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FREEDOM

By Ida M. Tarbell

My companion had business with Mademoiselle L'Hotellier, the directtice of the General Hospital of Cambrai - Red Cross business.

She soon came - a short, quick-stepping, rosy-cheeked woman, with great dark eyes and lips that would have been full if long experience in determined action had not thinned them. The white band under her dark blue veil was white as snow, and if her gray nurses suit was at least three sizes too large she wore it with distinction. As she waited, standing, to hear the errand, she looked in spite of her uniform the picture of a busy, vigorous American woman executive -- with something added -- something of spiritual dignity which radiated from her like an atmosphere.

The business was soon over and then quite by accident came the inevitable reference to the war. She could give no information later than August, 1916; she had not been in Cambrai between that date and November, 1918.

"But Cambrai was occupied", I exclaimed. "How could you leave?"

"I did not leave", she said, smilingly. "I was taken.

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They had condemned me to death, but they let me go, as you see. They made it hard labor instead."

Perhaps it was the tears that spring to our eyes, the look of sympathy - and curiosity - in our faces that made her drop her reserve, for she sat down and then little by little came out another one of those tales of woman's heroism, that now the war is over, are piling up day by day in France.

"They came upon us so suddenly. You will remember perhaps -- the 26th of Autust, 1914. The town was entered and surrounded. A few soldiers were left in the retreat and 107 of them took refuge with me in the general hospital where I was directress. Concealing a soldier carried with it a death penalty and the Germans made it very clear that there would be no mercy for one caught in the act. Of course, that made no difference to me. It was my duty to protect them; what did make me anxious, however, was that they might be discovered. I knew if that happened the men would resist and if they did Cambrai's fate might be that of Louvain and Liege - you see, I could not let them be taken."

"The Germans came to the hospital almost at once. 'You have soldiers concealed here, Madam', the officer in charge said. 'No, Monsieur,' I answered, 'I have only my sick'."

The amazing dignity, the big eyes, the something quite superior in the little woman seemed to have disarmed

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the officer for he took his men away; but suspicions remained. Again and again they came back, often unexpectedly, but always she disarmed or outwitted them. It was a fortnight before the threatened search was made, but when it came it was thorough. They went from room to room, opening doors, sounding walls, prying open locks. Mademoiselle L'Hotellier accompanied them, leading the way everywhere, answering all their questions - calm, steady, unhesitating. They had gone over two floors of the great place and found nothing. Her soldiers were on the third. They could not escape. Quite naturally and unexcitedly, she remarked to the attendant on the second floor as she passed, to take the men down by the stairs of the further wing and to conceal them on the first, and it was done. When the searching party reached the upper floor they found nobody and they went away convinced that the directress had told them the truth.

"I was very tired here", she said putting her hand on the back of her head, "when they left".

There were other narrow escapes. One day a soldier saw a party making its way to a sick ward from which it was impossible for him to escape. He jumped into an empty bed and pulled the clothes about him. "That is not a sick man", said the officer "Oh, yes, Monsieur," she replied. "See how white and haggard he is!" He is tubercular". The soldier had chosen wisely for over the bed was the word "Tuberculosis". Again a German officer came into her office when she had beside her at work a French officer

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in civilian clothes. The German sat down and she between them, went on with her work.

But she saw that this could not go on - that inevitably some incident would arouse suspicion and the hospital would be raided and possibly razed, so she called the men together. "My children", she said, "you must go. Tell me what your trades are". One was a butcher, one a lawyer, one a schoolmaster, etc. That night she sent out to those whom she trusted in Cambrai for the proper costumes for butchers, lawyers, schoolmasters, etc., with the tools of the trades. In two hours 200 costumes were in her hands. That night through the different doors and gates of the place 87 of her 107 went out to mingle with the citizen population of Cambrai. The remaining twenty were ill in her hospital, and there they stayed until one by one they were fit to leave, as their fellows had done.

But the going of the soldiers did not end her activities. Week after week, month after month, there slipped into Cambrai English or French soldiers or civilians on various missions and it was with her that they found shelter and from her they received the information they sought. Here she received and sheltered those who had escaped through the kind offices of Edith Cavell. Here Edith Cavell sent her information and requests.

There was a secret wireless station in Cambrai. "Not mine" says Mademoiselle L'Hotellier, "but through my hands went many of its messages." One day when she stood reading one of these

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communications, a German officer suddenly stood by her side. Quite naturally, without change of color or of voice she talked with him, answering his questions, paper in her hand. Finally carelessly she threw it towards the paper basket. It fell at his feet. "I was quite wet through with perspiration when he went away", she said.

During all this time she had concealed between the ceiling and the floor in one of the wings all of the uniforms and equipment of the 107 soldiers that she had sheltered the night that the Germans entered Cambrai. At the end of the eighteen months she determined that she must somehow get rid of the compromising collection, for unexpected investigations of the premises were constantly being made. She accordingly called together ten of her attendants in whom she had absolute confidence and told them that that night they must bring to the great heating apparatus of the hospital all of the uniforms and all of the equipment that would burn and the rest must be buried. This was actually carried out in one night and no trace that the Germans were ever able to discover was left behind.

For two years this went on, the sheltering of soldiers, the receiving of messages, the passing on of information, and along with it went the handling of the great hospital. All the sick of Cambrai came to her and she tells with pride how they

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never lacked anything which they needed. She had been very clever. Before the Germans could complete their requisitions in the town she had drawn 5000 sheets from the population, had called in great supplies of medicines, and had established such communication with merchants that milk and eggs were never lacking. Again and again the enemy demanded this or that from her, but always they were met with the same firm "That is against your own code, Sir, these things belong to my sick. You cannot have them," - and they never took them.

"I suppose", she says, "That if it had not been that I kept everything in my own hands I could not have gone on as long as I did, but I always went to the door myself night and day. Not one of my attendants was ever allowed to see or accompany the searchers, to answer a question. It was I -- always I that they saw. And then finally in August of 1916 a trecherous fellow in the town betrayed me. They came one day and took me and twenty soldiers with me. They walked me through the streets, a soldier on each side and I was very proud for all the men in Cambrai took off their hats as I passed and the women wept."

Mademoiselle L'Hotellier was taken from Cambrai to Valencinnes where for three months she was kept in solitary confinement. At the end of that time, she was brought back to Cambrai for trial, on five counts each of which under the German code, carried the death penalty. That trial must have been a

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wonderful sight - the great hall of the German headquarters, the General himself in full uniform as president of the tribunal, the general staff at his side, a jury of high rank and the white-faced little prisoner hardly over five feet with her great dark eyes of a child, and her fringe of blond hair peeping from under the border of her nurses' veil.

"The General was much surprised when I came in. 'You', he said. 'you Mademoiselle L'Hotellier. It is not possible. Why, you are young and little'"and I think he added 'beautiful', though she does not say so. "'I thought you were old and large'. It was very funny. They always said that. I think they thought I must be seven feet high with gray hair and fierce eyes".

She was given a lawyer to defend her. "You must tell me everything", he said. "I have nothing to tell", was all her answer.

On two counts they had the proofs. She had been discovered concealing the soldiers and their arms; but the Germans accused her of more - of conducting a wireless station, of receiving messeges, of getting information, of having accomplices. She steadily and firmly lied. They were particularly determined to discover her accomplices. Every pressure was brought to bear, every promise of mercy given, if she would but reveal those who aided her. "I worked alone - no one aided me", her only reply was. Her assistants and associates in the hospital were brought in.

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Mademoiselle L'Hotellier grows very eloquent here. "Oh, they were splendid", she said. "They knew nothing -- they gave no signs", all of which means of course that her steadfastness and simplicity had communicated itself to them. They were her worthy followers.

She was condemned on two counts. "You see, I defended myself well on the others - the best I could. And always I said to them, 'You have no proof'. If it had not been for the jury, I suppose I would have gone to death, but the jury commuted my sentence to hard labor." If it is true as the ex-kaiser says that on the death of Edith Cavell he ordered that hereafter no women should be executed whatever her military crime, the mercy shown by the jury is explained.

It was in November of 1916 that Mademoiselle L'Hotellier received her sentence, thard labor. For two years she suffered a martyrdom such as few women even in this epoch of martyrdom suffered. She was taken into Germany and moved from prison to prison - eight in all. For months at a time she was kept in damp cells - the only light being a high window in the ceiling. "It is curious", she said, "but you know the only physical effects of my experience of which I am now conscious is a weakness of the eyes. I sat always with my eyes liftedto that little streak of light. There was freedom there--".

Evidently the Germans had set out to break her will, to force her to ask for mercy, to betray her accomplices for every

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variety of punishment was tried on her. For weeks she was kept on starvation rations. "It is so hard to be hungry", she said. "You have no idea. They used to try to tempt me after I had had weeks of it, telling me if I would but confess all that I had done, that they would release me".

"You were never tempted?" I said.

"Tempted! Madame, that would have meant slavery. You see, I learned wonderful things - those days I spent alone in their cells. I learned to be perfectly free of the things that make slaves of us. Why, Madame, I am the richest woman in the world. I am free of everything that enslaves and encumbers. I know now how little material things matter. I know now how insignificant death is. Certainly I suffered, but to suffer in my body was nothing to what my suffering would have been had I sold myself into slavery. I have descended into hell and I have learned not to fear it. It is thus one reaches Heaven and knows himself master of his fate. Freedom, Madame, that is the greatest of riches - freedom and health!

It was the soaring of a soul in a realm to which many turn their eyes and into which few dare to venture.

"They could not bear it - the Germans - that I was stronger than they; yet I think that they respected me. I remember a man -- a sergeant who said to me "Madame, if you were a German woman the Emperor would call you to his side."

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"There were worse things than hunger. Once they sent me for three months into a barracks where they confined street women who were diseased. It was hard labor there, waiting on these women, scrubbing their floors, washing their garments, and it was very cold and they had taken all my clothes but a slip and an apron and a handkerchief. I slept in a room with thirty of them and never - never - had I dreamed that there were such things in the world as that I heard from their lips. It was dreadful at night, for sometimes soldiers came to them."

"You must not be surprised, Madame, if some young girls that were carried off from France and thrown into prison because they rejected the propositions of German officers, finally yielded. Cold, hunger and solitary confinement break the will unless you have learned what freedom means." [illegible]

"Late in 1917 they took me back to Valenciennes. There was a beautiful and wicked woman in charge of the prison there and I think it was a matter of professional pride with her to break me. I think she hated me because she could not do it. One night she brought into my cell a woman who was dying and let the poor creature lie there beside me. In the morning she came to me and asked why I did not ask to be put somewhere else. She said she would remove me if I asked her. I said, "No, Madame, I ask nothing."

"Finally at Valenciennes I fell so frightfully ill that I was transferred to their hospital. There were sisters

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in charge of it and they were kind. For six months I worked on my plans. As I grew better and could walk a little they let me go into the garden. Finally I asked them to let me put on my nurse's costume, for curiously enough, in all my wanderings my belongings had gone with me, even to my umbrella. I walked in the garden day after day quite naturally, until the guards were used to me. Then one day I walked out of the garden into the town. The guards did not notice. The sisters closed their eyes. I did this often always returning until one day late in September 1918 - I cannot tell you the date; you see I had lost track of dates - I walked out as usual - nothing in my hands, and did not return. I walked on and on through Valenciennes into the country towards Belgium. Everybody supposed me a lady on an errand of mercy. Sometimes I asked a lift from the Germans themselves. I rode in their camions; I slept sometimes in their quarters. In the weeks before the armistice I walked over 300 kilometers - and I was very happy always. For you see, Madame, I was free. It is a wonderful thing to be free in your soul; to know that nothing - nothing that the world can give you, or that you can suffer matters; that you have had it all and that you have conquered it all; that they have done their worse and they could not break you. To know this and to be alone on the road! Oh, I was very happy".

Then came the armistice. I was trying to get to Holland, but at that news I turned and hastened to Cambrai. And would you

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believe it, Madame, when I arrived here, although my old hospital was unhabitable and my city in the condition you find it - its very heart burned out,-I found I was still the directrice of the General Hospital of Cambrai. They had refused to choose a successor. All my attendants, all my helpers were there. They came flocking around me. 'We were waiting for you, Madame. We knew you would come. We knew they never could conquer you'. You may believe that I was happy then. We went to work at once to find a building that could be used until the city could rebuild the General Hospital. You find us in what was once the hospital of a sisterhood. The mayor told me to take it. Come and see how we have patched it up."

And so we followed her. It was one of the hundred of wonderful old public buildings in northern France that have been shot through and through by shell and bomb. Not a pane of glass had been left in its great windows. There were gapping holes in its sides. Its roof had been ripped in place after place. But this brave little woman had attacked the ruin with the same undaunted spirit that she had met her German acquasers. She and the force that had been waiting for her for two years or more, had cleaned up one wing. They had scraped the town for bits of wood and rolls pf paper, and with these scanty improvided supplies - a nail when they could get one, a brick used for a hammer - they had worked night and day to make the place weather proof. "Now and then, of course, we had a carpenter", she said. "When I heard of one I went out and took him by the ear and led

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him in to help us. We had to be quick, you see, for all my poor old invalids were scattered in huts and caves in and around the town. You see how snug we are now. Of course, there are the wind and rain blows in, but that is nothing; time will cure all that, you see, And now come and see my old people."

There were four wards of them - old, old men; old, old women - crippled, blind, bed-ridden. Those who were able hugging the big iron stoves which Mademoiselle L'Hotellier had somehow found for each room. As we came in, all that were able rose to their feet; those that saw, twitching the arms of those that did not see to make them know that there were visitors. They were very happy. "Oh, we are well off now and Madame is taking good care of us. How could anyone help being happy now that they are gone."

"You see", she said, when we went out. "They say 'Madame' as children say mother", and they did. We made the rounds from top to bottom - saw all of the brave make-shifts, the ingenuous adaptations, heard the amusing stories of how this and that had been accomplished. Mademoiselle L'Hotellier accompanied us to the end.

"You are very brave, Madame," I said.

"I am very happy, Madame,", she replied. "For I have the greatest of all things - FREEDOM".

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