. Some of the convalescents would be removed as soon as possible so as to make room for

newly wounded poilus.

“But where is the matron?”

“Ah, the good mother has gone to her bed—quite fagged out. Twenty-four hours on her feet—and she is no longer young. If I can do anything for the *Americaine mademoiselle*——?”

But Ruth told her no. She would write a note for *Madame la Directrice*, to be given to her when she awoke. For the girl of the Red Mill was determined to follow a plan of her own.

By rights she should be free until the next morning. There were twenty-four hours before her during which she need not report for service. Had she not learned of Tom’s trouble she doubtless would have taken a short nap and then appeared to help in any department where she might be of use.

But, to Ruth’s mind, Tom’s need was greater than anything else just then. In her walks about Clair she had become acquainted with a French girl who drove a motor-car—Henriette Dupay. Her father was one of the larger farmers, and the family lived in a beautiful old house some distance out of town. Ruth made a brief toilet, a briefer breakfast, and ran out of the hospital, taking the lane that led to the Dupay farm.

The fog was so thick close to the ground that she could not see people in the road until she was almost upon them. But, then, it was so early that not many even of the early-rising farmers were astir.

In addition, the night having been so racked with the sounds of the guns,—now dying out, thank heaven!—and the noise of the ambulances coming in from the front and returning thereto, that most of the inhabitants of Clair were exhausted and slept late.

The American girl, well wrapped in a cloak and with an automobile veil wound about her hat and pulled down to her ears, walked on hurriedly, stopping now and then at a crossroad to make sure she was on the right track.

If Henriette Dupay could get her father’s car, and would drive Ruth to Lyse, the latter would be able to assure herself about Tom one way or another. She felt that she must know just how badly the young fellow was wounded!

To think! An arm torn off at the elbow—if it was really Tom who had been picked up with the note Ruth had received in his pocket. It was dreadful to think of.

At one point in her swift walk Ruth found herself sobbing hysterically. Yet she was not a girl who broke down easily. Usually she was selfcontrolled. Helen accused her sometimes of being even phlegmatic.

She took a new grip upon herself. Her nerves must not get the best of her! It might not be Tom Cameron at all who was wounded. There were other American officers mixed in with the French troops on this sector of the battle front—surely!

Yet, who else but Tom would have carried that letter written to “Dear Ruth Fielding”? The more the girl of the Red Mill thought of it the more confident she was that there could have been no mistake made. Tom had fallen wounded in the trenches and was now in the big hospital at Lyse, where she had worked for some weeks in the ranks of the Red Cross recruits.

Suddenly the girl was halted by a voice in the fog. A shrill exclamation in a foreign tone—not French—sounded just ahead. It was a man’s voice, and a woman’s answered. The two seemed to be arguing; but to hear people talking in anything but French or English in this part of France was enough to astonish anybody.

“That is not German. It is a Latin tongue,” thought the girl, wonderingly. “Italian or Spanish, perhaps. Who can it be?”

She started forward again, yet walked softly, for the moss and short grass beside the road made her footfalls indistinguishable a few yards away. There loomed up ahead of her a wayside cross—one of those weather-worn and ancient monuments so often seen in that country.

In walking with Henriette Dupay, Ruth had seen the French girl kneel a moment at this junction of the two lanes, and whisper a prayer. Indeed, the American girl had followed her example, for she believed that God hears the reverent prayer wherever it is made. And Ruth had felt of late that she had much to pray for.

The voices of the two wrangling people suggested no worship, however. Nor were they kneeling at the wayside shrine. She saw them, at last, standing in the middle of the cross lane. One, she knew, had come down from the chateau.

Ruth saw that the woman was the heavy-faced creature whom she had once seen at the gateway of the chateau when riding past with Charlie Bragg. This strange-looking old woman Charlie had said was a servant of the countess up at the chateau and that she was not a Frenchwoman. Indeed, the countess herself was not really French, but was Alsatian, and “the wrong kind,” to use the chauffeur’s

expression.

The American girl caught a glimpse of the woman's face and then hid her own with her veil. But the man's countenance she did not behold until she had passed the shrine and had looked back.

He had wheeled to look after Ruth. He was a small man and suddenly she saw, as he stepped out to trace her departure more clearly, that he was lame. He wore a heavy shoe on one foot with a thick and clumsy sole—such as the supposed Italian chef had worn coming over from America on the Red Cross ship.

Was it the man, José, suspected with Legrand and Mrs. Rose Mantel—all members of a band of conspirators pledged to rob the Red Cross? Ruth dared not halt for another glance at him. She pulled the veil further over her face and scuttled on up the lane toward the Dupay farmhouse.

CHAPTER XX—MANY THINGS HAPPEN

Ruth reached the farmhouse just as the family was sitting down to breakfast. The house and outbuildings of the Dupays were all connected, as is the way in this part of France. No shell had fallen near the buildings, which was very fortunate, indeed.

Henriette's father was a one-armed man. He had lost his left arm at the Marne, and had been honorably discharged, to go back to farming, in order to try to raise food for the army and for the suffering people of France. His two sons and his brothers were still away at the wars, so every child big enough to help, and the women of the family as well, aided in the farm work.

No petrol could be used to drive cars for pleasure; but Henriette sometimes had to go for supplies, or to carry things to market, or do other errands connected with the farm work. Ruth hoped that the French girl would be allowed to help her.

The hospitable Dupays insisted upon the American girl's sitting down to table with them. She was given a seat on the bench between Henriette and Jean, a lad of four, who looked shyly up at the visitor from under heavy brown lashes, and only played with his food.

It was not the usual French breakfast to which Ruth Fielding had become accustomed—coffee and bread, with possibly a little compote, or an egg. There was meat on the table—a heavy meal, for it was to be followed by long hours of heavy labor.

"What brings you out so early after this awful night?" Henriette whispered to her visitor.

Ruth told her. She could eat but little, she was so anxious about Tom Cameron. She made it plain to the interested French girl just why she so desired to follow on to Lyse and learn if it really was Tom who had been wounded, as the message on the blood-stained envelope said.

"I might start along the road and trust to some ambulance overtaking me," Ruth

explained. "But often there is a wounded man who can sit up riding on the seat with the driver—sometimes two. I could not take the place of such an unfortunate."

"It would be much too far for you to walk, Mademoiselle," said the mother, overhearing. "We can surely help you."

She spoke to her husband—a huge man, of whom Ruth stood rather in awe, he was so stern-looking and taciturn. But Henriette said he had been a "laughing man" before his experience in the war. War had changed many people, this French girl said, nodding her head wisely.

"The venerable Countess Marchand," pointing to the chateau on the hill, "had been neighborly and kind until the war came. Now she shut herself away from all the neighbors, and if a body went to the chateau it was only to be confronted by old Bessie, who was the countess' housekeeper, and her only personal servant now."

"Old Bessie," Ruth judged, must be the hard-featured woman she had seen at the chateau gate and, on this particular morning, talking to the lame man at the wayside cross.

The American girl waited now in some trepidation for Dupay to speak. He seemed to consider the question of Ruth's getting to Lyse quite seriously for some time; then he said quietly that he saw no objection to Henriette taking the sacks of grain to M. Naubeck in the touring car body instead of the truck, and going to-day to Lyse on that errand instead of the next week.

It was settled so easily. Henriette ran away to dress, while a younger brother slipped out to see that the car was in order for the two girls. Ruth knew she could not offer the Dupays any remuneration for the trouble they took for her, but she was so thankful to them that she was almost in tears when she and Henriette started for Lyse half an hour later.

"The main road is so cut up and rutted by the big lorries and ambulances that we would better go another way," Henriette said, as she steered out of the farm lane into the wider road.

They turned away from Lyse, it seemed to Ruth; but, after circling around the hill on which the chateau stood, they entered a more traveled way, but one not so deeply rutted.

A mile beyond this point, and just as the motor-car came down a gentle slope to a small stream, crossed by a rustic bridge, the two girls spied another

automobile, likewise headed toward Lyse. It was stalled, both wheels on the one side being deep in a muddy rut.

There were two men with the car—a small man and a much taller individual, who was dressed in the uniform of a French officer—a captain, as Ruth saw when they came nearer.

The little man stepped into the woods, perhaps for a sapling, with which to pry up the car, before the girls reached the bottom of the hill. At least, they only saw his back. But when Ruth gained a clear view of the officer's face she was quite shocked.

"What is the matter?" Henriette asked her, driving carefully past the stalled car.

Ruth remained silent until they were across the bridge and the French girl had asked her question a second time, saying:

"What is it, Mademoiselle Ruth?"

"Do you know that man?" Ruth returned, proving herself a true Yankee by answering one question with another.

"The captain? No. I do not know him. There are many captains," and Henriette laughed.

"He—he looks like somebody I know," Ruth said hesitatingly. She did not wish to explain her sudden shocked feeling on seeing the man's face. He looked like the shaven Legrand who, on the ship coming over and in Lyse, had called himself "Professor Perry."

If this was the crook, who, Ruth believed, had set fire to the business office of the Robinsburg Red Cross headquarters, he had evidently not been arrested in connection with the supply department scandal, of which the matron of the hospital had told her. At least, he was now free. And the little fellow with him! Had not Ruth, less than two hours before, seen José talking with the woman from the chateau at the wayside shrine near Clair?

The mysteries of these two men and their disguises troubled Ruth Fielding vastly. It seemed that the prefect of police at Lyse had not apprehended them. Nor was Mrs. Mantel yet in the toils.

This was a longer way to Lyse by a number of miles than the main road; nevertheless, it was probable that the girls gained time by following the more roundabout route.

It was not yet noon when Henriette stopped at a side entrance to the hospital

where Ruth had served her first few weeks for the Red Cross in France. The girl of the Red Mill sprang out, and, asking her friend to wait for her, ran into the building.

The guard remembered her, and nobody stopped her on the way to the reception office, where a record was kept of all the patients in the great building. The girl at the desk was a stranger to Ruth, but she answered the visitor's questions as best she could.

She looked over the records of the wounded accepted from the battle front or from evacuation hospitals during the past forty-eight hours. There was no such name as Cameron on the list; and, as far as the clerk knew, no American at all among the number.

"Oh, there *must* be!" gasped Ruth, wringing her hands. "Surely there is a mistake. There is no other hospital here for him to be brought to, and I am sure this person was brought to Lyse. They say his arm is torn off at the elbow."

A nurse passing through the office stopped and inquired in French of whom Ruth was speaking. The girl of the Red Mill explained.

"I believe we have the *blessé* in my ward," this nurse said kindly. "Will you come and see, Mademoiselle? He has been quite out of his head, and perhaps he is an American, for he has not spoken French. We thought him English."

"Oh, let me see him!" cried Ruth, and hastened with her into one of the wards where she knew the most serious cases were cared for.

Her fears almost overcame the girl. Her interest in Tom Cameron was deep and abiding. For years they had been friends, and now, of late, a stronger feeling than friendship had developed in her heart for Tom.

His courage, his cheerfulness, the real, solid worth of the young fellow, could not fail to endear him to one who knew him as well as did Ruth Fielding. If he had been shot down, mangled, injured, perhaps, to the very death!

How would Helen and their father feel if Tom was seriously wounded? If Ruth found him here in the hospital, should she immediately communicate with his twin sister in Paris, and with his father, who had doubtless reached the States by this time?

Her mind thus in a turmoil, she followed the nurse into the ward and down the aisle between the rows of cots. She had helped comfort the wounded in this very ward when she worked in this hospital; but she looked now for no familiar face, save one. She looked ahead for the white, strained countenance of Tom Cameron

against the coarse pillow-slip.

The nurse stopped beside a cot. Oh, the relief! There was no screen around it! The occupant was turned with his face away from the aisle. The stump of the uplifted arm on his left side, bandaged and padded, was uppermost.

“Tom!” breathed the girl of the Red Mill, holding back just a little and with a hand upon her breast.

It was a head of black hair upon the pillow. It might easily have been Tom Cameron. And in a moment Ruth was sure that he was an American from the very contour of his visage—but it was *not* Tom!

“Oh! It’s not! It’s not!” she kept saying over and over to herself. And then she suddenly found herself sitting in a chair at the end of the ward and the nurse was saying to her:

“Are you about to faint, Mademoiselle? It is the friend you look for?”

“Oh, no! I sha’n’t faint,” Ruth declared, getting a grip upon her nerves again. “It is not my friend. Oh! I cannot tell you how relieved I am.”

“Ah, yes! I know,” sighed the Frenchwoman. “I have a father and a brother in our army and after every battle I fear until I hear from them. I am glad for your sake it is another than your friend. And yet—*he* will have friends who suffer, too—is it not?”

CHAPTER XXI—AGAIN THE WERWOLF

Ruth Fielding felt as though she needed a cup of tea more than she ever had before in her life. And Clare Biggars had her own tea service in her room at the pension. Ruth had inquired for Clare and learned that this was a free hour for the Kansas girl. So Ruth and Henriette Dupay drove to the boarding-house; for to get a good cup of tea in one of the restaurants or cafés was impossible.

Her relief at learning the wounded American in the hospital was not Tom Cameron was quite overwhelming at first. Ruth had come out to the car so white of face that the French girl was frightened.

“Oh! Mam’zelle Fielding! It is that you haf los’ your friend?” cried the girl in the stammering English she tried so hard to make perfect.

“I don’t know that,” sighed Ruth. “But, at least, if he is wounded, he was not brought here to this hospital.”

She could not understand how that letter had been found in the pocket of the young man she had seen in the hospital ward. Tom Cameron certainly had written that letter. Ruth would not be free from worry until she had heard again from Tom, or of him.

The pension was not far away, and Ruth made her friend lock the car and come in with her, for Clare was a hospitable soul and it was lunch time. To her surprise Ruth found Clare in tears.

“What is the matter, my dear girl?” cried Ruth, as Clare fled sobbing to her arms the moment she saw the girl of the Red Mill. “What can have happened to you?”

“Everything!” exploded the Kansas girl. “You can’t imagine! I’ve all but been arrested, and the Head called me down dreadfully, and Madame——”

“Madame Mantel?” Ruth asked sharply. “Is she the cause of your troubles? I should have warned you——”

“Oh, the poor dear!” groaned Clare. “She feels as bad about it as I do. Why, they took her to the police station, too!”

“You seem to have all been having a fine time,” Ruth said, rather tartly. “Tell me all about it. But ask us to sit down, and *do* give us a cup of tea. This is Henriette Dupay, Clare, and a very nice girl she is. Try to be cordial—hold up the reputation of America, my dear.”

“How-do?” gulped Clare, giving the French girl her hand. “I *am* glad Ruth brought you. But it was only yesterday——”

“What was only yesterday?” asked Ruth, as the hostess began to set out the tea things.

“Oh, Ruth! Haven’t you heard something about the awful thing that happened here? That Professor Perry——”

“Ah! What about him?” asked Ruth. “You know what I wrote you—that I had heard there was trouble in the Supply Department? You haven’t answered my letter.”

“No. I was too worried. And finally—only yesterday, as I said—I was ordered to appear before the prefect of police.”

“A nice old gentleman with a white mustache.”

“A horrid old man who said the *meanest* things to dear Madame Mantel!” cried Clare hotly.

Ruth saw that the Western girl was still enamored of the woman in black, so she was careful what she said in comment upon Clare’s story.

All Ruth had to do was to keep still and Clare told it all. Perhaps Henriette did not understand very clearly what the trouble was, but she looked sympathetic, too, and that encouraged Clare.

It seemed that Mrs. Mantel had made a companion of Clare outside of the hospital, and Ruth could very well understand why. Clare’s father was a member of Congress and a wealthy man. It was to be presumed that Clare seemed to the woman in black well worth cultivating.

The Kansas girl had gone with the woman to the café of the Chou-rouge more than once. Each time the so-called Professor Perry and the Italian commissioner, whose name Clare had forgotten—“But that’s of no consequence,” thought Ruth, “for he has so many names!”—had been very friendly with the Red Cross workers.

Then suddenly the professor and the Italian had disappeared. The head of the Lyse hospital had begun to make inquiries into the working of the Supply

Department. There had been billed to Lyse great stores of goods that were not accounted for.

“Poor Madame Mantel was heartbroken,” Clare said. “She wished to resign at once. Oh, it’s been terrible!”

“Resign under fire?” suggested Ruth.

“Oh—you understand—she felt so bad that her department should be under suspicion. Of course, it was not her fault.”

“Did the head say *that*?”

“Why, he didn’t have to!” cried Clare. “I hope *you* are not suspicious of Madame Mantel, Ruth Fielding?”

“You haven’t told me enough to cause me to suspect anybody yet—save yourself,” laughed Ruth. “I suspect that you are telling the story very badly, my dear.”

“Well, I suppose that is so,” admitted Clare, and thereafter she tried to speak more connectedly about the trouble which had finally engrossed all her thought.

The French police had unearthed, it was said, a wide conspiracy for the diversion of Red Cross supplies from America to certain private hands. These goods had been signed for in Mrs. Mantel’s office; she did not know by whom, but the writing on the receipts was not in her hand. That was proved. And, of course, the goods had never been delivered to the hospital at Lyse.

The receipts must have been forged. The only point made against Mrs. Mantel, it seemed, was that she had not reported that these goods, long expected at Lyse, were not received. Her delay in making inquiry for the supplies gave the thieves opportunity for disposing of the goods and getting away with the money paid for them by dishonest French dealers.

The men who had disposed of the supplies and had pocketed the money (or so it was believed) were the man who called himself Professor Perry and the Italian commissioner.

“And what do you think?” Clare went on to say. “That professor is no college man at all. He is a well-known French crook, they say, and usually travels under the name of Legrand.

“They say he had been in America until it got too hot for him there, and he crossed on the same boat with us—you remember, Ruth?”

“Oh, I remember,” groaned the girl of the Red Mill. “The Italian, too?”

“I don’t know for sure about him. They say he isn’t an Italian, but a Mexican, anyway. And he has a police record in both hemispheres.

“Consider! Madame Mantel and I were seen hobnobbing with them! I know she feels just as I do. I hate to show myself on the street!”

“I wouldn’t feel that way,” Ruth replied soothingly. “You could not help it.”

“But the police—ordering me before that nasty old prefect!” exclaimed the angry girl. “And he said such things to me! Think! He had cabled the chief of police in my town to ask who I was and if I had a police record. What do you suppose my father will say?”

“I guarantee that he will laugh at you,” Ruth declared. “Don’t take it so much to heart. Remember we are in a strange country, and that that country is at war.”

“I never shall like the French system of government, just the same!” declared Clare, with emphasis.

“And—and what about Mrs. Mantel?” Ruth asked doubtfully.

“I am going over to see her now,” Clare said, wiping her eyes. “I am so sorry for her. I believe that horrid prefect thinks she is mixed up in the plot that has cost the Red Cross so much. They say nearly ten thousand dollars worth of goods was stolen, and those two horrid men—Professor Perry and the other—have got away and the French police cannot find them.”

Ruth was secretly much disturbed by Clare’s story. She believed that she knew something about the pair of crooks who were accused—Rose Mantel’s two friends—that might lead to their capture. She was sure Henriette Dupay and she had passed them with their stalled automobile on the road to Lyse that morning.

In addition, she believed the two crooks were connected with those people at the Chateau Marchand, who were supposed to be pro-German. Now she knew what language she had heard spoken by José and the hard-featured Bessie of the chateau, there by the wayside cross. It was Spanish. The woman might easily be a Mexican as well as José.

Should she go to the prefect of police and tell him of these things? It seemed to Ruth Fielding that she was much entangled in a conspiracy of wide significance. The crooks who had robbed the Red Cross seemed lined up with the spies of the Chateau Marchand.

And there was the strange animal—dog, or what-not!—that was connected with

the chateau. The werwolf! Whether she believed in such traditional tales or not, the American girl was impressed with the fact that there was much that was suspicious in the whole affair.

Yet she naturally shrank from getting her own fingers caught in the cogs of this mystery that the French police were doubtless quite able to handle in their own way, and all in good time. It was evident that even Mrs. Mantel was not to be allowed to escape the police net. She had not been arrested yet; but she doubtless was watched so closely now that she could neither get away, nor aid in doing further harm.

As for Clare Biggars, she was perfectly innocent of all wrong-doing or intent. And she was quite old enough to take care of herself. Besides, her father would doubtless be warned that his daughter was under suspicion of the French police and he would communicate with the United States Ambassador at Paris. She would be quite safe and suffer no real trouble.

So Ruth decided to return to Clair without going to the police, and, after lunch, having delivered the bags of grain which had filled the tonneau of the car, she and Henriette Dupay drove out of town again.

They were delayed for some time by tire trouble, and the French girl proved herself as good a mechanic as was necessary in repairing the tube. But night was falling before they were halfway home.

Ruth's thoughts were divided between the conspiracy, in which Mrs. Mantel was engaged, and her worry regarding Tom Cameron. She had filed a telegraph message at the Lyse Hospital to be sent to Tom's cantonment, where he was training, and hoped that the censor would allow it to go through. For she knew she could not be satisfied that Tom had not been wounded until she heard from him.

The American girl's nerves had been shot through by the affair of the early morning, when the note from Tom had been brought to her. What had followed since that hour had not served to help her regain her self-control.

Therefore, as Henriette drove the car on through the twilight, following the road by which they had gone to Lyse, there was reason for Ruth suddenly exclaiming aloud, when she saw something in the track ahead:

"Henriette! Look! What can that be? Do you see it?"

"What do you see, Mademoiselle Ruth?" asked the French girl, reducing the speed of the car in apprehension.

“There! That white——”

“*Nom de Dieu!*” shrieked Henriette, getting sight of the object in question.

The girl paled visibly and shrank back into her seat. Ruth cried out, fearing the steering wheel would get away from Henriette.

“Oh! Did you see?” gasped the latter.

The white object had suddenly disappeared. It seemed to Ruth as though it had actually melted into thin air.

“That was the werwolf!” continued the French girl, and crossed herself. “Oh, my dear Mademoiselle, something is sure now to happen—something very bad!”

CHAPTER XXII—THE COUNTESS AND HER DOG

RUTH FIELDING had almost instantly identified the swiftly moving object in the road as the same that she had seen weeks before while riding with Charlie Bragg toward Clair. And yet she could not admit as true the assertion made both by the ambulance driver and the excited French girl.

To recognize the quickly disappearing creature as a werwolf—the beast-form of a human being, sold irrevocably to the Powers of Darkness—was quite too much for a sane American girl like Ruth Fielding!

“Why, Henriette!” she cried, “that is nothing but a dog.”

“A wolf, Mademoiselle. A werwolf, as I have told you. A very wicked thing.”

“There isn’t such a thing,” declared Ruth bluntly. “That was a dog—a white or a gray one. And of large size. I have seen it once before—perhaps twice,” Ruth added, remembering the glimpse she had caught of such a creature with Bessie at the chateau gate.

“Oh, it is such bad fortune to see it!” sighed Henriette.

“Don’t be so childish,” Ruth adjured, brusquely. “Nothing about that dog can hurt you. But I have an idea the poor creature may be doing the French cause harm.”

“Oh, Mademoiselle! You have heard the vile talk about the dear countess!” cried Henriette. “It is not so. She is a brave and lovely lady. She gives her all for France. She would be filled with horror if she knew anybody connected her with the spies of *les Boches*.”

“I thought it was generally believed that she was an Alsatian *of the wrong kind*.”

“It is a wicked calumny,” Henriette declared earnestly. “But I have heard the tale of the werwolf ever since I was a child—long before this dreadful war began.”

“Yes?”

“It was often seen racing through the country by night,” the girl declared

earnestly. “They say it comes from the chateau, and goes back to it. But that the lovely countess is a wicked one, and changes herself into a devouring wolf—ah, no, no, Mademoiselle! It is impossible!

“The werwolf comes and goes across the battle front, it is said. Indeed, it used to cross the old frontier into Germany in pre-war times. Why may not some wicked German woman change herself into a wolf and course the woods and fields at night? Why lay such a thing to the good Countess Marchand?”

Ruth saw that the girl was very much in earnest, and she cast no further doubt upon the occupant of the chateau, the towers of which had been in sight in the twilight for some few minutes. Henriette was now driving slowly and had not recovered from her fright. They came to a road which turned up the hill.

“Where does that track lead?” Ruth asked quickly.

“Past the gates of the chateau, Mademoiselle.”

“You say you will take me to the hospital at Clair before going home,” Ruth urged. “Can we not take this turn?”

“But surely,” agreed Henriette, and steered the car into the narrow and well-kept lane.

Ruth made no explanation for her request. But she felt sure that the object which had startled them both, dog or whatever it was, had dived into this lane to disappear so quickly. The “werwolf” was going toward the chateau on this evening instead of away from it.

There was close connection between the two criminals, who had come from America on the Red Cross steamship, Legrand and José, with whatever was going on between the Chateau Marchand and the Germans. Werwolf, or despatch dog, Ruth was confident that the creature that ran by night across the shell-racked fields was trained to spy work.

Who was guilty at the chateau? That seemed to be an open question.

Henriette’s declaration that it was not the Countess Marchand, strengthened the suspicion already rife in Ruth’s mind that the old servant, Bessie, was the German-lover.

The latter was known to José, one of the crooks from America. She might easily be of the same nationality as José—Mexican. And the Mexicans largely are pro-German.

José and Legrand were already under suspicion of a huge swindle in Red Cross

stores. It would seem that if these men would steal, it was fair to presume they would betray the French Government for money.

It was a mixed-up and doubtful situation at best. Ruth Fielding intuitively felt that she had hold of the ends of certain threads of evidence that must, in time, lead to the unraveling of the whole scheme of deceit and intrigue.

It was still light enough on the upland for the girls to see some distance along the road ahead. Henriette drove the car slowly as they approached the wide gateway of the chateau.

Ruth distinguished the flutter of something white by the gate and wondered if it was the “werwolf” or the old serving woman. But when she called Henriette’s attention to the moving object the French girl cried, under her breath:

“Oh! It is the countess! Look you, Mademoiselle Ruth, perhaps she will speak to us.”

“But there’s something with her. It *is* a dog,” the American girl declared.

“Why that is only Bubu, the old hound. He is always with the countess when she walks out. He is a greyhound—see you? It is foolish, Mademoiselle, to connect Bubu with the werwolf,” and she shrugged her plump shoulders.

Ruth paid more attention to the dog at first than she did to the lady who held the loop of his leash. He wore a dark blanket, which covered most of his body, even to his ears. His legs were long, of course, and Ruth discovered another thing in a moment, while the car rolled nearer.

The thin legs of the slate-colored beast were covered with mud. That mud was not yet dry. The dog had been running at large within the last few minutes, the girl was sure.

CHAPTER XXIII—RUTH DOES HER DUTY

The query that came sharply to Ruth Fielding's mind was: Without his blanket and off his leash, what would Bubu, the greyhound, look like in the gloaming? The next moment the tall old lady walking by the observant dog's side, raised her hand and nodded to Henriette.

"Oh, Madame!" gasped the French girl, and brought the car to an instant stop.

"I thought it was my little Hetty," the countess said in French, and smiling. "Hast been to Lyse for the good father?"

"Yes, Madame," replied the girl.

"And what news do you bring?"

The voice of the old lady was very kind. Ruth, watching her closely, thought that if the Countess Marchand was a spy for Germany, and was wicked at heart, she was a wonderfully good actress.

She had a most graceful carriage. Her hair, which was snow white, was dressed most becomingly. Her cheeks were naturally pink; yet her throat and under her chin the skin was like old ivory and much wrinkled. She was dressed plainly, although the cape about her shoulders was trimmed with expensive fur.

Henriette replied to her queries bashfully, bobbing her head at every reply. She was much impressed by the lady's attention. Finally the latter looked full at Ruth, and asked:

"Your friend is from the hospital, Hetty?"

"Oh, yes, Madame!" Henriette hastened to say. "She is an *Americaine*. Of the Red Cross."

"I could imagine her nativity," said the countess, bowing to Ruth, and with cordiality. "I traveled much with the count—years ago. All over America. I deem all Americans my friends."

"Thank you, Madame," replied Ruth gravely.

At the moment the stern-faced Bessie came through the little postern gate. She approached the countess and stood for a moment respectfully waiting her mistress' attention.

"Ah, here is the good Bessie," said the countess, and passed the serving woman the loop of the dog's leather leash. "Take him away, Bessie. Naughty Bubu! Do you know, he should be punished—and punished severely. He had slipped his collar again. See his legs? You must draw the collar up another hole, Bessie."

The harsh voice of the old woman replied, but Ruth could not understand what she said. The dog was led away; but Ruth saw that Bessie stared at her, Ruth, curiously—or was it threateningly?

The countess turned again to speak to the two girls. "Old Bessie comes from America, Mademoiselle," she explained. "I brought her over years ago. She has long served me."

"She comes from Mexico, does she not?" Ruth asked quietly.

"Yes. I see you have bright eyes—you are observant," said the countess. "Yes. Mexico was Bessie's birthplace, although she is not all Spanish."

Ruth thought to herself: "I could guarantee that. She is part German. 'Elizabeth'—yes, indeed! And does this lady never suspect what her serving woman may be?"

The countess dismissed them with another kindly word and gesture. Henriette was very much wrought up over the incident.

"She is a great lady," she whispered to Ruth. "Wait till I tell my father and mother how she spoke to me. They will be delighted."

"And this is a republic!" smiled Ruth. Even mild toadyism did not much please this American girl. "Still," she thought, "we are inclined to bow down and worship a less worthy aristocracy at home—the aristocracy of wealth."

Henriette ran her down to the town and to the hospital gate. Ruth was more than tired—she felt exhausted when she got out of the car. But she saw the matron before retiring to her own cell for a few hours' sleep.

"We shall need you, Mademoiselle," the Frenchwoman said distractedly. "Oh! so many poor men are here. They have been bringing them in all day. There is a lull on the front, or I do not know what we should do. The poor, poor men!"

Ruth had to rest for a while, however, although she did not sleep. Her mind was too painfully active.

Her thoughts drummed continually upon two subjects, the mystery regarding Tom Cameron—his letter to her found in another man's pocket. Secondly, the complications of the plot in which the woman in black, the two crooks from America, and the occupants of the chateau seemed all entangled.

She hoped hourly to hear from Tom; but no word came. She wished, indeed, that she might even see Charlie Bragg again; but nobody seemed to have seen him about the hospital of late. The ambulance corps was shifted around so frequently that there was no knowing where he could be found, save at his headquarters up near the front. And Ruth Fielding felt that she was quite as near the front here at Clair as she ever wished to be!

She went on duty before midnight and remained at work until after supper the next evening. She had nothing to do with the severely wounded, of course; but there was plenty to do for those who had already been in the hospital some time, and whom she knew.

Ruth could aid them in simple matters, could read to them, write for them, quiet them if they were nervous or suffering from shell-shock. She tried to forget her personal anxieties in attending to the poor fellows and aiding them to forget their wounds, if for only a little while.

But she climbed to her cell at last, worn out as she was by the long strain, with a determination to communicate with the French police-head in Lyse regarding the men who had robbed the Red Cross supply department.

She wrote the letter with the deliberate intention of laying all the mystery, as she saw it, before the authorities. She would protect the woman in black no longer. Nor did she ignore the possibility of the Countess Marchand and her old serving woman being in some way connected with Legrand and José, the Mexican.

She lay bare the fact that the two men from America had been in a plot to rob the Red Cross at Robinsburg, and how they had accomplished their ends with the connivance (as Ruth believed) of Rose Mantel. She spared none of the particulars of this early incident.

She wrote that she had seen the man, José, in his character of the lame Italian, both on the steamship coming over, in Paris, and again here at Clair talking with the Mexican servant of the Countess Marchand. Legrand, too, she mentioned as being in the neighborhood of Clair, now dressed as a captain of infantry in the French army.

She quite realized what she was doing in writing all this. Legrand, for instance,

risked death as a spy in any case if he represented himself as an officer. But Ruth felt that the matter was serious. Something very bad was going on here, she was positive.

The only thing she could not bring herself to tell of was the suspicions she had regarding the identity of the “werwolf,” as the superstitious country people called the shadowy animal that raced the fields and roads by night, going to and coming from the battle front.

It seemed such a silly thing—to repeat such gossip of the country side to the police authorities! She could not bring herself to do it. If the occupants of the chateau were suspected of being disloyal, what Ruth had already written, connecting José with Bessie, would be sufficient.

She wrote and despatched this letter at once. She knew it would be unopened by the local censor because of the address upon it. Communications to the police were privileged.

Ruth wondered much what the outcome of this step would be. She shrank from being drawn into a police investigation; but the matter had gone so far now and was so serious that she could not dodge her duty.

That very next day word was sent in to Ruth from the guard at the entrance whom she had tipped for that purpose, that the American ambulance driver, Monsieur Bragg, was at the door.

When Ruth hastened to the court the *brancardiers* had shuffled in with the last of Charlie’s “load” and he was cranking up his car. The latter looked as though it had been through No Man’s Land, clear to the Boche “ditches” it was so battered and mud-bespattered. Charlie himself had a bandage around his head which looked like an Afghan’s turban.

“Oh, my dear boy! Are you hurt?” Ruth gasped, running down the steps to him.

“No,” grunted the young ambulance driver. “Got this as an order of merit. For special bravery in the performance of duty,” and he grinned. “Gosh! I can’t get hurt proper. I bumped my head on a beam in the park—pretty near cracked my skull, now I tell you! Say! How’s your friend?”

“That is exactly what I don’t know,” Ruth hastened to tell him.

“How’s that? Didn’t you go to Lyse?”

“Yes. But the man in whose pocket that letter to me was found isn’t Tom Cameron at all. It was some one else!”

“What? You don’t mean it! Then how did he come by that letter? I saw it taken out of the poor chap’s pocket. Johnny Mall wrote the note to you on the outside of it. I knew it was intended for you, of course.”

“But the man isn’t Tom. I should say, Lieutenant Thomas Cameron.”

“Seems to me I’ve heard of that fellow,” ruminated the ambulance driver, removing his big spectacles to wipe them. “But I believe he *is* wounded. I’m sorry,” he added, as he saw the change in Ruth’s face. “Maybe he isn’t, after all. Is—is this chap a pretty close friend of yours?”

Ruth told him, somewhat brokenly, in truth, just how near and dear to her the Cameron twins were. Telling more, perhaps, in the case of Tom, than she intended.

“I’ll see what I can find out about him. He’s been in this sector, I believe,” he said. “I guess he has been at our headquarters up yonder and I’ve met him.

“Well, so long,” he added, hopping into his car. “Next time I’m back this way maybe I’ll have some news for you—*good* news.”

“Oh, I hope so!” murmured Ruth, watching the battered ambulance wheel out of the hospital court.

Henriette Dupay had an errand in the village the next day and came to see Ruth, too. The little French girl was very much excited.

“Oh, my dear Mademoiselle Ruth!” she cried. “What do you think?”

“I could not possibly think—for *you*,” smiled Ruth.

“It is so—just as I told you,” wailed the other girl. “It always happens.”

“Do tell me what you mean? What has happened now?”

“Something bad always follows the seeing of the werwolf. My grandmère says it is a curse on the neighborhood because many of our people neglect the church. Think!”

“Do tell me,” begged the American girl.

“Our best cow died,” cried Henriette. “Our—ve-ry—best—cow! It is an affliction, Mademoiselle.”

Ruth could well understand that to be so, for cows, since the German invasion, have been very scarce in this part of France. Henriette was quite confident that the appearance of the “werwolf” had foretold the demise of “the poor Lally.” The American girl saw that it was quite useless to seek to change her little

friend's opinion on that score.

"Of course, the thing we saw in the road could not have been the countess' dog?" she ventured.

But Henriette would have none of that. "Why, Bubu's blanket is black," she cried. "And you know the werewolf is all of a white color—and so hu-u-uge!"

She would have nothing of the idea that Bubu was the basis of the countryside superstition. But the French girl had a second exciting bit of news.

"Think you!" she cried, "what I saw coming over to town this ve-ry day, Mademoiselle Ruth."

"Another mystery?"

"Quite so. But yes. You would never, as you say, 'guess.' I passed old Bessie, Madame la Countess' serving woman, riding fast, *fast* in a motor-car. Is it not a wonder?"

The statement startled Ruth, but she hid her emotion, asking:

"Not alone—surely? You do not mean that that old woman drives the countess' car?"

"Oh, no, Mademoiselle. The countess has no car. This was the strange car you and I saw on the road that day—the one that was stalled in the rut. You remember the tall capitaine—and the little one?"

The shock of the French girl's statement was almost too much for Ruth's self-control. Her voice sounded husky in her own ears when she asked:

"Tell me, Henriette! Are you *sure*? The old woman was riding away with those two men?"

"But yes, Mademoiselle. And they drive fast, fast!" and she pointed east, away from the hospital, and away from the road which led to Lyse.

CHAPTER XXIV—A PARTIAL EXPOSURE

It was when Ruth was going off duty for the day that the matron sent for her to come to the office before going to her own cell, as the tiny immaculate little rooms were called in which the Red Cross workers slept.

Obedying the summons, Ruth crossed the wide entrance hall and saw in the court a high-powered, open touring car in which sat two military-appearing men, although neither was in uniform. In the matron's room was another—a tall, dark young man, who arose from his chair the instant the girl entered the room.

“Monsieur Lafrane, Mademoiselle Fielding,” said the matron nervously. “Monsieur Lafrane is connected, he tells me, with the Department of Justice.”

“With the secret police, Mademoiselle,” the man said significantly. “The prefect of police at Lyse has sent me to you,” and he bowed again to Ruth.

The matron was evidently somewhat alarmed as well as surprised, but Ruth's calm manner reassured her to some extent.

“It is all right, Madame,” the American girl told her. “I expected monsieur's visit.”

“Oh, if mademoiselle is assured——?”

“Quite, Madame.”

The Frenchwoman hurried from the office and left the girl and the secret agent alone. The latter smiled quietly and asked Ruth to be seated.

“It is from Monsieur Joilette, at Lyse, that I come, as I say. He informs me you have the logic of a man—and a man's courage, Mademoiselle. He thinks highly of you.”

“Perhaps he thinks too highly of my courage,” Ruth returned, smiling.

“Not so,” proceeded Monsieur Lafrane, with rather a stern countenance, “for it must take some courage to tell but half your story when first you went to Monsieur Joilette. It is not—er—exactly safe to tell half truths to the French

police, Mademoiselle.”

“Not if one is an American?” smiled Ruth, not at all shaken. “Nor did I consider that I did wrong in saying nothing about Mrs. Mantel at the time, when I had nothing but suspicion against her. If Monsieur Joilette is as wise as I think him, he could easily have found the connection between those two dishonest men from America and the lady.”

“True. And he did so,” said the secret agent, nodding emphatically. “But already Legrand and this José had made what you Americans would call ‘a killing,’ yes?” Ruth nodded, smiling. “They got away with the money. But we are not allowing Madame Mantel, as she calls herself——”

“That isn’t her name then?”

“Name of a name!” ejaculated the man in disgust. “I should say not. She is Rosa Bonnet, who married an American crook four years ago and went to the United States. He was shot, I understand, in an attempt of his gang to rob a bank in one of your Western States.”

“Oh! And she came East and entered into our Red Cross work. How dreadful!”

“Rosa is a sharp woman. We believe she has done work for *les Boches*. But then,” he added, “we believe that of every crook we capture now.”

“And is she arrested?”

“But yes, Mademoiselle,” he said good-naturedly. “At least the police of Lyse were about to gather her in as I left this afternoon to come over here. But the men——”

“Oh, Monsieur!” cried Ruth, with clasped hands, “they have been in this neighborhood only to-day.”

He shot in a quick: “How do you know that, Mademoiselle Fielding?”

She told him of the French girl’s visit and of what Henriette had said of seeing Legrand, the Mexican and Bessie riding away in a motor-car from the chateau.

“To be trusted, this girl? This Mademoiselle Dupay?”

“Oh, quite!”

“The scoundrels! They slip through our fingers at every turn. But we will have them yet. Surely they cannot escape us for long. There are too many looking for them—both of the secret police and of the army.”

“Then the woman, too! The old woman and that José may only be related.

Perhaps she has nothing to do with—with——”

“With what, Mademoiselle?” he asked, smiling across the table at her, and that grimly.

“Is there not spying, too? Don’t you think these people are in communication with the Germans?”

“Could you expect me to answer that query, Mademoiselle?” he returned, his eyes suddenly twinkling. “But, yes! I see you are vitally interested. And you have heard this old wives’ tale of the werwolf.”

He quite startled her then, for she had said nothing of that in her letter to the Lyse prefect of police.

“Some matters must be cleared up. You may be able to help, Mademoiselle. I have come to ask you to make a call with me.”

“A call? On the Dupays? I hope I have said nothing to lead you to suppose that they are not loyal. And they have been kind to me.”

“Quite so, Mademoiselle,” he rejoined again with gravity. “I would ask you to do nothing that will make you feel an atom of disgrace. No, no! A mere call—and you shall return here in an hour.”

Ruth knew it was a command as well as a request. She hurried for her wrap, for the evening was damp. But she did not remove her costume of the Red Cross.

As she came down to the waiting car she saw that she was peered at by several of the nurses. Some wind of what was going on evidently had got about the hospital.

Ruth ran down the steps and jumped into the car, the tonneau door of which was held open by the man with whom she had talked in the matron’s office. Instantly the engine began to purr and the car slipped away from the steps.

Lafrane bowed to Ruth again, and said, with a gesture, as though introducing her:

“My comrades, Mademoiselle Fielding. Be of good courage. Like myself, Mademoiselle, they admire the courage of *les Americaines*.”

Ruth could say nothing to that. She felt half stifled with seething emotions. Her heart beat rapidly. What was now going to happen to her? She had endured many strange experiences since coming to France; but she had to admit that she was not prepared for this occurrence.

The car shot through the tortuous roads swiftly. Suddenly she noted that they were taking the hilly road to the Dupay farm—the longer way. They mounted the hill toward the chateau gate.

A light flashed ahead in the roadway. The car was pulled down to a stop before the entrance to the Chateau Marchand. Another soldierly looking man—this one in uniform—held the lantern and pointed to the gateway of the estate. To Ruth's surprise the wide gates were open.

The guard said something swiftly that the girl did not catch. The chauffeur manipulated the clutch and again the car leaped ahead. It turned directly into the private drive leading up to the chateau.

CHAPTER XXV—Quite Satisfactory

Ruth said nothing to Monsieur Lafrane, although she was startled. He had had no idea, then, of taking her to the Dupay farm. She was somewhat relieved by this discovery, although she was curious as to why she was being carried to the chateau.

It was plain that their visit was expected. The great front door of the old pile of masonry was wide open and a flaring, swinging lamp illuminated the entrance hall, the light shining far across the flagging before the door. As the girl had noted, there seemed no fear here at the chateau of German night raiders, while the village of Clair lay like a black swamp below the hill, not a lamp, even in the hospital, being allowed to shine from windows or doorways there.

“Will you come in, Mademoiselle?” said the leader of the expedition softly.

One of his companions got out, too, and him they left in the entrance hall, standing grim and silent against the wall like an added piece of ancient armor, of which there were several in sight, while the secret agent and Ruth entered an apartment on the right.

It was a library—a long and lofty room, paneled with carved oak and furnished in a wood quite as dark, the chairs and huge table being massive. There were a few fine old pictures; but the bookshelves were almost stripped of volumes. Ruth noted that but a few dozen remained.

The floor, too, was bare; yet by the stain on the boards she saw that once a huge rug must have almost covered the room. Everything remaining gave the apartment a stern and poverty-stricken air.

These things she noted at first glance. The countess was present, and it was the countess who attracted Ruth’s almost immediate attention.

She was quite as handsome and graceful as she had seemed when Ruth saw her walking in the road. But now she was angry, and her head was held high and her cheeks were deeply flushed. Her scant skirts swishing in and out of the candlelight, she walked up and down the room beyond the table, with something

of the liveness of the caged tiger.

“And have you come back to repeat these things you have said about Bessie?” she demanded in French of the secret agent.

“But, yes, Madame la Countess. It is necessary that you be convinced,” he said respectfully.

“I cannot believe it. I resent your accusation of poor Bessie. She has been with me for twenty years.”

“It is so,” said the man gravely. “And we cast no reflection upon her faithfulness to you, Madame. But have you noted no change in her—of late?”

“Ah, who has not been changed by the war?” murmured the countess, stopping to look at them across the table. Then for the first time she seemed to apprehend Ruth’s presence. She bowed distantly. “Mademoiselle Americaine,” she murmured. “What is this?”

“I would ask the mademoiselle to tell you what she knows of the connection of your servant with these men we are after,” said the secret agent briefly. Then he gestured for Ruth to speak.

The latter understood now what she had been brought here for. And she was shrewd enough to see, too, that the French secret police thought the countess entirely trustworthy.

Therefore Ruth began at the beginning and told of her suspicions aroused against Legrand and José when still she was in America, and of all the events which linked them to some plot, aimed against France, although she, of course, did not know and was not likely to know what that plot was.

The men were proven crooks. They were in disguise. And Ruth was positive that José was closely associated with the old serving woman whom Ruth had seen with the dog.

At mention of the greyhound the countess and the secret agent exchanged glances. Ruth intercepted them; but she made no comment. She saw well enough that there was a secret in that which she was not to know.

Nor did she ever expect to learn anything more about that phase of the matter, being unblest with second sight. However, in our next volume, “Ruth Fielding at the War Front; Or, The Hunt for a Lost Soldier,” she was destined to gain much information on several points connected with the old chateau and its occupants.

Now, however, she merely told the countess what the agent had asked her to tell, including the fact that Bessie had been seen that afternoon riding away from the chateau with the two criminals, Legrand and José.

Her testimony seemed to convince the lady of the chateau. She bowed her head and wiped away the tears that moistened her now paling cheeks.

“*Ma foi!* Who, then, is to be trusted?” she murmured, when the girl had finished. “Your pardon, Monsieur! But, remember, I have had the poor creature in my service for many years.

“I must accept all your story as true. The American mademoiselle convinces me. This José, then, must be Bessie’s nephew. I had heard of him. I must thank her, perhaps, that she did not allow him and his associate to rob me before she ran away. The apaches!”

“We will get them,” said the agent cheerfully, preparing to depart. “I leave men in the neighborhood. They will communicate with you—and you can trust them. If the woman reappears alone we must question her. You understand?” and he spoke with some sternness.

The countess nodded, having recovered her self-control. “I know my duty, Monsieur,” she said. Then to Ruth, putting forth her hand, she added:

“You have called and find me in sore trouble, my dear. Do I understand that you work in our hospital at Clair?”

“Yes, Madame,” replied the girl.

“Come to see me again, then—at a happier time.” She pressed Ruth’s hand for a moment and went out. The secret service agent bowed low as she disappeared. Then he said with admiration to Ruth:

“*Ma foi!* A countess, say you? She should be a queen.” Ah, this good republican was quite plainly a lover of the aristocracy, too!

Ruth was whisked back to the hospital. On the way Monsieur Lafrane assured her that she would be gratefully remembered by the French secret police for what seemed to her, after all, a very simple thing.

The men were confident of soon apprehending Legrand and his companions. “And then—the jug!” ejaculated the leader, using with gusto what he fondly believed to be another Americanism.

It was not likely that Ruth would sleep much that night. Her mind was greatly overwrought. But finally, about daylight, when she did fall into a more or less

refreshing sleep, an orderly came to her door and knocked until she responded.

“Mademoiselle has waiting for her on the steps a visitor,” he said, with a chuckle. “She should come down at once.”

“A visitor, Henri?” she cried. “Who can it be?”

“One young *Americaine*,” he replied, and went away cheerfully humming a tune.

“What can that Charlie Bragg want at this hour in the morning?” Ruth murmured, yet hurrying her toilet. “Possibly he brings news of Tom!”

Down she ran to the court as soon as she was neat. A man was sitting on the steps, leaning against the doorpost. It was not Charlie, for he was in military uniform and she could see an officer’s insignia. He was asleep.

She saw as she left the stairway and crossed the entrance hall that he wore his arm in a sling. She thought instantly of the unknown American in Lyse Hospital who had lost his forearm. Then——

“Tom Cameron!” she cried, and sprang to his side.

The soldier awoke with a start. He looked up at her and grinned.

“Hullo, Ruthie,” he observed. “Excuse this early call, but I might not have another rest day for a long time. We’re going into the trenches—going to take over a sector of the French line, they say, before long. So——

“Hullo! What’s happened?”

“Your arm, Tom! You are wounded?” she gasped.

“Oh, shucks! Got a splinter of shell in it. Nothing much. Keeping it in splints so it will mend quicker,” he said.

“But your letter, Tom!” she cried, and there, in the early morning, standing upon the hospital steps, she told him the story of the happening that had so disturbed and troubled her.

“Don’t that beat all!” exclaimed Tom. “I wondered what had happened to that letter that I had just finished when I was called on duty. It was Sam Hines who had his arm torn off—poor fellow. We heard from him. He’s getting on all right, but, of course, he’ll have to go home.

“He must have picked up my letter, maybe to give it to me, knowing I had forgotten it. Well, it’s all right, Ruthie. I can tell you lots more than was in that letter—and you’ve got a lot to tell me.”

So they sat down, side by side, and related each to the other all their adventures, while the great guns on the battle line boomed a rumbling accompaniment to what was said.

THE END

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