

THE CALL OF HIS COUNTRY

by Beth Slater Whitson

I am engaged in the real estate business in the city of Z_____, south of the Ohio River, and on the afternoon of the day on which England declared war against Germany, had gone out to Neiderhouser's with a prospective buyer for the small farm which he had listed with me some time before.

It was not his home place, but a smaller one joining it on the northeast, that was for sale. Seen from Neiderhouser's broad eastern piazza, it appeared as a small, exquisite picture—a miniature of green fields, white buildings with red roofs and chimneys; there was a deutsch aspect about it, and it appealed to Nolon, who had come out with me to see it, But Neiderhouser wanted a thousand more than Nolon had intended paying for a place, and, after going over it—those two had spent the greater part of the afternoon talking — had gotten no nearer a trade than at first.

"It iss nod big, Mister Nolon," Neiderhouser said at last, "but it iss goot — it is as goot as dis — but only schmaller."

"Dis," as Neiderhouser referred to it, was good to look at, too. It was all tableland, much of it in fine orchards and vineyards, the rest in rolling, grassy fields, where dairy cattle fed. The location, too, was ideal for a house — just on the brow of a long slope whose foot descended into a picturesque valley through which a ribbon-like road, built by Neiderhouser, wound along and joined a pike a mile away to the left of the farm.

On every side were evidences of German thrift and industry — the closely cropped grassy lawns, the whitewashed paling fences, the painted barns and haysheds—not anywhere were there signs of shiftlessness or neglect or procrastination. Yet, eight years before. when Neiderhouser had bought the place, it had been like a hundred other wornout, run-down, abused farms of Blakely County, and bringing it up to its present state had cost eight of the best years of Neiderhouser's life. He was still young—nearing the middle thirties, I should guess—but the years of hard, unceasing toil had left their mark; there were tired lines about his mouth and eyes that not even the ever-ready, genial smile could wholly obliterate.

It was getting late, and we had stopped talking "farm," and with our chairs drawn closely together, were smoking and drinking Neiderhouser's grape wine.

"This is excellent," Nolan remarked, draining his glass for the third time.

"Ach—but not so goot as the Rheinisch wines," returned Neiderhouser, quickly. "I haf been over to America twenty years, Meester Nolon, but I remember dings of der Faderland like it vas yesterday."

"What do you think of the present state of affairs over there?" I asked, carelessly, knowing that he usually kept up with the news of the day.

"My paper vas oudt ten days past," he answered, "and I haf not been to the town. Vot affairs iss they?"

Just then a buggy came into view up the slope, carrying Mrs. Neiderhouser and Carl – the only child. They had been in town, Neiderhouser said. As they drew near the gate, Mrs. Neiderhouser began waving a paper and calling excitedly in German, and the next minute Neiderhouser was running wildly towards them, shouting short, broken questions – also in the mother tongue – as he ran.

He took the paper from his wife's hand, gave a long, searching glance at some flourishing headlines – then, wonderingly, Nolon and I watched him straighten like a ramrod, give the German military salute, and say something which brought a low cry from Mrs. Neiderhouser.

They came up the walk together, then – the three of them. Nolon and I had risen and were standing at the head of the steps ready for departure, and a feeling of awe came over me as I looked at Neiderhouser. He walked with slightly uplifted face from which all the color had gone out. His lips were set in a straight line, and there was an air of aloofness about him. We had spent the afternoon with a young German farmer, and for the moment we were seeing the German soldier.

Mrs. Neiderhouser, a delicate-looking little woman with a pretty face, and with pale yellow hair and big, appealing blue eyes that were filled with a look of terrified apprehension, followed closely in his steps, and behind them, came the boy, a sturdy little fellow, looking curiously at his mother and father.

At the foot of the steps Neiderhouser paused. "Ve are going to fight England," he said, solemnly, as if in answer to a question. "She haf declared war on us; Russia haf declared war; France haf declared war."

"I sell, you the place, Mister Nolon, at your price – I leave for Schermany on der morrow morning."

Mrs. Neiderhouser clutched his arm with two small, shaking hands.

"You vill not leave meinself and the boy, Fritz," she cried, piteously, tears running down her cheeks – "You vill not – say you vill not – "

Neiderhouser gave her the look of one who wonders if he can have heard aright. "I go to fight for mein country, Elsie," he said, sternly.

Without another word Mrs. Neiderhouser crumpled in a small unconscious heap against the steps, and for a few moments all was confusion. Neiderhouser was crying. "Elsie, Elsie," and the boy was sobbing, "Wake up. Mamma – wake up, mamma." It wasn't very pleasant, and as soon as we got her into the house and she began to regain consciousness, I joined Nolon on the porch and signaled Neiderhouser through the window that we were leaving. To my intense surprise, he came out hurriedly.

"She iss better – she iss most well," he said. "Please get de papers ready for der sale. I vill be back in a minute."

Until then I hadn't credited for an instant his declaration that he was going back to fight for Germany; I had just supposed him laboring under the excitement of the moment, but he was back shortly with pen and ink, and within twenty minutes he had made over the adjoining place to Nolon. Even then, I thought a few hours would cool his enthusiasm, but he walked down to the gate with us when we were leaving, and as I cranked the car, I heard him talking to Nolon.

"I vould be glad, Mister Nolon," he said, "if you vould look after Mrs. Neiderhouser und de boy vile I am in Schermanny – I leave them plenty, but dey vill need a protector until I return, Gott willing."

His patriotism irritated me, somehow, and I told him so in plain English. "It's all foolishness," I wound up, "leaving your wife and boy, not to mention this home, which you have given the best part of your life for, and all to go back to fight for a country that has long ago forgotten you, if it ever gave you any recognition."

"But mein country I haf not forgot," he answered, with a dignity that silenced me, and we drove away after Nolon had assured him that he would look after the wife and boy.

"He won't go," I told Nolon after we had discussed the matter from A to Z – but I was not convinced that he wouldn't. And next morning when the New York limited was due I was at the station, but my German friends were there before me; they were already at the gate when I discovered them, and the train was in.

Mrs. Neiderhouser's back was toward me and Neiderhouser stood facing her, talking earnestly and brokenly. The calm control of the day before had deserted him and tears were coursing down his cheeks. He held the boy to him with one arm – the other was about his wife – and he was saying over and over: "I will come back when the war is ended." And it was only when the gate-keeper said something to him that he finally released Elsie and the boy and caught the train as it began moving – waving frantically from the steps as the car passed out of the shed. The two left behind stood watching until the last car had gone, and then I got a distinct shock. They turned and came in my direction, and I saw there was not a trace of tears on Mrs. Neiderhouser's face. It was very white and she looked more fragile than usual, but she bore herself with dignity as she came toward me, leading the boy. She paused as she recognized me and gave me a wan little smile.

"He lofs his country better than mein self und the boy," she said, in a very low voice; "we haf done mit grief."

That was all, and she had passed on before I recovered from my astonishment enough to reply.

The story – if this brief narrative could be termed a story – ends here. But, belonging to that class of people who always turn to the last chapter of a book after reading the first three or four, I find myself idly speculating on the outcome of the Neiderhouser affair.

Three weeks have passed since Neiderhouser's departure, and if he reached Germany in safety he has probably been mustered in the Kaiser's army by this time. Yesterday Nolon moved onto his new place. I had forgotten to mention heretofore that he is a young and good-looking bachelor, and I am inclined to believe he will carry out his promise to Neiderhouser to the letter, about looking after Mrs. Neiderhouser's welfare. I was out at Nolon's in the afternoon, and he came in with me. As we were passing the Neiderhouser place, Mrs. Neiderhouser came running down to the gate to bring some of the wine that "isn't so good as the Rheinisch wines," but is, as Nolon expresses it, "excellent" – and I noticed that she and Nolon appeared to be on, very friendly footing with each other, so I take it for granted he has already been looking after his little neighbor's interests.

I was thinking over the situation last night after Nolan left. The chances are he will soon endear himself to the boy who has been deprived of a father. And Mrs. Neiderhouser is a pretty and charming woman! So I find myself wondering if, by some streak of fortune or fate, Neiderhouser should escape the bullets and bayonets of Russia, England and France – not to mention little Belgium –

and come back, will his little kingdom on the brow of the hill have the same loyal subjects as before he went away? I wonder if a picture of it – its vineyards and orchards – its peaceful green fields – all the fruit of his own unremitting toil – will ever rise before him as he tramps, weary and footsore, with thousands of other weary and footsore soldiers who sing, "Der Wacht Um Rhein," and does he still say as proudly as on the afternoon before he went away, "Mein country I haf not forgot"?

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