Miss Ida M. Tarbell
R. F. D. 1
Bethel, Conn.

O U T L I N E

In the early spring of 1919 I spent some weeks in devastated France, my business, reporting for the American Red Cross Magazine. I was more or less benumbed by what I had seen and heard when I reached Cambrai, a town which I had known all my life as the home of the beautiful cambric in which my Mother so delighted.

But it was not because of that that I was there. It was rather the chance remark of a man who knew his devastated France, "you should see the head of the Cambrai Hospital. There's a woman they never could break, as great as Edith Cavell--and cleverer."

There was no question about Cambrai belonging in the devastated category. Fire had laid much of it waste. Its churches and schools and public buildings were wrecked beyond use and some of them, like the original hospital, the head of which I was to see, wiped out.

"But there is a hospital?"

"Oh, yes, Madame saw to that," they told me, and I was directed to what had once been a solid and rather imposing building belonging to a scattered sisterhood. Somebody of courage and ingenuity had been working on that wreck. Corrugated iron from the trenches had been nailed over gapping holes in the roof, over glassless windows there was paper; and the shell-holes in the walls were stuffed with rags.

I had become accustomed to finding the heads of battered institutions as battered as their possessions, but not so the head of the hospital at Cambrai. She came out to meet me, a little woman not over five feet, with rosy cheeks, big, appealling eyes, full of energy. But what almost startled me, it was so unexpected, she was happy. My informant was right. They had not broken her.

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

But unless I had been deceived by what I had heard there was no device known to the philosophy of frightfulness that had not been tested in the effort to break her. Gradually I pieced together the story which makes her, for me, the most unforgettable of women--a perfect type of devotion to a task undertaken, a complete emancipation from worldly ambitions and possessions.

Begin

Madame, as everyone called her, was in Cambrai in August of 1914 when the Germans surrounded and occupied the Town. Her one thought was to protect her hospital and its inmates. What were their rights under the German war code? She found a manual and studied it. It was to serve her good purpose in the future months. Sensing a possibly long siege she prepared for it, requisitioning five thousand sheets from trusted townsmen, practically all the supplies of medicines in the Town, arranging for milk and eggs by secret chsnnels. This was not done before she was faced with a problem quite outside of the province of the director of a hospital.

The occupation had been so sudden that many of the little garrison of soldiers in the Town had been trapped. A hundred and nine of them sought refuge with Madame. What was she to do with them in her already crowded quarters? How was she to rid them of their tell-tale uniforms, get them into civilian clothes? Where was she to get the clothes and what was she to do with the unforms?--and them?

The Germans from the start were suspicious of her. They came, not asking if she was concealing soldiers, but charging her with it. She had taken on herself the business of seeing them. She allowed no attendant to answer her questions. She always opened the door, always conducted them on their frequent and unexpected visits. For weeks this went on until finally, literally under their noses, she had disposed of her charges, done away with even the last button

Digital Image, 2011. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

and buckle of their uniforms.

But ther Germans were suspecting her of other crimes. French and British prisoners from Belgium to the East found their way in and out of the Town. Information reached the French which must have come through Cambrai. Who there, but Madame, was clever enough to engineer such operations.

"It was true," she told me quite simply, "until Edith Cavells arrest in August of 1915 I was in frequent communication with her. Her underground did not run only to the Dutch border, it came westward. My hospital was a station. Cambrai had a wireless. We made the enemies very uneasy for they never were able to detect, only to suspect."

Two years went by when the Germans, outwitted by her at every point, their suspicions stronger than ever, finally secured proofs through the treachery of a man of the Town and Madame was arrested.

They couldn't afford to guillotine her until they find out her accomplices, learned the technique of the underground system that was doing them so much damage. They had been outwitted by one woman, they must not be outwitted by another.

But they got nothing. She had worked alone, she had no accomplices, she had nothing to tell. This, rightly enough, they could not believe and would not.

They showed sound phychology in their first attack on her refusal to tell them anything. Solitary confinement, that generally opened the mouth of a woman. They marched her through the Town on her way to the prison twenty-five miles away.

"I was very proud," she said smiling, "for as I passed all the men in Cambrai raised their hats and the women wept."

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

At the end of three months her mouth was still shut. They brought her back to be tried--a spectacular trial, the most grandiose show the Germans could put on with the General of the district himself presiding. Do their best they learned nothing from her, nothing from her attendants, nothing from her fellow-townsmen.

Angry and baffled, they turned to torture. She was sent into Germany and for many months transferred from prison to prison, it being made clear to those who had charge of her that she must be made to confess. That was their business, that was what they were trained for. Professional pride made them do their best with Madame. There are horrible episodes in this story of the eighteen months. They tried hunger, they tried cold, they tried months of hard labor scrubbing floors and emptying slops for a prison of depraved women. Eighteen months was not too much for her will to silence, but it was for her body. She became terribly ill and was brought to the hospital in Valenciennes, only twenty-five miles from Cambrai.

There were nuns in charge of the institution and they were good to her. She was so frail, so little, and her big eyes so disarming. When finally she could walk they gave her the run of the garden. One day she asked to walk into Town. She came back. She went out and in repeatedly, but finally there came a day when she did not return. She walked eastward through Belgium headed for the Dutch border. She was still walking when the Armistice came. She simply turned on her heel and walked westward through Belgium into France headed for Cambrai.

Digital Image, 2011. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

It was late in November of 1918 when she came to the Town. Men and women, rich and poor, but most important to her of all, the poor old derelicts, the blind and the poor, once her charges, who had outlived the sufferings war had brought them, came flocking about her. "We were waiting for you. We knew you would come."

All her old energy re-asserted itself. She had taken the ruins where I found her and in three months had gathered piece by piece bits of wood and paper and iron, old stoves, old bedding, bits of furniture until she had been able to furnish four wards. She took me over the place. Every patch had a story, every shell-hole filled was a conquest, her gaiety was contagious. I found myself exhulting with her.

"How happy you are, Madame, " I ventured.

"Yes," she said soberly, "I am happy, but it is because I am free. I learned in those months in the attempt to wrest from me what I had been given to guard, that for me the only happiness lay in fidelity to my trust. If I had betrayed by word or sign one of my accomplices I never again could have faced these people so faithful to me. I should have sold myself into slavery.

"Freedom," she went on, "comes only through fidelity. You must earn it, and each must pay his own price and there are no two prices alike. It is an affair of the soul, but having earned freedom all that really matters follows."

stop.

I had come to Cambrai numb and burdened by the hopelessness of material restoration. I left, the burden gone, hope restored, for here was the key in the intrepid soul who knew the true values of things and was willing to sacrifice for them. Such men and women, I told myself, had made the France I had so delighted in. They would remake it. If they were her hope twenty-five years ago how much more so are they today. And do not despair. All over France are those who, at this hour, still believe L[illegible]rty is worth dying for.

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.