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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ARMY BOYS ON THE FIRING LINE; OR, HOLDING BACK THE GERMAN DRIVE ***

E-text prepared by Al Haines



"America!" answered Frank, and hurled his revolver full in the sentry's face.

ARMY BOYS ON THE FIRING LINE

OR

Holding Back the German Drive

BY

HOMER RANDALL

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"Army Boys in the French Trenches," etc.*

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ARMY BOYS ON THE FIRING LINE

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ARMY BOYS ON THE FIRING LINE

CHAPTER I

FIGHTING AGAINST ODDS

"The Huns are coming!" exclaimed Frank Sheldon, as from the American front line his keen, gray eyes searched a broad belt of woodland three hundred yards away.

"Bad habit they have," drawled his special chum and comrade, Bart Raymond, running his finger along the edge of his bayonet. "We'll have to try to cure them of it."

"I think they're getting over it to some extent," remarked Tom Bradford, who stood at Frank's left. "The last time they tried to rush us they went back in a bigger hurry than they came. What we did to them was a shame!"

"They certainly left a lot of dead men hanging on our wires," put in Billy Waldon. "But there are plenty of them ready to take their places, and the Kaiser's willing to fight to the last man, though you notice he keeps his own precious skin out of the line of fire."

"I think Frank's getting us on a string," chaffed Tom, when some minutes had passed in grim waiting. "I don't see any Heinies. Trot out your Huns, Frank, and let's have a look at them."

"You'll see them soon enough," retorted Frank. "I saw the flash of bayonets in that fringe of woods and I'm sure they're massing."

"Do you remember that little thrilly feeling that used to go up and down our spines when we were green at the war game?" grinned Bart. "I feel it now to some extent, but nothing to what I did at first."

"That's because we've tackled the boches and taken their measure," commented Frank. "We know now that man for man when conditions are equal we can lick them. The world had been so fed up with stories about Prussian discipline that it seemed as though the Germans must be supermen. But a bullet or a bayonet can get them just like any one else, and when it comes to close quarters, the American eagle can pick the pin feathers out of any Prussian bird."

"It isn't but what they're brave enough," remarked Bart. "When they're fighting in heavy masses they're a tough proposition. But they've got to feel somebody else's shoulder against theirs to be at their best. Turn a hundred of them loose in a ten-acre lot against the same number of Americans, where each man had to pick out his own opponent, and see what would happen to them."

"They wouldn't be in it," agreed Tom with conviction. "Put a Heinie in a strange position where he has to think quickly without an officer to help him, and he's up in the air. Take his map away from him and he's lost."

"Even when you talk of his mass fighting being so good, perhaps you're giving him too much credit," said Billy grudgingly. "He goes into battle with his officer's revolver trained on him, and he knows that if he flinches he'll be shot. He's got a chance if he goes ahead and no chance at all if he doesn't. And you remember at the battle of the Somme how the gun crews were chained to their cannon so that they couldn't run away. You'll notice that we don't use chains or revolvers for that purpose in the American army."

"I heard Captain Baker tell the colonel the other day that what he needed was a brake instead of a spur in handling his bunch of doughboys," chuckled Tom.

"Quit your chinning," commanded Frank suddenly. "Here they come! Now will you boobs tell me that my eyesight's no good?"

"You win," agreed Bart, as a sharp word of command came down the line. "They're coming for fair!"

From the thick woods beyond, a huge force of enemy troops were coming, marching shoulder to shoulder as stiffly and precisely as though they were on parade or were passing in review before the Kaiser himself.

Their artillery, which had been keeping up a steady fire, now redoubled in volume, and a protecting barrage was laid down, in the shelter of which they steadily advanced.

But now the American guns opened up with a roar that shook the ground. The guns were served with the precision that has made American gunnery the envy of the world, and great gaps were torn in the dense masses of the enemy troops. But the lanes filled up instantly, and with hardly a moment of faltering the advance continued.

As the troops drew nearer, it could be seen that all the men were clad in brand-new uniforms as though for a festive occasion.

"Getting ready to celebrate in advance," murmured Bart. "They must feel pretty sure of themselves."

"Just Prussian bluff," growled Tom. "They think it will brace up Fritz, and that we'll think it's all over but the shouting and lighting out for home."

"They'll have to take those uniforms to the tailors when we get through with them," muttered Billy, as he took a tighter grasp on the stock of his rifle.

"They'll do well enough for shrouds," added Frank grimly.

The advancing troops were now not more than a hundred yards away, and though their losses had been severe there were so many left that it was evident it would come to a hand-to-hand fight. The enemy cannon had torn big rents in the barbed wire entanglements that stretched before the American position so that it would be possible to get through.

Now the American machine guns began sputtering, and their shrill treble blended with the deep bass of the heavier field guns. A moment more, and from the rifles of the American infantry a withering blast of flame sprang out and the enemy went down in heaps.

There were signs of confusion in the German ranks and the American commander gave the signal to charge.

Out from their shallow trenches leaped the Army Boys, the light of battle in their eyes, and fell like an avalanche upon the advancing hosts.

In an instant there was a welter of fearful fighting. The force of the enemy had been largely spent by their march over that field of death, while the Americans were fresh and their vigor unimpaired.

For a brief space the Germans were pressed back, but they had concentrated their forces on that section of the line so that they outnumbered the Americans by two or three to one, and little by little, by sheer weight, they pressed their opponents back. And behind those immediately engaged, fresh forces could be seen emerging from the woods and coming to the help of their comrades.

But Americans never show to such advantage as when they are fighting against odds, and the battle line swayed back and forth, first one and then the other side seeming to have a temporary advantage.

Frank and his comrades were in the very thick of the fight, shooting, stabbing, using now the bayonet and again the butts of their rifles as the occasion demanded. There was a red mist before their eyes and their blood was pounding in their veins and drumming in their ears from their tremendous exertions.

Slowly but surely, the fierce determination of the Americans began to tell. The solid enemy front was broken up into groups, and the gaps grew wider and wider as their men were pushed back further and further over the ground that lay between the lines. In the center the Americans were winning.

But suddenly a new danger threatened. A fresh body of German troops had worked its way to a position where it could attack the American right flank, which was but thinly held because for the time being the bulk of the forces were engaged in pressing the advantage gained at the center. If the enemy could turn that flank and throw it back in confusion on the main body, it might lead to serious disaster.

At the point where Frank and his comrades were fighting, there was a nest of machine guns that commanded the space over which the new enemy forces were bearing down on the threatened flank. Several of the gun crews had fallen, and the guns were temporarily unserved.

There was no time to wait for orders. Another minute and the guns would be in the enemy's hands.

"Quick, Bart! Come along, Billy and Tom!" shouted Frank, as he rushed toward the guns.

His chums were on his heels in an instant. Quick as a flash, the guns were aimed, and streams of bullets cut the front ranks of the attacking force to ribbons. Volley after volley followed, until the guns were so hot that the hands of the young soldiers were blistered.

But the hardest part of their work was done, for now fresh guns had been brought into position and the flank was strengthened beyond the power of the enemy to break. Frank's quick thought and instant action had averted what might have been a calamity that would have decided the fortune of the day.

"Good work, old man!" panted Bart, when in a momentary lull he could gain breath enough to speak.

"Yours as well as mine!" gasped Frank, as he dashed the perspiration from his forehead. "If you fellows hadn't been right on the job, I couldn't have done anything worth while."

Regular crews had now been assigned to take their places, and resuming their positions in the ranks the young soldiers plunged once more into the hand-to-hand work at which they were masters.

The issue was no longer in doubt. The scale had turned against the Germans and they were retreating. But they went back stubbornly, giving ground only inch by inch, and in certain scattered groups the fighting was as furious as ever.

As far as might be, they kept together, but as the swirl of the battle tore them apart, Tom and Billy were lost sight of by Bart and Frank, who were laying about them right and left among the enemy.

A sharp exclamation from Bart caused Frank to turn his eyes toward him for a second.

"Hurt, Bart?" he queried anxiously.

"Bullet ridged my shoulder," responded Bart. "Doesn't amount to anything, though. Look out, Frank!" he yelled, his voice rising almost to a scream. Frank turned to see two burly Germans bearing down upon him with fixed bayonets.

Bart sought to engage one of them, but was caught up in a mass of combatants and Frank was left to meet the onset alone.

Quick as a cat, he sidestepped one of them, and putting out his foot tripped him as he plunged past. He went down with a crash, and his rifle flew from his hands.

The remaining German made a savage lunge, but Frank deftly caught the blade upon his own, and the next instant they were engaged in a deadly bayonet duel.

It was fierce but also brief. A thrust, a parry, and Frank drove his weapon through the shoulder of his opponent. The latter reeled and fell. Frank strove to pull out his weapon, but it stuck fast, and just then a pair of sinewy hands fastened on his throat and he looked into the reddened eyes of the antagonist whom he had tripped.

With a quick wrench Frank tore himself away, and the next instant he had grappled with his opponent and they swayed back and forth, each putting forth every ounce of his strength in the effort to master the other.

Panting, straining, gasping, neither one of them saw that the struggle had brought them to the edge of a deep shell crater. A moment more and they fell with a crash to the bottom of the hole.

CHAPTER II

A PERILOUS JOURNEY

The shock was a heavy one. For an instant both combatants were stunned. The flying arms and legs straightened out and lay quiet. Then Frank staggered painfully up to his hands and knees.

Luckily he had fallen on top, and the breath had been knocked out of his opponent's body. But even as Frank looked down upon him, his foe showed signs of reviving. His eyes opened, and a glare of rage came in them as they rested on Frank.

He put his hand to his belt, but Frank was the quicker and in an instant his knife was out and pointed at the German's throat.

"Say 'Kamerad,'" he commanded.

The German hesitated, but a tiny prick of the knife decided him.

"Kamerad," he growled sullenly.

"That's right," said Frank, "but just to make sure that you won't stick your knife into me when I'm not looking, I guess I'll take care of it. No, you needn't take the trouble of handing it to me," he continued, as he saw a vicious expression in his captive's eyes. "You just keep your hands stretched above your head and I'll find your knife myself. And don't let those hands come down until I tell you, or something awkward is likely to happen."

If the prisoner did not understand all that was said to him, there was enough in Frank's gestures to indicate his meaning, and the hands went up and stayed up, while Frank searched his prisoner and removed his knife, which he put in his own belt. Then he bound the fellow's hands.

The attack had been made late in the afternoon, and dusk had fallen while the fight was still going on. Now it was quite dark, and Frank rose to his feet, intending to clamber out of the shell hole, taking his prisoner with him.

But what was his consternation, on lifting his head to the level rim of the crater, to hear about him commands shouted in hoarse guttural accents. The sounds of battle had died down and it was evident that the fight for that day was over. And that part of the field had been left in German hands!

Reinforcements coming up in the nick of time had halted a retreat that was threatening to become a rout. The battle would probably be resumed on the morrow, but for the present both forces were resting on their arms.

The tables were turned with a vengeance. A moment before he had been holding a prisoner and getting ready to take him into the American lines. Now he was himself in the enemy lines, liable at any moment to be discovered and dragged out roughly, to be questioned by German captors.

All this passed through Frank's mind in a twinkling. But then another thought came to him. He must silence his prisoner.

The thought came not a moment too soon, for as Frank dropped down beside him a shout arose from the German's lips. He too had heard and understood the sounds about him.

In an instant Frank had thrust his handkerchief into the prisoner's mouth. The man squirmed and struggled, but his bound hands made him powerless, and Frank soon made a gag that, while allowing the man a chance to breathe comfortably, would keep him silent.

Then he settled back and tried to think. And his thoughts were not pleasant ones.

He had had a brief taste of German imprisonment, and he was not anxious to repeat the experience. Yet nothing seemed more probable. Little short of a miracle would prevent his capture if he stayed there much longer. In the morning, discovery would be certain. He must escape that night, if at all. But how could he make his way through that swarm of enemies?

And while he is cudgeling his brain to find an answer to the question, it may be well, for the sake of those who have not read the preceding volumes of this series, to tell briefly who Frank and his chums were and what they had done up to the time this story opens.

Frank Sheldon had been born and brought up in the town of Campport, a thriving American city of about twenty-five thousand people. His father was American but his mother was French. Mr. Sheldon had met and married his wife in her native province of Auvergne, where her parents owned considerable property. They had died since their daughter's marriage, and in the natural course of things she would have inherited the estate. But legal difficulties had developed in regard to the will, and Frank's parents were contemplating a trip to France to straighten matters out, when the war broke out and made it impossible. Mr. Sheldon had died shortly afterward, leaving but a slender income for his widow. Frank had become her chief support. She was a charming, lovable woman, and she and her son were very fond of each other.

Frank had secured a good position with the firm of Moore & Thomas, a prosperous hardware house in Campport, and his prospects for the future were bright when the war broke out. But he was intensely patriotic, and wanted to volunteer as soon as it became certain that America would enter the conflict. For a time he held back on account of his mother, but an insult to the flag by a German, whom Frank promptly knocked down and compelled to apologize, decided his mother to put no obstacles in the way of his enlisting.

But Frank was not the only ardent patriot in the employ of Moore & Thomas. Almost all of the force wanted to go, including even Reddy the office boy, who although too young, was full of ardor for Uncle Sam. Chief among the volunteers were Bart Raymond, Frank's special chum and a fine type of young American, and Tom Bradford, loyal to the core. Poor Tom, however, was rejected on account of his teeth, but was afterward accepted in the draft, and by a stroke of luck rejoined Frank and Bart at Camp Boone, where they had been sent for training. Another friend of all three was Billy Waldon, who had been a member of the Thirty-seventh regiment before the boys had joined it. The four were the closest kind of friends and stuck by each other through thick and thin.

There had been one notable exception to the loyalty of the office force. This was Nick Rabig, a surly, bullying sort of fellow, who had been foreman of the shipping department. He was a special

enemy of Frank, whom he cordially hated, and the two had been more than once at the point of blows. Rabig was of German descent, although born in this country, and before the war began he had been loud in his praise of Germany and in "knocks" at America. His chagrin may be imagined when he found himself caught in the draft net and sent to Camp Boone with the rest of the Campport contingent.

How the Army Boys were trained to be soldiers both at home and later in France; their adventures with submarines on the way over; how Rabig got what he deserved at the hands of Frank; what adventures they met with and how they showed the stuff they were made of when they came in conflict with the Huns—all this and more is told in the first volume of this series, entitled: "Army Boys in France; Or, From Training Camp to Trenches."

From the time they reached the trenches the Army Boys were in hourly peril of their lives. They took part in many night raids in No Man's Land and brought back prisoners. Frank met a Colonel Pavet whose life he saved under heavy fire and learned from the French officer encouraging news about his mother's property. The four friends had a thrilling experience when they were chased by Uhlan cavalry, plunged into a river from a broken bridge only to find when they reached the other side that the bank was held by German troops. How an airplane rescued them from German captivity is only one of stirring incidents narrated in the second volume of the series, entitled: "Army Boys at the Front; Or, Hand-to-Hand Fights with the Enemy."

Frank had been in many tight places since he had been in France. In fact, danger had been so constant that he had come to expect it. To have a feeling of perfect comfort and security would hardly have seemed natural. But now he freely owned to himself as he sat crouching low in the shell hole that his liberty if not his life was scarcely worth a moment's purchase.

Something of what was passing in his mind must have been evident to the German who shared the hole with him. Frank could not see his face clearly but he could hear the man shaking as if with inward laughter.

"Laugh ahead, Heinie," remarked Frank, though he knew the man could probably not understand him. "I'd do the same if the tables were turned. It'll be a mighty good joke to tell your cronies at mess tomorrow how the Yankee *schweinhund* thought he had you and then got nabbed himself. But they haven't got me yet. Those laugh best who laugh last, and perhaps I've got a laugh coming to me."

But just then the laugh seemed a good ways off. At any instant some one of the many passing to and fro might stumble into the hole and the game would be up. Or a flare from a star-shell might reveal him crouching beside his prisoner. His prisoner! What irony there was in the word under those circumstances.

Yet not all irony, for at the moment the thought passed through his mind, another thought told him how he might exercise the power that the fortune of war had given him over the German and by so doing effect his escape.

It was certain that in his American uniform he could not get through the Germans who surrounded him. His only chance would be to make a dash, and although he was a swift runner the bullets that would be sent after him would be swifter.

But in a German uniform—

And here was one in the hole right beside him!

The plan came to him like a flash of light and he started at once to put it into execution. But just then a sober second thought made him pause.

If he were captured wearing his own uniform it would be just as an ordinary prisoner, entitled to be treated as such by the laws of war.

But if they took him wearing a German uniform he would be regarded as a spy and would be shot or hanged offhand, perhaps even without the form of a court-martial.

He weighed the question carefully, for he knew that life or death might result from the way he answered it.

To help him decide, he raised his head with infinite caution to the rim of the shell hole and looked about him. In the faint light that came from lanterns disposed at various places he could see men moving here and there and catch the murmur of conversation where some of them were sitting in groups.

Occasionally a man would rise from one of these gatherings and move away, apparently without attracting notice or arousing question. Why could he not do the same?

Of course there was the chance of a word being addressed to him and he could not answer without revealing his ignorance of German. But perhaps he could pretend not to hear or respond with a grunt that would pass muster.

One thing was certain. If it were done at all it must be done at once while there were many about. If he waited until things were quiet his solitary figure would be sure to attract attention.

His choice was made. Between the certainty of capture and the chance of being shot he would take the chance. If worse came to worst he had his knife and his revolver and he would sell his life dearly.

He knelt down close by his captive and began to strip off his clothes. The man was inclined to resist, but a sharp prick of Frank's knife told him that his captor was in no mind to stand any nonsense and he lay quiet. It was hard work because the man was heavy and the quarters were cramped. The coat had to be cut off in places because Frank did not dare to untie his prisoner's hands. But at last the clothes were off, and Frank slipped them on over his own.

It was with a shudder of repulsion that he saw himself clad in the detested uniform that stood for all that was hateful and brutal in warfare. It made him feel soiled. But he comforted himself with the thought that the clothes were only external and that good United States khaki lay between that abhorred uniform and his skin.

He saw that the gag was still securely in position and that his captive's bonds had not relaxed. Then as a last reminder he laid the back of his knife on the prisoner's neck and felt him shiver beneath the cold steel.

"I guess he'll make no attempt to give me away," he said to himself. "He knows that he'll be all right in the morning anyway."

Slowly and with the infinite precaution that had been taught him in his scout training, Frank lifted himself out of the hole and lay flat on the ground near the edge. There he waited until he was sure that he had attracted no attention.

Then having carefully taken his bearings and fixed upon the direction of the American lines, he yawned, stretched and rising slowly to his feet strolled carelessly toward the outskirts of the camp.

CHAPTER III

AMONG THE MISSING

Frank's heart was beating like a triphammer and his nerves were at a fearful tension. The next five minutes would probably determine whether he was to live or die.

But he kept himself well in hand and to all appearances he was only a tired German soldier going to his bunk.

As far as he could without attracting attention, he kept carefully away from the low fires around which some of the Germans were sitting. But at one point he was forced to pass within the zone of light, and one of a group threw a laughing remark at him, occasioned probably by the cuts in his coat which he had been compelled to make when he had stripped his prisoner.

"*Ase!*" Frank flung back at him and passed on, thankful that he at least knew the German term for jackass.

Nearer and nearer he drew to the confines of the camp. Here the great danger lay, for he knew that it would be closely guarded after the day's fighting.

If he were challenged what should he say? To the sentinel's "*Wer da?*" he could answer "*Freund.*" But when he was told to advance and give the countersign what would be his answer?

He had it ready. But it would not suit the Germans.

At the point that he had selected for his attempt, there was an opening in the wire that had been hastily strung to guard against a possible night attack by the American forces.

Up and down in front of this a stalwart sentry was pacing. He stopped and looked sharply at Frank, as the latter approached. When he was ten feet distant the sentry presented his bayonet and called:

"*Halt! Wer da?*"

"*Ein freund,*" responded Frank.

"*Losung,*" demanded the sentinel, asking for the countersign.

"America!" answered Frank, and hurled his revolver full in the sentry's face.

The heavy butt of the weapon landed plumb in the middle of the German's forehead. He had opened his mouth to shout, but no sound came forth. The rifle fell from his hands and he went down like a log.

With a leap Frank got through the gap in the wire and started running like a deer toward the American lines.

There were startled shouts behind him, hoarse commands, a rushing of feet and a crackling volley of shots. The bullets whizzed and zipped close to him and he felt a sharp sting as one of them grazed the lower part of his left arm. Once he stumbled and fell headlong, but he scrambled hastily to his feet and ran on.

But now a new peril was added. Behind him a star-shell shot up, followed by another and another, together with strings of "blazing onions," until the broken field over which he was making his way became almost as bright as day. In that greenish radiance his flying figure stood out sharply, and the firing which had been wild now became more accurate. At the same time, a look behind him showed that a troop of men had been hastily organized and was rushing after him.

This, however, gave him little concern. A bullet might catch him, but these heavy Germans, never!

But just as he was comforting himself with this thought he tripped and went down with a shock that jarred every bit of breath out of his body.

He struggled to get up but could not move. His lungs labored as though they would burst. His legs refused to obey his will. He felt as if he were in the clutches of a nightmare.

And all the time he could hear the pounding of his pursuers' feet drawing closer and closer. Would he never be able to breathe again?

Little by little, during seconds that seemed ages, his breath came back to him, in short gasps at first but gradually becoming longer, until at last he rose weakly to his feet.

He started out again, slowly at first, but, as his wind came back to him, gathering speed at every stride. But now his pursuers were perilously near. Those precious seconds lost perhaps had been fatal.

His fingers gripped the handle of his knife. He would not be taken. Capture in that uniform meant certain death. No German should gloat over his execution. If brought to bay he would die fighting then and there, using his knife so savagely that his enemies would have to shoot him to save themselves.

Commands to halt came from behind him accompanied by bullets, but he only ran the swifter.

But just then a tumult rose from another quarter. The lines in front of him seemed to awake. Lights flashed here and there, a mass of figures detached themselves from the gloom, and in the light of a star-shell Frank saw a detachment of American troops coming on the run!

His pursuers saw them too and the chase slackened. There was a hurried gathering for consultation, a volley of shots, and then the Germans beat a hasty retreat, hotly pursued by a band of the Americans while another group of them rushed up and surrounded Frank.

"Why, it's a Hun!" exclaimed one of them disgustedly, as his eyes fell on the uniform. "Only a deserter, and we thought they were chasing one of our own men."

"That's one on us," remarked another. "The rest of the boys will have the laugh on us for sure."

"Do I look like a Heinie?" demanded Frank with a grin. "I can lick the fellow that calls me one."

A shout of amazement rose from the crowd as they gathered close to him.

"Sheldon! Sheldon! Old scout! Bully boy!"

They mauled and pounded him until he was sore, for he was the idol of the regiment. There was a rush, and Bart and Billy had their arms around him and fairly hugged the breath out of him.

"Frank! Frank!" they exclaimed delightedly. "We thought you were gone. The last we saw of you, you were fighting like a tiger, but then the enemy reinforcements came and we were swept away from you. We didn't know whether you were dead or a prisoner. Thank God you're neither one nor the other."

"Pretty close squeak," smiled Frank happily. "But a bit of luck, and these two legs of mine carried me through, and I'm worth a dozen dead men yet. But I'm hungry as a wolf, and if you fellows don't feed me up you'll have me dead on your hands."

"Trust us," laughed Bart. "You can have the whole shooting match. The whole mess will go hungry if necessary to fill you up. Come along now and tell us the story."

It was a happy crowd that bore Frank back in triumph to his old quarters. There the rest of the boys flocked about him in welcome and jubilee.

"Not a word, fellows," protested Frank laughingly, "until I get these rags off of me. It's the first time I ever wore a German uniform and I hope it will be the last. I feel as if I needed to be fumigated before I'm fit to talk to decent fellows again."

It was a long time before the hubbub quieted down, and he had to tell his story again and again before the other soldiers left him alone with his own particular chums.

"Where's Tom?" asked Frank. "Our bunch doesn't seem complete without him. On special duty somewhere, I suppose?"

Bart and Billy looked at each other with misery in their eyes.

"What's the matter?" asked Frank in quick alarm, as he intercepted the glance. "Great Scott!" he added, springing to his feet. "You don't mean to say that anything's happened to him?"

Bart shook his head soberly.

"We don't know," he answered. "The last any of the boys saw of him he was hacking right and left in a crowd of the boches. But he didn't come back with the rest of us."

"You don't mean to say he's dead?" cried Frank. "You're not stalling to let me down easy?"

"Not that," protested Billy quickly. "Honor bright, Frank. The burial parties haven't come across him at last reports, and he hasn't been picked up as wounded. That's all we know. The chances are that he's been taken prisoner."

"Prisoner!" repeated Frank in blank despair. "Tom a prisoner of the Huns! Heaven help him!"

CHAPTER IV

CAPTURED OR DEAD?

There was very little sleep for the three Army Boys that night, in spite of the exhausting labors of the day. They rolled and tossed restlessly in their bunks, tortured by conjectures as to the fate of their missing comrade.

Good old Tom! He had been so close to all of them, loyal to his heart's core, brave as a lion, ready to stand by them to his last breath. He had been beside them in many a tight scrape and had always held up his end. It seemed as though part of themselves had been torn from them.

Still, while there was life there was hope, and they drew some comfort from the fact that he had not yet been found among the dead. If he were a prisoner he might escape. They had all been in a German prison camp before and had gotten away. Perhaps Tom might have the same luck again.

They fell asleep at last, but the thought clung to them and assumed all sorts of fantastic attitudes in their dreams so that they awoke tired and depressed.

But there was little time on that morning to indulge in private griefs. The fight was on, and shortly after dawn the battle was resumed.

All the forenoon it raged with great ferocity. But American grit and steadfastness never wavered and the enemy was forced to retire with heavy loss. Not only had they failed to drive the Americans from their positions, but they had been driven back and forced to surrender a large portion of their own, including the place where Frank had crouched in the shell hole the night before.

Shortly after noon there came a lull while the Americans reorganized the captured positions. Infantry actions ceased, though the big guns, like belligerent mastiffs, still kept up their growling at each other.

"Hot work," remarked Frank, as, after their work was done, the three friends found themselves together in the shade of a great tree.

"A corking scrap," agreed Bart, as he sprawled at his ease with his hands under his head.

"The Heinies certainly put up a stiff fight," observed Billy, as he tied up his little finger from which blood was trickling.

"They felt so sure that they were going to make mincemeat out of us that it was hard to wake out of their dream," chuckled Frank. "I wonder if they're still kidding themselves in Berlin that the Yankees can't fight."

"In Berlin perhaps but not here," returned Bart. "They've had too much evidence to the contrary."

"I wonder if this is really the beginning of the big drive that the Huns have been boasting about?" hazarded Billy.

"I hardly think so," replied Frank. "There's no doubt that that's coming before long, but the fighting yesterday and today was probably to pinch us out of the salient we're holding. That would straighten out their line and then they'd be all ready for the big push. When that comes there will be some doings."

"The longer they wait the harder the job will be," said Billy. "They say that our boys are coming over so fast that they're fairly blocking the roads."

"They can't come too many or too fast," replied Bart. "And they'll sure be some busy bees after they get here."

"Well, we're not worrying," observed Billy. "We're getting along pretty well, thank you. By the way, Frank," he went on with a grin, "are you feeling any different on this ground today than you felt last night?"

"Bet your life," laughed Frank. "It's just about here that I was calling a Heinie a jackass. And at that same minute I was thinking that my life wasn't worth a plugged nickel."

"Wonder how the fellow made out that you left in the shell hole," chuckled Billy.

"Oh, he was all right," replied Frank. "I shouldn't wonder if he was rather chilly during the night, but no doubt they hauled him out in the morning."

"He got off lucky, though," put in Bart. "It's the sentry who got the hot end of the poker. I wonder what he thought when he heard that watchword."

"He didn't have much time to think," guessed Billy, "and to tell the truth, I don't think he's done much thinking since. That revolver must have hit him a fearful crack."

"It's safe to say that it gave him a headache anyway," remarked Bart drily.

"Speaking of the revolver," said Frank, rising to his feet, "I'm going to take a look for it. It was just over near that tree that I plugged the sentry and it's probably there yet."

He searched industriously among the welter of debris and after a few minutes arose with a shout.

"Here's it is," he said, as he held up his recovered treasure, which had his initials scratched upon the butt. "Same old trusty and as good as ever. It's saved my life many a time through the muzzle, but last night was the first time it saved it through the butt."

He fondled the weapon lovingly for a moment, carefully cleaned and reloaded it, and thrust it in his belt.

Just then a French colonel passed by, accompanied by two orderlies. The French had been holding a section of the line at the right of the Americans and their uniform was a familiar sight, so that the boys only gave the group a passing glance. But Frank's eyes lighted with pleasure when the colonel detached himself from the others and came over with extended hand.

Frank wrung the hand heartily.

"Why, Colonel Pavet!" he exclaimed. "This is a great pleasure! I didn't know that you were in this locality."

"My regiment is only two miles from here," replied the colonel, his face beaming. "I need not say how glad I always am to see the brave young soldier who saved my life."

"What I did any one else would have done," responded Frank lightly.

"But no one else did," laughed the colonel. "And from what I hear from your commander you've been doing similar things ever since. I just heard of your daring escape last night. It was gallantly done, *mon ami*."

"Luck was with me," replied Frank.

"It usually is in such exploits," was the visitor's reply. "You know the old saying that 'fortune favors the brave.' But I'll spare your blushes and come down to something that will probably interest you more. Did you get that letter from Andre, my brother, about your mother's property?"

"Why, no, I didn't," answered Frank. "When was it written?"

"That's strange," said the colonel, a puzzled look coming over his face. "I received a letter from Andre day before yesterday and he said that he had written to you by the same mail."

"Well, you know the mail is rather irregular just now," replied Frank. "No doubt it will get to me before long. Perhaps your brother told you something of what was in the letter he wrote to me."

"Not in detail. He just mentioned that he was very anxious to get hold of a former butler in your grandfather's family who is now in the ranks. They had his testimony in part before he was called into service, but he had not been cross-examined. Andre seems to feel sure that he can extract information

from him that will aid your mother to come into possession of the estate. Andre's judgment is good, and as you know, he is one of the leading lawyers of Paris."

"He is too good, and you also, to take all this trouble in our behalf," said Frank warmly. "My mother and I can never thank you enough."

"The debt will be always on our side," responded the colonel with a wave of the hand. "By the way, how is your mother? I hope she is well."

"She was well when I last heard from her," replied Frank, "and happy—that is as happy as she can be while we are separated from each other."

"She is a true daughter of France," said the colonel, "and she should be happy to have so brave a son. Please remember me to her when you write. *Au revoir*," and with a friendly smile he passed on.

"Still hobnobbing with the swells, I see," remarked Billy, as Frank rejoined his chums.

"He was telling me of a letter that his brother had written me about my mother's property," explained Frank. "Queer that it hasn't reached me. Did any of you fellows get any mail yesterday?"

"I got a couple of letters," replied Billy. "Tom handed them to me just before we went into action yesterday morning."

"Come to think of it, Tom was asking for you at the same time," said Bart. "He'd brought down the mail for the bunch. He said he had a letter for you. But you weren't around at the time and he stuck it into his pocket. Then the boches came swinging at us, and in the excitement I suppose he forgot all about it. Likely enough he has it with him now—that is if the Huns have let him keep it."

"That must be the explanation," said Frank. "Well, all I can do is write to the colonel's brother and ask him to send me a duplicate of the letter. Poor Tom! I'd give all the letters in the world to have him safe with us just now."

"Same here," said Billy and Bart in chorus.

"I guess the Huns have got him," said Frank gloomily. "He isn't among the dead or wounded as far as we've been able to find. But I'll bet they thought they had hold of a wildcat when they nabbed him."

"Trust Tom for that," said Bart. "He was a terror when he had his blood up. He must have got knocked on the head, or they wouldn't have taken him alive."

"Perhaps he'd have been luckier if he had been killed," said Billy sadly. "From all I hear there are plenty of prisoners in German camps who would welcome death."

"It makes me grit my teeth to think of the humane way we treat the men we capture, and then compare it with the way the Huns treat our soldiers," said Frank bitterly. "Look at the German prisoners we saw working on the roads that time we went away on furlough. Plenty of food, kind treatment, good beds. Why, lots of those fellows are living better than they ever did in their own country. They're getting fat with good living."

"Nothing like that in German prison camps," growled Bart. "Horrible food, mouldy crusts, rotten meat, and not enough of that to keep body and soul together. In a few months the men are little more than skeletons. They work them sixteen or eighteen hours a day in all kinds of weather. They set dogs on them and prod them with bayonets. Did you read of the forty they tortured to death by swinging them by their bound arms for hours at a time in freezing weather?"

"It's no mistake to call the Germans Huns," snapped Billy, clenching his fists.

"No," agreed Frank, "but it's rough on the Huns."

CHAPTER V

NICK RABIG TURNS UP

"Guess who's here," said Billy a few mornings later, as he came up to Bart and Frank. "Give you three guesses."

"That's generous," remarked Frank. "Well, I'll bite. Who is it? The Kaiser?"

"Come off."

"The Crown Prince?"

"Quit your kidding."

"I know," said Bart. "Hindenburg."

"Blathering boobs, both of you," pronounced Billy. "But with your limited intellects one ought to be patient. I'll give you one more chance. Think of the fellow you like the least in all the world."

"Nick Rabig!" the others exclaimed in one breath.

"Right," grinned Billy. "I knew that would get you. Nick seems to be as popular with you as poison ivy at a church picnic."

"What cat dragged it in?" groaned Bart.

"Our unlucky day," growled Frank. "I knew something would happen when I picked up the wrong shoe this morning."

"But how did he get back?" asked Bart, his curiosity overcoming his repugnance.

"Came in on his own feet," replied Billy. "Escaped, so he says, after performing prodigies of valor. To hear Nick talk you'd think he'd wiped out half the German army."

His comrades laughed.

"I suppose we ought to kill the fatted calf," said Frank sarcastically.

"Where's the calf?" asked Bart. "Unless we take Billy here," he added as an afterthought.

He dodged the pass that Billy made at him, and just then Fred Anderson, another young soldier, strolled up.

"Heard the news?" he inquired.

"About Nick Rabig? Yes," replied Frank. "Billy's just been telling us about it."

"Bad news travels fast," growled Bart.

"Nick doesn't seem to cut much ice with you fellows," commented Fred. "I never thought much of him myself, but you seem to have it in for him especially. I suppose it's because he tried to play that dirty trick on Frank in the boxing bout."

"No, it isn't that," replied Frank. "I got satisfaction for that then and there, and I don't hold grudges. It's something altogether outside of personal matters. Have you heard any details about how Nick made his escape?"

"Only a bit here and there," answered Fred. "I suppose it will all come out later on. But it seems that he has a lot of information about the German plans and he's now at headquarters being questioned by the officers."

Frank turned the conversation into other channels, because although he had the gravest reasons for believing Rabig to be a traitor, he did not want to do the fellow an injustice or voice his suspicions until he was able to confirm them by absolute proof.

Fred passed on after a few minutes and the boys looked at each other.

"Did you hear what Fred said about Nick's 'important information'?" asked Frank.

"Important misinformation," growled Bart.

"Bunk," declared Billy.

"Of course, Nick has an advantage in understanding German," said Frank cautiously, "and a loyal fellow in his situation might have picked up something that would be of advantage to our people, though it isn't likely, for the Germans guard their secrets pretty well."

"What's the use of talking?" burst out Bart. "We fellows are all onto Rabig. We know at this minute that he'd like nothing better than to see the United States licked by Germany. Don't we know that he let that German prisoner escape? Don't you know that he was talking in the woods at night with that German spy that you shot? I tell you straight, Frank, that if Rabig escaped it was because the Germans let him escape. If he has information, it is because the Germans filled him up with just the kind of information they wanted our officers to believe."

"I think Bart's right," remarked Billy. "It'll be the best day this regiment ever saw when Rabig's stood up before a firing squad."

"In my heart I believe the same," assented Frank. "But the tantalizing thing is that we haven't a bit of legal proof. Rabig had that cut on his hand to explain the escape of the prisoner. He seemed to be sleeping in his bunk that night I got back from the woods. So far he has an alibi for everything. We can't prove that he let himself be captured. We can't prove that the Germans let him escape. As for the

information he claims to have, our suspicions are based only on what we know of the man's character."

"That legal stuff doesn't make a hit with me," growled Bart. "Some day I'll break loose and take it out of him myself. My fingers itch every time I see him. I'd hoped I'd never have to see him again."

"You're doomed to be disappointed, then," grinned Billy, "for here he comes now."

They looked in the direction he indicated and saw Rabig coming along the company street.

His step was swaggering and he looked immensely satisfied with himself.

Bart's fist clenched.

"Nothing doing, Bart," Frank counseled in a low tone. "Hold your horses. I know just how you feel. I had to lick him once and maybe you'll have your turn. But not now. I want to find out whether he knows anything about Tom."

"All right," said Bart, "but it comes hard."

Nick saw them standing there, and for a fraction of a second seemed to be of two minds about keeping on. He hated them all cordially and he had no doubt of the feeling with which they regarded him. But his hesitation was only momentary, and he came on with just a little additional swagger in his gait.

He would have passed without stopping but Frank spoke to him pleasantly enough.

"Hello, Nick!" he said. "See you've got back."

"That's plain enough to see," responded Nick surlily.

"Papa's little sunshine," murmured Billy under his breath.

"Huns seem to have fed you pretty well," remarked Frank.

Rabig only grunted and looked at Frank suspiciously.

"Did you see anything of Tom Bradford over there?" asked Frank.

A look of surprise came into Rabig's little eyes.

"No," he answered. "Was he captured?"

"We're afraid so," answered Frank.

"I didn't see him," declared Rabig. "Perhaps he's killed," he added, almost smacking his lips with satisfaction.

They longed to kick him, but restrained themselves, and Rabig passed on.

"Isn't he a sweet specimen?" asked Bart in disgust, as he looked at Rabig's receding figure.

"Did you see how his eyes lighted up when he heard that Tom was gone?" put in Billy. "The only thing that would give him more satisfaction would be to have the same thing happen to Frank."

"I guess he hates us all alike," said Frank. "Down in his heart he knows that we believe him to be a traitor. His only comfort is that we haven't been able to catch him with the goods. But that will come in time. A little more rope and he can be depended on to hang himself. But that can wait. What I'm more interested in is that he didn't have any news of Tom."

"Perhaps he was lying," suggested Bart. "He may have seen Tom over there, but wouldn't give us the satisfaction of telling us."

"No, I don't think it was that," commented Billy. "I was watching him closely while Frank was talking to him, and I could see that he was really surprised as well as pleased to learn that Tom was gone."

"But even if he didn't see him, that doesn't prove that Tom isn't there," suggested Bart. "He may have been captured by some other division. Besides, to tell the truth, I don't believe that Rabig was in a prison camp at all. Did you notice how fat and well fed he looked? I'll bet that he's been living high on the best the Huns could give him."

"He didn't look like most escaped prisoners for a fact," assented Frank. "We'll let his failure to see Tom go for what it's worth. But there's one thing that's been growing in my mind right along. We're sure that Tom isn't dead, for the burial parties cleared up the field and didn't find him. We know too that he isn't on the hospital list. I got a squint at that no later than yesterday, and Tom's name isn't there. That seems to cut out everything except capture by the Huns, doesn't it?"

"What else is there?" asked Bart gloomily.

"Just one thing," replied Frank, "and that is that Tom has got away from the Huns but hasn't yet got back to us. I know what that boy is. He isn't the kind to settle down and tell himself that he's a prisoner and that's all there is to it. There isn't a bone in his head, and he's been busy every minute thinking up some plan to get away. You know what the boches are doing now. They're getting so short of men that they're using prisoners right behind the lines in cutting brush and hauling guns and that sort of thing. Of course it's dead against all the rules of war, but a little thing like that doesn't bother the Germans. Now if that's going on there are lots of chances to escape that the prisoners wouldn't have if they were all huddled together in a prison camp under the rifles of their guards. Get me? Picture Tom out in the thick woods going meekly ahead doing as he is told without making a break for freedom. Not on your life! Some way or other he'll slip off, and some fine day you'll see the old scout come walking in and asking us if breakfast's ready."

"It sounds good," said Bart unconvinced, "but I'm afraid it's a dream."

"All guess work," chimed in Billy. "We don't know anything."

"No," admitted Frank, "but we know Tom."

CHAPTER VI

THE COMING DRIVE

"That big German drive seems to have slipped a cog somewhere," Bart remarked to his comrades, a few days later, as they were resting after a hard morning's work at organizing the position that their division was holding.

"I suppose the Crown Prince is making up a new time-table," grinned Billy. "He seems to have a passion for that. He ought to have been a railroad man."

"The trouble is that they always go wrong," laughed Frank. "I'll bet he's cross-eyed."

"Yet the Heinies fall for them every time," said Billy. "I suppose they figure that just by the law of chance one of them will have to be right some time."

"I thought that the drive had started the other morning, when the Germans came down like wolves on a fold," said Bart. "But it seems that things were quiet on other parts of the line, so that this must have been just a local operation."

"Local operation!" snorted Billy. "In other days it would have been counted a big battle. Why, if Waterloo were pulled off now do you know how the papers would describe it? They'd say that there was 'considerable activity on a section of the line over near Hougomont Farm yesterday, where certain units under Napoleon and Wellington came in contact. The artillery fire was fairly strong, and there were clashes between a few infantry regiments and the French were repulsed. Apart from this there is nothing to report.'"

The boys laughed.

"Everything's topsy-turvy nowadays," said Frank. "It used to be armies that did the fighting. Now it's whole nations. But look at that scrap going on overhead. Its a dandy."

They looked in the direction he indicated and their pulses quickened, for they themselves had once been engaged in a battle in the sky, and an aerial combat had a personal interest to them.

Far up in the sky, which just then was as clear as crystal, a duel was in progress between two planes. It was evident at a glance that both of the rival aviators were masters of their profession. They circled deftly about each other like giant falcons, jockeying for position, each trying to get the weather gauge on the other where he could rake his opponent with his machine gun without exposing himself to his enemy's fire in return.

Swooping, climbing, diving, the planes pursued their deadly purpose, while exclamations of admiration came from the lips of the fascinated onlookers as some specially daring manoeuvre promised to give the advantage first to one and then to the other of the antagonists.

"Classy work!" exclaimed Frank.

"They're both dandies," declared Billy. "It's a toss up as to which will win."

"They're so far up that it's hard to tell which is which," said Bart, "but I've got a nickel that says the Hun will be downed."

"Great Scott," cried Frank. "One of them was hit that time. See it swerve."

"And look at the smoke!" Billy shouted. "It's on fire! A bullet must have hit the petrol tank."

A burst of smoke and flame shot out from the doomed plane, and it began to fall, fire streaming out in its wake like the tail of a meteor. Down it came like a plummet.

"It's coming right in our lines!" exclaimed Bart. "Scatter, fellows, or it will be right on top of us!"

The wrecked plane had fallen about two hundred feet, when a figure shot from the burning mass, whirling over and over as it descended. The aviator, knowing that his only choice lay between being burned or crushed, had chosen the less painful form of death.

The body fell some distance off, but the plane itself came down within a few rods of the boys. It was blazing so fiercely that they could not approach very close to it, but they could easily detect the marking which indicated that it was a French plane.

The Army Boys looked at each other regretfully.

"Score one for the Huns," remarked Frank. "You'd have lost your nickel, Bart."

"It's too bad," said Billy, as he straightened up and shook, his fist at the victorious plane.

But to the boys' amazement, the conqueror, instead of flying off toward his own lines, was coming down toward them in long sweeping spirals.

"Why, it looks as if he were going to land here!" exclaimed Billy in wonder.

"If he does, we'll have the satisfaction of taking him prisoner anyway," observed Bart.

"It must be that his own plane is injured and he has to descend," suggested Frank.

But there was no sign of injury to the descending plane and it seemed to be in perfect control. Swiftly and steadily it came down, and a cry of astonishment broke from the boys as they saw that it bore American markings.

"How's that?" exclaimed Frank. "There's been a fearful mistake somewhere. This fellow has downed a French plane thinking that it was German."

"He'll be court-martialed for that or I miss my guess," said Bart with a frown.

"It's bad enough to have the Huns after us without trying to kill our own people," growled Billy.

There was a level place nearby that made an ideal place for a landing, and the American machine came down there with scarcely a jar.

The boys rushed toward it with reproaches on their lips, but their wrath was lost in astonishment when they recognized, in the aviator who stepped forth, Dick Lever, one of the most daring of the American "aces" and a warm personal friend of theirs.

The reproaches died when they saw him, for only a little while before he had saved them from a German prison by swooping down with his machine and carrying them off from their captors. It was with mixed feelings that they greeted him, as he came gaily forward, a smile upon his handsome bronzed face. But Dick seemed to feel a certain stiffness in their welcome that was unusual.

"Hello, fellows," he greeted. "What's the grouch?"

"No grouch at all, Dick," answered Frank. "We owe you too much for that. We're only sorry that you happened to make a mistake and down a French plane thinking it was German."

Dick's eyes twinkled.

"Come out of your trance," he chuckled. "I don't make that kind of mistakes."

For answer Frank led the way to the wrecked and partly burned plane and pointed out the markings.

But despite the evidence, Dick still seemed unabashed and his chuckle broke into a laugh.

"That's one on you fellows," he snorted. "Those markings are pure camouflage. Just another cute little German trick that went wrong. That fellow set out to take photographs over our lines and he didn't want to be disturbed, so he painted out his own markings, and put the French in their place. If you'll come a little closer you can see the Hun marks under their coat of white."

The boys did so and, now that their attention had been called to it, they could readily see the tracings that had been almost obliterated.

"That's evidence enough," remarked Dick, "but to make assurance doubly sure we'll go over to where the aviator fell and you'll see that he was a German all right."

The body had been decently covered up before the boys reached there, but the clothing and the

effects found proved beyond a doubt that the aviator had been one of their foes.

"Take it all back, Dick," said Frank. "You knew what you were about. And I'm glad that you came out of the scrap safe and sound. But it certainly was some scrap while it lasted."

"It sure was," replied Dick. "That fellow was as skilful and plucky as they make them. He kept my hands full, and there was one time when he came within an ace of raking me. But luck was with me. Poor fellow! I'm sorry for him, but I'd have been still more sorry if it had been myself."

"What beats me is the way you tumbled to him," puzzled Billy. "You surely couldn't have read the German markings under their coat of paint. How did you know he was a German?"

Dick smiled.

"Simple enough," he answered. "We Allied aviators have a secret system of signals, something like Freemasonry. When we come near another plane that seems to be one of our own, we make a certain dip of our plane. That's like asking for the countersign. If the other fellow's all right he makes a certain signal in return. If he doesn't do it the first time, we try again, because there's always a chance that he hasn't noticed our signal, or is too busy in handling his plane to give the reply. But if after two or three times we don't get the countersign, we know the fellow's a Hun and we open up on him."

"Good stuff!" approved Billy.

"That's what happened this morning," continued Dick. "This fellow came sailing along as calm and cheeky as you please, and was having a bully time taking pictures of our positions. At least I suppose that is what he was doing, as he evidently wasn't out looking for fight. I thought it wouldn't do any harm to take a look at him, although I saw the machine had French markings. I gave the signal, but of course he couldn't give the countersign. I repeated it three times without getting an answer, and then I pitched into him. That makes the thirteenth that I've brought down."

"Thirteen was an unlucky number for him, all right," remarked Billy.

"How are you fellows getting along?" asked Dick, stretching himself out on the ground for a brief resting spell. "I notice that you've been right up to your neck in fighting lately."

"Its been pretty hot along this sector," Frank admitted, "though I suppose it's nothing to what it will be after the big German drive gets started. That is if it ever does start. I sometimes think they've given up the idea."

"Don't kid yourself," replied the aviator grimly. "It's coming, all right. If you fellows had been up in the air with me you wouldn't have any doubt about it. The roads back of the German lines are just black with troops. It's like an endless swarm of ants. The trains move along in endless procession and they're packed. Big guns, too, till you can't count them. It seems as if all Germany was on the move. It's the old invasion of the Huns over again."

"Where do they get them all, I wonder," remarked Billy.

"That's easy," replied Frank bitterly. "They're coming from the Russian front. The breakdown of Russia means a cool million at the very least added to the German troops on the western front."

"That accounts for most of them," agreed Dick. "Then in addition Germany's combing out her empire to put every available man into service. She's enslaving the Belgians to work in her factories so that German workmen can be sent into the ranks. She's calling up mere boys who ought to be at their schoolbooks. I tell you, boys, Germany's desperate. She's beginning to realize what a fool she was to bring America into the war, and she's going to try to get a decision before we get a big army over here."

"She'll have to get busy mighty soon, then," said Bart, "for Uncle Sam's boys are coming into France by the hundreds of thousands. And those hundreds of thousands will be millions before long."

"Right you are," agreed Dick. "The jig's up with Germany and she's the only one that doesn't see it. It's fun to see the way she tries to belittle America to her own people. Almost every week she has to change the story. At first she said that America wouldn't fight at all. We were a nation of money grabbers. Then even if we wanted to fight the U-boats would keep us from getting over; Then even if we got over, our troops would be green and run like hares as soon as they caught sight of the veteran Prussian regiments."

The boys looked at each other with a grin.

"We've run, all right," chuckled Billy, "but we've run toward them instead of away from them."

"They thought our marines would run too," laughed Frank, "but do you see what they're calling them now? *Teufelhunden*. They're devil-hounds, all right, and the dachshund yelps when he sees them coming."

"What do you think the Germans will aim for when they do begin their drive?" queried Bart.

"The Allied commanders would give a good deal to know that," smiled Dick. "Of course the thing

the Huns want to do above everything else is to separate and crush the Allied armies. Everything would be easy after that. But if they can't do that, they'll probably make a break for Paris. They figure that if they once got that in their hands the French would be ready to sue for peace. Or they may try to take the Channel Ports, where they'd be in good position to take a hack at England. The only thing that's certain is that the drive is coming and when it does come it's going to be the biggest fight in the history of the world."

"Let Heinie do his worst," said Bart.

"Yes," agreed Frank. "And no matter what he does, he'll have to reckon with Uncle Sam."

CHAPTER VII

IN THE HANDS OF THE HUNS

The last thing that Tom Bradford remembered in the fight that separated him from his comrades was the sight of Frank in a bayonet duel with two Germans. He was trying desperately to get to his friend's side and help him in the unequal combat, when a great blackness seemed to sweep down upon him and he knew nothing more.

When he came to consciousness, he felt himself dragged roughly to his feet and thrust into a group of other prisoners who were being sent to the rear under guard of a squad of German soldiers. He reeled and would have fallen had he not been supported by some of his other companions in misfortune. Then the line was set in motion and he stumbled along dazedly, abused verbally by his guards and prodded with bayonets if he lagged or faltered.

Gradually his head stopped whirling and his brain grew clearer. His face felt wet and sticky, and putting his hand to it he drew his fingers away covered with blood.

He felt his head and found a ragged gash running almost the length of the scalp. It must have bled freely, judging from the weakness he felt and the way his hair was matted and his face smeared. But the blood had congealed now and stopped flowing. He figured from the character of the wound that it had been made by a glancing blow from a rifle.

It was fully dark when the gloomy procession halted at a big barn where the prisoners were counted and passed in to stay for the night.

A little later some food was passed in to the prisoners, but Tom had no appetite and even if he had been hungry it would have been hard to stomach the piece of dry bread and watery soup that was given him as his portion. So he gave it to others, and sat over in a corner immersed in the gloomy thoughts that came trooping in upon him.

He was a prisoner. And what he had heard of Hun methods, to say nothing of a former brief experience, had left him under no delusion as to what that meant.

What were his comrades Frank, Bart and Billy doing now? Had they come safely through the fight? He was glad at any rate that they were not with him now. Better dead on the field of battle, he thought bitterly, than to be in the hands of the Huns.

But Tom was too young and his vitality too great to give himself up long to despair. He was a prisoner, but what of it? He had been a prisoner before and escaped. To be sure, it was too much to expect to escape by way of the sky as he had before. Lightning seldom strikes twice in the same place. But there might be other ways—there should be other ways. While breath remained in his body he would never cease his efforts to escape. And sustained and inspired by this resolve, he at last fell asleep.

When he awoke in the morning, his strength had in large measure returned to him. His head was still a little giddy but his appetite was returning. Still he looked askance at the meagre and unpalatable breakfast brought in by the guards.

"Don't be too squeamish, kid," a fellow prisoner advised him, as he saw the look on the young soldier's face. "Take what's given you, even if it isn't fit for Christians. You'll get weak soon enough. Keep strong as long as you can."

There was sound sense in this even with the woeful prophecy and Tom, though with many inward protests, followed the well-meant advice.

Bad as it was, the food did him good, and he was feeling in fairly good condition when, a little later, he was summoned before a German lieutenant to be examined.

That worthy was seated before a table spread with papers, and as Tom entered or rather was

pushed into his presence he compressed his beetling black brows and turned upon the prisoner with the face of a thundercloud.

But if he expected Tom to wilt before his frowning glance he was disappointed. There was no trace of swagger or bravado when Tom faced his inquisitor. But there was self-respect and quiet resolution that refused to quail before anyone to whom fate for the moment had given the upper hand.

The officer spoke English in a stiff and precise way so that an interpreter was dispensed with, and the examination proceeded.

"What is your name?" the lieutenant asked.

Tom told him.

"Your nationality?"

"American."

The officer snorted.

"There is no such thing as American," he said contemptuously. "You are just a jumble of different races."

Tom said nothing.

"What is your regiment?" the officer continued.

There was no answer.

"Did you hear me?" repeated the lieutenant impatiently. "What is your regiment?"

"I cannot tell," answered Tom.

"You mean you will not?"

"I refuse to tell."

"Refuse," exclaimed the officer, growing red in the face. "That is not a safe word to say to me."

Tom kept quiet.

The officer after a moment of inward debate shifted to another line.

"What are your commanders' plans, as far as you know?"

"To beat the Germans," returned Tom promptly.

The officer's face became apoplectic.

"Yankee pig!" he roared. "You know that is not what I meant. Tell me if you know anything of their tactics, whether they intend to attack or stand on the defensive."

"I don't know," replied Tom truthfully.

"Have you plenty of ammunition?"

"More than we can use," replied Tom promptly, glad to tell what could do no harm and would only increase the chagrin of his enemy.

"How many troops have the Americans got in France?"

"A good many hundreds of thousands," answered Tom, "and they're coming over at the rate of two hundred thousand a month."

"Yankee lies," sneered the officer. "You are very ready to give me more information than I ask for when it will suit your purpose."

Tom kept discreetly silent, but he chuckled inwardly at the discomfort shown by his enemy.

The officer pondered a moment, and evidently decided that there was not much to be got out of this young American who faced him so undauntedly. Perhaps other prisoners would prove more amenable. But his dignity had been too much ruffled to let Tom get off without punishment.

"You think that you have baffled me," he said, "but you will find that it is not wise to try to thwart the will of a German officer. We have ways to break such spirits as yours."

He called to the guard, who had been standing stolidly at the door.

"Take him out in the woods and put him to work where the enemy's shell fire is heaviest," he commanded. "It doesn't matter what happens to him. If his own people kill him so much the better. It

will only be one less Yankee pig for us to feed."

The guard seized Tom and thrust him roughly out of the door. Then he took him back to the barn and a whispered conversation ensued, with many black glances shot at Tom.

A short time afterward he was placed with some others in the custody of a squad of soldiers, and taken into the woods close behind the German lines. Of course this was a flagrant breach of all the laws of war. But there was no use in protesting. That would only arouse the amusement of the German guards.

As a matter of fact, when Tom came to think it over, he did not want to protest. His captors could have taken no course that would have suited him better. At first his heart had sunk, for he realized that the officer's purpose was to sign his death warrant. The chances of being killed by the American shells was very great. And then the significant word of the lieutenant that it didn't matter what happened to him, was a hint to the guards that they could murder him if they liked, and there would be no questions asked.

But after all, to be in the open was infinitely better than to be eating his heart out in a squalid prison camp. His health stood less chance of being undermined. As to the shells, he had grown so used to that form of danger that it hardly disturbed him at all.

But the one thing that stood out above all others was that in the woods he would have a chance of escape, while in the camp he would have practically none at all. His limbs would have to be free in order to do the work demanded of him. And he was willing to match his keen American wits against the heavy and slow-thinking guards who might stand watch over him.

He soon reached the section where he was to work, and was set to felling trees to make corduroy roads over which guns and supplies could be brought up from the enemy's rear to the advanced lines.

He had never done that kind of work, and at first the tremendous efforts demanded of him amounted to sheer physical torture. He was hounded on unceasingly under the jibes and threats of his brutal guards. Not half enough food was supplied, and he was forced to work for sixteen and eighteen hours on a stretch.

But he had great reserves of youth and vitality to draw on, and he kept on doggedly, his brain alert, his eyes wide open, his heart courageous, looking for his opportunity.

On the third night his opportunity came.

CHAPTER VIII

FRYING-PAN TO FIRE

The third day of Tom's captivity had been more trying than the two that preceded it.

A new piece of woodland had been ordered to be cleared and, as there was a scarcity of labor, Tom had been taxed to even a greater degree than usual. By the time night came, he was feeling utterly exhausted and ready to drop.

But dusk brought him little relief, for he was told that he must keep on by lantern light until ten o'clock, before he would be permitted to stop.

His troubles were aggravated by the fact that this afternoon a change of guards had brought him under the control of an especially brutal one who made his life a burden by abuse.

His guard had ordered him into a thick part of the woods where the high underbrush cut them off from the sight of other working parties a hundred yards away. Here the German had seated himself comfortably on a fallen tree while he watched his prisoner toil, occasionally hurling a threat or epithet at him.

The guard's watch was out of order, and he had borrowed a small clock from the mess room in order to know when the time came to report with his prisoner at quarters. He had placed the clock in the light of the lantern and kept looking at it frequently and yawning. It was plain that he would welcome the hour that released him from his monotonous duty.

The night was warm and the guard's gun was heavy. He stood it against the tree, but within instant reach, and unbuckled his belt.

In working around the tree, Tom's foot as though by accident knocked against the clock and it fell over on its face. The guard thundered a curse against his awkwardness, and stooped down to pick it up.

Quick as thought Tom picked up the heavy lantern and brought it crashing down on the German's head. The next instant his hands were on the German's throat.

The struggle was brief, for the German at his best would have been no match for the young American. Tom had soon choked him into unconsciousness, and when he felt the man become limp beneath him he relaxed his hold.

He tied the German's hands with his belt and gagged him securely. The lantern had gone out with the blow and he did not dare to relight it. Darkness was now his best friend.

His eyes fell on the clock. It had done him good service, but now was of no further use to him. But a second thought made him pick it up and put it in his blouse.

He had no compass, but the clock would do in a pinch. His woodcraft had taught him how the hands of a clock could find for him the cardinal points. More than once his watch in more peaceful times had done him a similar service.

The first thing necessary was to put as wide a distance as possible between himself and the place where he now was. Afterwards he could figure out how to regain his own lines. By ten o'clock at latest his attack on the guard would be discovered. He must be miles away before then, or his life would not be worth a cent.

His impulse was to take the German's gun, but he discarded the thought at once. His only salvation lay in hiding. The gun would count for nothing among the innumerable foes that surrounded him. It was heavy and cumbersome, and would only retard his progress through the woods. He must travel light if he would travel fast.

He gathered up some fragments of food left from the lunch that the guard had been munching and tucked them in his pocket. Then like a shadow he slipped away through the woods.

From what he had seen and bits of information that he had picked up from other prisoners, some of whom were Frenchmen and knew the country well, Tom had a pretty good idea of the lay of the land. He knew that the country was rolling, with here and there a range of hills that rose almost to the dignity of mountains. Here there ought to be plenty of hiding places where he could stay while he planned a way to get across the lines.

Of course his route would be within the German lines for miles. But the inhabitants were in sympathy with the Allied cause, prisoners in almost as great a degree as he himself had been, and he might find among them aid and comfort, though such assistance if discovered would be sure to be visited with hard punishment by the German oppressors.

The way was full of difficulties and almost every step would be attended by danger. But for the present at least he was free. Free! The word had never appealed to him so strongly before. He drew in great draughts of the mountain air. They seemed in a way to cleanse his lungs from the prison taint.

For what seemed to him hours he never slackened his pace. Many times he stumbled in the darkness and his body was full of bruises, but in the joy of his recovered freedom, he scarcely felt the pain. On he went and on until he felt certain he had placed a safe distance between himself and the scene of his recent captivity.

To be sure, the German command had other things to rely on than mere physical pursuit. There were the long arms of the telegraph and telephone, through which every division on the sector might be warned to be on the lookout for him. But it was wholly unlikely that this would be done. On the eve of the great drive, the authorities were too busy to expend their energies on the recapture of an escaped prisoner. Even if he should fall into the hands of another body of his enemies, it was unlikely that they would know anything of his recent exploit.

So with body tired after his strenuous exertions, but with his mind as much at rest as it could be under the circumstances, Tom threw himself down at last to take a brief rest under the shadow of a giant beech.

The sun streaming through the branches woke him a little later. For a moment he did not know where he was and lay trying to get his thoughts in order. Then it all came back to him with a rush and he sprang to his feet and looked about him.

There was nothing in sight to alarm him. The place seemed to be wild and unvisited. A squirrel sat in the boughs over his head chattering his surprise and perhaps his displeasure at the sight of the intruder. A chipmunk slipped along a grassy ridge and vanished in the undergrowth. Birds sang their welcome to a new day. Everything about him spoke of peace and serenity. It seemed as though there were no such thing as war in the world.

Yet even while this thought lingered with him there came a discordant note in the booming of a distant gun. But it seemed far off and though other guns soon swelled the menacing chorus there seemed to be no immediate cause for alarm.

A little way off from where he had slept, a small brook wound its way through the sedge grass. Tom welcomed it with a grin, for he had not had a bath since he had been captured.

In a moment he had undressed and plunged into the brook. The water was scarcely deeper than his waist, but its coolness was like balm to Tom's bruised and heated body. When he resumed his clothing he felt infinitely strengthened and refreshed.

The young soldier worked his way into a dense thicket as a measure of precaution, before he ate the remnants of food that he had carried away with him the night before. It was a meager breakfast and he could have eaten four times as much if he had had it. But even crumbs were grateful to him in his famished condition.

He had just finished when an ominous sound fell on his ears. Voices mingled with the tread of feet and the clank of weapons. He looked through the bushes and saw a squad of soldiers wearing helmets coming over a little rise of ground beyond where he lay concealed.

He counted them as they came into view. There were at least forty Germans going along in loose marching order. They might have been a patrol out for scout duty or, what was more likely, a foraging party.

He had scarcely established their numbers when on the other side of the thicket and not more than fifty feet away another squad of Germans came into view. They apparently belonged to the same party, but had separated somewhat from the others, probably for more ease in marching.

They seemed to have come from some distance for they were warm and perspiring. The sight of the brook was refreshing, and after a brief conference between the lieutenant in command and a sergeant, the order was given to break ranks, and the men threw themselves down in sprawling attitudes for a rest under the trees.

Tom's heart was in his mouth. What kind of a trick was fate playing on him? Was this to be the end of his heartbreaking struggle, his wild flight through the woods? Was he to get just a tantalizing glimpse of liberty to have it immediately snatched from him? At that moment he tasted the bitterness of death.

How lucky it was, though, that he had sought refuge in that thicket before he commenced his breakfast. There was still a chance. The men were tired and would not be likely to wander about. They were only too glad of a chance to rest.

He burrowed deeper and deeper into the recesses of the thicket. He lay as close to the ground as possible. What would he have given for the friendly shelter of a trench!

The men conversed lazily together while the officer sat some distance apart. At times the Germans' eyes rested carelessly on Tom's shelter, but without any sign of suspicion.

At last the order came to resume the march, and Tom drew an immense sigh of relief. A few minutes more and they would be gone.

The men had formed in loose marching order and the lieutenant lifted his hand to give the signal.

Suddenly a loud ringing came from the center of the thicket, whirring, rattling, clanging.

The time-piece Tom was carrying was an alarm clock!

CHAPTER IX

THE CONFESSION

To poor Tom that ringing was the crack of doom.

The world seemed to end for him then and there. The first surprise had paralyzed him. Then he rolled upon the betraying clock, tried to crush it, strangle it, press it into the earth. But it kept on remorselessly until the alarm ran down.

The Germans had been almost as startled at first as Tom himself. But they hesitated only for a moment. There could be no mistaking where that insistent buzzing was coming from. There was a rush for the thicket, and the next moment Tom was hauled out and stood upon his feet among his captors.

It took only a glance to tell them that Tom was an American. His face as well as his uniform betrayed that fact. Amid a hubbub of excited exclamations he was taken before their leader.

But this time the officer was not able to talk English and there was no interpreter at hand, so that Tom for the present was spared the ordeal of questioning.

The fateful clock was passed around among the men with jest and laughter. It was a good joke to

them, but Tom was in no mood to see the humor of the situation. To him it meant that all his strivings had come to naught.

Why had he not noticed that the clock was of the alarm variety and that the alarm had been set? He promised that he would never forgive himself for that.

A number of men were counted off to take Tom to the local prison camp, while the rest of the party went on with their expedition.

The journey was long, but it was not attended by the rough treatment that would ordinarily have been meted out to the prisoner. The men were glad, for one thing, that they were relieved from going on the special duty for which the party had been formed. Then, too, Tom's misadventure had given them a hearty laugh, and laughs were something to be prized in their arduous life.

After reaching the camp, Tom was taken before an officer for examination. But the officer was busy and preoccupied, and the questioning was largely a matter of form. Tom was vague or dense as the case demanded, and the impatient officer curtly ordered him to be thrust in with the other prisoners and promptly proceeded to forget him.

Tom passed through several stages of emotion when he was left to himself. First he moped, and then he raged. Then, as the comical side of the situation forced itself even upon his misery, he laughed.

A proverb says that "the man is not wholly lost who can laugh at his own misfortunes." Tom laughed and immediately felt better. His natural buoyancy reasserted itself. But he had imbibed a prejudice against alarm clocks that promised to last for the rest of his life.

The sector was a quiet one and Tom was not sent out to work under shell fire. For a few days he was left unmolested to the tedium of prison life, and he began with renewed zest to formulate plans for his escape.

He had a chance also to become more or less acquainted with his fellow-prisoners. There were not many and Tom reflected with satisfaction that the Americans held more German prisoners than the Huns had captured of his own countrymen.

There was a sprinkling of nationalities. There were a few American and British, but the majority were French and Belgians.

About the only French prisoner that Tom grew to know intimately was one who could speak English fairly well. This he explained was due to the fact that the man in whose employ he had been as a butler had a daughter who had married an American, and English had been much spoken in the household.

"What part of France do you come from?" asked Tom one day, when they were chatting together.

"From Auvergne," answered the Frenchman, whose name was Martel. "Ah," he continued wistfully, "what would I not give to see the gardens and vineyards of Auvergne again! But I never will."

"Sure you will," said Tom cheerily. "Brace up, Martel. You won't stay in this old hole forever."

Martel shook his head.

"I'm doomed," he said. "I was in the first stage of consumption when I came here, and the disease is gripping me more tightly every day. Perhaps it's a judgment on me."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Tom, but Martel did not reply except by a shrug of the shoulders.

"Speaking of Auvergne," remarked Tom after a pause, "reminds me that I have a special chum whose mother came from that province. She married an American, too."

"*Vrai?*" exclaimed Martel with quickened interest. "What was her name, *mon ami?*"

"Blest if I remember," answered Tom. "I've heard it, too, but I don't recall it. But I'll tell you how I can find out," he went on, rummaging in his pockets. "I've got a letter somewhere that was sent to my chum. I got it from the headquarters post-office the day I was captured and forgot to give it to him. The Huns tore the envelope off when they saw me, but when they saw that it was of no importance to them they tossed it back. I've kept it carefully ever since because it's from some lawyer fellow in Paris telling him about his mother's property, and I hope some time to be able to hand it to him. It's simply a business letter with nothing private or personal in it. Here it is," and Tom produced from his pocket a crumpled letter without an envelope. "Let's see, the name of Frank's mother is Delatour—why, what's the matter, Martel?" he added anxiously, as he saw the Frenchman turn white and start back at the mention of the name.

"Nothing," answered Martel, controlling himself with difficulty. "A little weakness—I'm not very strong, you know."

The conversation turned then in other channels, and Tom soon forgot it in his absorption of his one idea of escape.

A week had passed when a sudden hemorrhage that attacked Martel brought the prison doctor to his side. He shook his head after an examination. There was no hope. It was a matter of days only, perhaps of hours. He was heartless and perfunctory. What did it matter? The sufferer was only a prisoner.

A little while after, Martel called Tom to him.

"I told you, *mon ami*, that it would not be long," he said with the ghost of a smile. "And I also told you that perhaps it was a judgment on me. Do you remember?"

"Why, yes," answered Tom reluctantly. "But perhaps you'd better not excite yourself talking about it. I guess we've all done things we're sorry for afterwards."

"But I committed a crime," said Martel. "I perjured myself. And I did it for gain."

"There, there," soothed Tom, but Martel continued:

"No, I must speak. *Le bon Dieu* has sent you to me. Listen, *mon brave*, I was in the household of Monsieur Delatour. I had seen Mademoiselle Lucie grow up from childhood. She was charming. But she married and passed largely out of our life. Monsieur Delatour grew old. He had made his will leaving the property chiefly to his daughter. But there was a nephew, a spendthrift—what you call in English the black sheep—and after Monsieur Delatour died this *mauvais sujet* offered me money to swear that there was a later will. The object? To tie up the estate, to delay the settlement, to force a compromise with the daughter. I took the money. I perjured myself. There was no later will. The property belongs to Mademoiselle Lucie—pardon, Madame Sheldon."

He fell back exhausted on his pillow. Tom was shocked, but he was also greatly excited at the prospect of the wrong that had been done to Frank's mother being righted. At Martel's request the confession was reduced to writing with many details added, and then a number of the prisoners signed their names as witnesses.

Tom was not sure how far the confession would stand in law, but he felt reasonably certain that it would be regarded as good evidence and he was jubilant at the chance that had made him of such great service to his chum, Frank.

The confession was made none too soon, for that same night Martel died.

"Well, Frank, old scout," said Tom to himself the next day, as he carefully read and re-read the important document, "that alarm clock played me a lowdown trick, but it's sure been a good friend of yours, all provided I can get this confession to you!"

CHAPTER X

A MIDNIGHT SWIM

"A pretty tight place we're in," remarked Bart to Frank as the Army Boys stood side by side behind a barricade of logs where they had just repelled a German attack that had surged up close before it fell back in confusion.

"Tight is right," grunted Bart, as he reloaded his rifle which was getting hot from firing.

"We ought to be used to tight places by this time," put in Billy, stopping long enough to wipe the perspiration from his face. "It seems that when our division has a specially tough job to do they always call upon the old Thirty-seventh to do it."

There was no exaggeration in describing the position the soldiers were holding as a tight place. While the great drive had not yet begun, the enemy was carrying on a nibbling process in the attempt to improve his position before the start of the big offensive.

There was a piece of woodland surmounting a broad plateau that had considerable strategic importance. Its possession would enable the Germans to straighten their lines and permit their guns to dominate the valley beyond. They had made several attacks previously which had been driven back; but on the morning in question the assaults had been particularly ferocious and determined. It was evident that the Germans had received orders to carry it at all costs, and they had thrown their forces ahead again and again regardless of their heavy losses in men.

Their attacks on the direct front had remained without result, but they had been able to gain some advantages on the side that separated the detachment in the woods from their main divisions. It was necessary that American reinforcements should be sent at once, for the comparatively small force that held the position was rapidly thinning out, owing to the terrific shell fire of the enemy's guns.

Several couriers had been sent to notify the main command of the perilous position in which the defenders were placed, but these had evidently been killed or captured, and at last Major Blake, the officer in command, had to use his last resort.

There was a cage of carrier pigeons that the detachment had brought with them, beautiful, soft-eyed creatures that had been thoroughly trained. It seemed a pity that things so gentle should have to serve the harsh purposes of war. But human lives were at stake, and one of the birds was quickly selected, and a message tied on it securely. Then it was thrown up in the air. It circled about for a moment to get its direction, and then straight as an arrow to its mark made for division headquarters.

A cheer rose from the men as they watched the feathered messenger, but this quickly changed to a groan when the bird was seen to falter and then plunge downward. An enemy shot had winged or killed it.

Two more were sent and met with the same fate. The need was growing fearfully urgent, for the enemy had been reinforced and the attacks were growing in intensity. Unless help came very soon the position would be overwhelmed.

Frank and his comrades were fighting like tigers, their faces covered with grime and sweat. The last time the enemy came on they had reached the breastworks and had been beaten back with savage bayonet fighting and clubbed rifles. But they still kept coming as though their numbers were endless.

"The boys had better hurry up if they want to find any of us alive," muttered Billy.

"They'll probably find us dead," grunted Bart, "but they'll find, too, that we've taken a lot of the Huns with us."

"There goes the fourth bird," said Frank. "Perhaps he'll have better luck."

Through the tempest of shot and shell the bird winged its way unhurt, and with new hope the desperate defenders buckled down to their work. They knew their comrades would not leave them in the lurch.

Two more attacks came on, but the gray-clad waves broke down before the gallant defense. And then, above the roar of battle, came a rousing American cheer, and into the woods came plunging rank after rank of fresh troops to relieve their hard-pressed comrades.

They rapidly fell into position, and the next time the Germans came for what they believed would be their crowning success they had the surprise of their lives. A withering rifle fire ploughed their ranks, and then the American boys leaped over the barricade and chased the enemy back to his own lines. The position was saved, and the hardy fighters who had held it so gallantly looked at each other and wondered that they were alive.

"The narrowest shave we ever had!" gasped Billy as, utterly exhausted, he threw himself at full length on the ground.

"It was nip and tuck," panted Bart. "I know now how the besieged British at Lucknow felt when they heard the bagpipes playing: 'The Campbells are coming.'"

"We pulled through all right," said Frank, "and don't forget, boys, that we owe it to the birds."

Two days later the position of the divisions was shifted and the Army Boys found themselves on the banks of a small river that forms the dividing line between the hostile armies.

The squad to which Frank and his comrades were assigned under the command of Corporal Wilson, who had now fully recovered from his wounds, was stationed at a point where the river was about a hundred and fifty yards wide. Desultory firing was carried on, but the sector at the time was comparatively quiet, as both armies were engrossed in their preparations for the great battle that was impending. It was the lull before the storm, and the boys improved it to the utmost. Their duties were light compared to what they had been, and they rapidly recuperated from the great strain under which they had been for some weeks past.

"If only Tom were here now," remarked Frank for perhaps the hundredth time, for their missing comrade was always in the thoughts of the other Army Boys.

"Poor old scout!" mourned Bart. "I wonder where he is now?"

"Working his heart out in some German camp, I suppose," said Billy savagely.

"You see, Frank, your hunch hasn't worked out as you thought it would," said Bart. "You felt sure that Tom would be with us again before this."

"I know," admitted Frank. "My time-table has gone wrong, but I haven't given up hope. Tom is only human and he can't work miracles. He may have been so placed that it simply wasn't possible to make a break. But one thing you can gamble on, and that is that he hasn't given up trying. And when a man has that spirit his chance is sure to come."

"I wish I had your optimism," said Bart gloomily.

"Look at those skunks on the other side of the river," interrupted Billy.

He pointed to a group of German soldiers who were making insulting gestures and holding up huge placards with coarse inscriptions on them.

"Cheap skates," replied Frank. "You notice they're not quite so gay when we get to close quarters with them."

"They get my goat," said Billy with irritation. "I'd like to cram those placards down their throats."

"Pretty big mouthful," laughed Frank.

"We'll get them yet," said Billy vengefully.

"What's the use of saying 'yet,'" suggested Frank. "Why not say 'now'?"

They looked at him curiously.

"What do you mean?" queried Bart.

"Got anything up your sleeve?" asked Billy.

"An idea just came to me," replied Frank. "I don't know whether it's any good, but perhaps it's worth chewing over."

"Let's have it," demanded Billy eagerly.

"Well," said Frank slowly, "I figure that there must be about twenty Germans in that detachment just opposite us. What would be the matter with a few of us going over there some dark night and cleaning up the bunch?"

A delighted shout met the suggestion.

"Bully!" exclaimed Bart.

But though the approval was enthusiastic, practical difficulties soon presented themselves.

"How are we to get across?" asked Bart dubiously.

"We haven't any boat on this side that's big enough," said Billy. "In fact, I don't think we have any at all."

"That's an easy one," answered Frank. "Do you see that big lobster of a boat on the other side? That looks as though it would carry almost a dozen anyway. We won't need any more than that to nab the Huns, because we'll have the advantage of the surprise if our plans go through all right."

"But how are we going to get the boat?" asked Bart.

"Swim over for it," replied Frank. "I'll attend to that. Give me a dark night and it's all I ask."

"Let's see what the corporal has to say about it," suggested Bart.

The corporal listened with interest. It was a plan after his own heart.

"You young roosters are always looking for fight," he grinned. "I'll put it up to the captain and see what he says."

The assent of the captain was readily obtained as he knew the value of such exploits in keeping the spirits of the men up to high fighting pitch.

The night following there would be no moon until late, and it was fixed on for carrying out the raid. Frank was to swim across the river and get the boat. On the American side Wilson with eight men would be in waiting. They would embark and try to reach the other side without detection. Quick thinking and Yankee grit could be depended on to do the rest.

The night came, black as pitch. Frank slid into the water as noiselessly as a fish and struck out for the other side.

CHAPTER XI

GALLANT WORK

The water had a chill in it that struck to Frank's marrow, but the reaction soon came and he

proceeded swiftly, making as little noise as possible, and keeping body and head low in the water. He was a powerful swimmer, and the distance was as nothing to him. But the greatest caution had to be exercised lest he be discovered by a sentry whose shot would alarm his comrades and put an end to the projected raid.

But fortune favored him and he soon reached the boat, which seemed to be large enough, with some crowding, to carry the American party. It swung with its stern toward the shore, to which it was held by a rope that was passed about a cleat.

Frank clung for a moment to the bow and listened intently. He could hear no breathing nor any other sound that indicated that any one was on board. The Germans had evidently not dreamed of any such exploit as that on which Frank was bent.

But that a watch was kept on the shore was evident, for Frank could hear the measured step of a sentinel some distance away. The steps receded as he listened, and he gathered that the patrol was an extended one. Now was his time, while the sentry was at the further limit of his beat.

Swiftly he climbed on board, slipped the rope from its cleat, and with a push of an oar against the bank sent the boat some distance out into the stream. He did not dare to row for he feared that the oars grating in the rowlocks might betray him. But he made a paddle of one of the oars, dipping it in alternately on opposite sides of the bow, paddle fashion, and before long reached his party, by whom he was received with intense though subdued jubilation.

In whispers Frank explained to Wilson what he had observed and action was agreed on accordingly. The party, ten in all, bestowed themselves as best as they might in their narrow quarters and the boat started on its perilous expedition.

A paddle was employed as before, and the journey was necessarily slow, for the boat sank in the water almost to the gunwales. But they reached the other side at last, and Frank, slipping into the water, waded to the bank, where he fastened the boat securely.

Whether they would ever step into that boat again was known to none of the party that slipped like shadows up the grassy bank. They were outnumbered two to one, or more, and their success depended mainly on surprise. The slightest slip in their plans would bring the expedition to grief.

They lay flat on the bank and listened. There was no sound except the tread of the sentry's feet coming nearer. It was unlikely that the absence of the boat had been discovered. Still, it might have been, and the dead silence might portend an ambush by the enemy.

This was a chance, however, that they had to take. But the first thing to do was to dispose of the sentry.

The path along which he seemed to be coming was bordered with a small and uncared-for hedge.

In a hurried whisper Wilson gave his commands.

"You, Sheldon and Raymond, creep ahead and lie on opposite sides of the ledge. When the sentry comes along, close on him at the same time. Keep him from making a noise if you can. The one thing is to be quick."

Frank and Bart glided along and took up positions opposite each other.

"You grab his gun, Bart, and I'll make for his throat," whispered Frank.

The sentry came on unsuspectingly. Lithe as panthers the boys leaped upon him, Bart grasping the gun, while Frank's sinewy hands fastened on his throat.

There was a muffled exclamation and a short sharp struggle. Then the sentry lay on the ground unconscious, while Frank and Bart hastily improvised a gag, and bound the man's hands and feet.

"Good work," commended the corporal, as Frank and Bart rejoined their comrades. "That was the most ticklish part. The rest ought to be easy."

But he was mistaken, for just then the door of a dugout in a small trench opened, and two men came out with lanterns. It was evidently the corporal of the guard who had come out with a private to relieve the sentry.

There was an exclamation of surprise and alarm, and as the light of the lanterns revealed the group of dark figures at the head of the trench, the men started to leap back into the dugout. But a rifle cracked and one of them fell. The other, however, got inside and slammed and barred the door.

"Rush them, men!" shouted the corporal, and charged, at their head, toward the dugout.

Two or three of them launched themselves against the door, but it held.

"Splinter it with your gun butts!" yelled the corporal, and a series of heavy blows thundered against the barrier.

Some of the planks started to give, but before the door had completely yielded, it was thrown open from within and the Germans rushed out, firing as they came.

They were met by a return volley, and two of them fell. But the others charged fiercely, and in an instant the two forces were engaged in a terrible hand-to-hand battle.

In the narrow confines of the trench there was no chance for shooting after the first volley. It was a matter of fists and knives and in this the Germans proved, as they had many times before, that they were no match for the sinewy young Americans who with a yell went at them like wild-cats.

Sullenly they retreated and their leader held up his hands and shouted "*Kamerad!*"

His followers did the same. The fight was over. None of the Americans had been killed though one was slightly and another severely wounded. Three of the Germans would never fight again and two others stood supported by their comrades.

Two of the Americans stood at the door of the dugout and searched the Germans for arms as they came through. Others stood at the head of the trench and herded the prisoners together for transportation to the other side.

The German corporal looked about him as he and his men stood guarded by Americans with loaded rifles, and his chagrin was evident as he realized that he had been captured by so small a force.

"Are these all the men you have?" he asked in passable English of Wilson.

"They were enough, weren't they?" answered Wilson with a grin that reflected itself on the faces of his comrades.

"*Donnerwetter!*" growled the German. "You would never have taken us if we had known!"

"We don't tell all we know," answered Wilson with a grin.

The prisoners were ferried across in groups of half a dozen at a time, but not before Billy had had the satisfaction of gathering up the insulting placards that had aroused his ire and tearing them up before the Germans' faces.

"Feel better now?" laughed Frank.

"Lots," replied Billy. "I couldn't exactly make them swallow them, but they must have felt almost as bad to see so much German Kultur going to waste."

The party was greeted with exuberant delight on their return, and received the special thanks of the captain.

"It was a big risk," he smiled, "but risks have a way of going through when they are carried out by the boys I'm lucky enough to command."

"You forget, Captain," smiled the lieutenant who stood nearby, "that there are no American soldiers in France."

"That's so," laughed the captain. "The U-boats stopped us from coming over, didn't they?"

CHAPTER XII

THE DRUGGED DETACHMENT

A scouting party was being made up a few days later, and the Army Boys were glad that they were included in it. In the region where they were stationed the woods were thick, and there was a sort of "twilight zone" that afforded excellent opportunities for individual fighting. The lines were rather loosely kept, and it was no uncommon occurrence to have raiding parties slip across, have a brush with their opponents, and retire with what forage or prisoners they might be lucky enough to take.

There had been a good deal of "sniping" that, while it only caused occasional losses, was a source of harassment and irritation, and Frank's squad had orders to "get" as many of these sharpshooters as possible.

A little way from the camp there was a deep gorge. Along its top were many huge trees whose branches reached far out over the precipice. They drew so close together that their branches in many cases were interwoven.

The squad was moving along without any attempt to keep formation in such rough country, when there was the crack of a rifle and a bullet zipped close by Frank's ear.

He started back.

"Did it get you, Frank?" called out Bart in alarm.

"No," replied Frank, "but it came closer than I care to think about."

At the corporal's command they took shelter behind trees, from which they scanned the locality in the direction from which the shot had come.

There was no trace of any concealed marksman, search the coverts as they would. But that he was there, and that he was an enemy to be dreaded, was shown a moment later when a bullet ridged the fingers of the hand that Billy had incautiously exposed.

With an exclamation, Billy put his bleeding fingers to his mouth. The injury was slight and Bart bound his hand up for him, using extreme care to keep behind the trees.

"We have to hand it to that fellow," remarked the corporal. "He certainly knows how to shoot."

"I'd hand him something if I only knew where he was," growled Billy.

"I know where he is," said Frank.

"Do you?" asked the corporal eagerly.

"Where?"

"In the tallest of that clump of trees on the edge of the gorge," replied Frank. "I caught a glimpse of his rifle barrel the last time he fired."

"We'll give him a volley," decided the corporal, and a moment later, at his command, the rifles rang out.

Several times this was repeated in the hope that one of the bullets would find its mark. But the tree trunk was enormously thick and bullets imbedded themselves in it without injury to the marksman, snugly sheltered on the further side.

If they could have surrounded the tree and shot from different sides there would have been no trouble in bagging their quarry. But the tree had been cunningly chosen for the reason that the further side hung over the precipice and could only be attacked from the side where the party now were.

Frank's keen eyes had been sizing up the situation and he now had a proposal to make.

"I think I see a way to dislodge him if you'll let me try it, Corporal," he said.

"What is it?" asked Wilson.

"You'll notice that the branches of those trees are mixed in with each other," replied Frank. "If you can keep him busy with your shooting, so that he won't be thinking of anything else, I think I can make a detour and climb up one of those other trees on the side away from him. I could carry my rifle strapped on my back. Then I might work my way along the branches and perhaps catch sight of him."

"It's worth trying," decided the corporal. "Go ahead, Sheldon, but be mighty careful."

Frank slipped away in the shelter of the trees, described a semi-circle, reached the third tree from the one where the German was stationed, and commenced to climb.

It was hard work, for the tree was thick and he could not get a good grip on it with his arms. But he persisted until he reached the first limb and drew himself up on it. Then he examined his rifle carefully and with the utmost caution began to work his way among the branches.

Some of these were so thick as to be themselves almost like tree trunks, and he had no apprehension on the score of his weight. He passed to the next tree, and then to the next. There he paused, parting the branches carefully.

He knew that his comrades were keeping their part of the bargain, for the thud of bullets against the tree that sheltered the enemy was almost continuous.

For several minutes Frank looked for his enemy. Then his search was rewarded, and through an open space he found himself looking squarely into the eyes of the man who, a few minutes before, had tried to send a bullet through his brain.

The man saw him at the same instant. Like a flash he leveled his rifle and fired.

For such a hurried aim the shot was good. Frank felt the whistle of the bullet as it almost grazed him. But it was not good enough.

The next instant Frank's rifle spoke. The man flung out his arms, toppled over and fell with a crash into the gorge that the tree overhung. The rifle clanged after him. There would be no more sniping by that particular marksman from that particular tree.

There was a shout from the squad who had witnessed the duel, and as Frank slid down the tree he was greeted with acclamations.

"A neryv thing, Sheldon," commended Wilson.

"He almost got me, though," returned Frank. "It was a case of touch and go."

"He was a brave man," was the tribute of the corporal, "though that particular kind of work has always seemed to me something like murder. He shot his victims without giving them a chance. His work on land was that of the U-boats on the sea—a species of assassination."

The squad went on with special caution and with a close watch on the trees. But noon came without further adventure and they got out their rations and prepared to enjoy them at the foot of a spreading maple.

They were perhaps half way through the meal, which they had seasoned with jokes and laughter, when there was a rustling in the bushes near at hand. Instantly they leaped to their feet and reached for their rifles.

"Who goes there?" demanded the corporal.

There was no answer.

"Answer or we shoot!" cried Wilson.

The bushes parted and a young peasant girl stepped forth.

She was a pretty girl of about eighteen. Her face bore the marks of tears, her hair was dishevelled, and she was in a state of extreme agitation. She began to talk feverishly and with many gestures.

"Here, Sheldon," said the corporal, "you speak French. See if you can understand what the girl is saying."

Frank stepped forward.

"*Que voulez-vous, Mademoiselle?*" he asked.

The relief of the girl when she heard her own language was evident.

"These are English soldiers, Monsieur?" she asked.

"No," said Frank, "they are Americans."

"Oh, *les braves Americains!*" she exclaimed. "How glad I am! I know you will help me."

"Be sure of that," replied Frank. "But tell me now just what has happened."

"The boches," she answered. "They are at our house."

"How many are there?" asked Frank with quickened interest.

"About thirty," she replied. Then as she saw Frank glance at the ten who made up his party, she went on: "But you can capture them, I am sure. They are drugged."

"Drugged?"

"Yes. They came to our house early this morning. They upset everything. They smashed the furniture. They tied my father and brother in chairs. They said they were going to burn the house when they got ready to go away."

"But how were they drugged?"

"They made me get them all the food and wine there was in the house. I did so. I put some laudanum in the wine. They ate and drank. Then they got sleepy. They dropped off one by one. Then I ran out to find help. I find you. Heaven is good."

Frank consulted the corporal as the others crowded around in great excitement.

The corporal meditated.

"It may be a trap," he said cautiously.

"I don't think so," replied Frank. "Look at the girl. She's no actress. I think she's telling the truth."

"But even if they were drugged, they may have recovered from the effects by this time," pondered the corporal.

Then he made up his mind.

"We'll take a chance," he decided. "Ask the girl how far the house is from here."

"About a mile," the girl answered to Frank's query. "And there is one other thing," she added. "They have a prisoner with them. He is young and he has a uniform like yours, only it is torn and soiled. They threw him on the floor in a room upstairs. He was tied with ropes."

"What does he look like?" asked Frank. "Tell me as well as you can."

She described the prisoner amid the growing excitement of the Army Boys.

"Tom, for a thousand dollars!" cried Frank.

"It must be!" echoed Bart.

"Sure as guns!" chimed in Billy.

"Do you know him, then?" asked the girl, who had been looking at them wonderingly. "Oh, then hurry! For they are going to hang him. They put a rope over the tree near the well and said they would hang him when they got through eating and drinking."

Hang Tom! If there had been any hesitation before, there was none now. The chums would have run every step of the way if the corporal had not restrained them. As it was they covered the mile in double-quick time.

As they came to where the farm bordered on the woods and caught sight of the house, their eyes turned with dread toward the well. An exclamation of heartfelt relief broke from them. The rope was there as the girl had said, but no hideous burden dangled from it.

No one was in sight, and a death-like silence brooded over the place. They waited in the shelter of the trees. Perhaps the enemy had recovered and was waiting for them with a force three times their own.

Five minutes passed. Then the corporal gave an order.

"Fix bayonets! We're going to rush the house."

There was a sharp click.

"Charge!"

With a cheer they rushed across the brief space that separated them from the house and up to the open door.

The corporal looked in.

"Put up your guns, boys," he said quietly. "We've got them."

The others crowded after him into the long low-ceiled room. The enemy had been delivered into their hands. There, sprawled over the floor in all sorts of ungainly attitudes among the smashed furniture, were the invaders in various stages of stupor. Some of them opened their eyes at the sudden interruption and stared hard at the newcomers. The lieutenant himself sat at the table on which his head had fallen forward.

But the Army Boys did not tarry long. A word of permission from the corporal and they bounded up the narrow stairs and burst into the room where the girl had said Tom had been left.

The room was empty!

They searched and called frantically.

"Tom! Tom! Where are you? Come out! It's friends, Frank, Billy, Bart!"

They looked in every cranny and corner of the house upstairs and then down. Then they rushed out to the barn. Then with fear at their hearts they sounded the well.

All was to no purpose. Tom—if it had really been Tom—might have vanished into thin air for any trace they found of him.

Where had he gone? What had become of him? Or, worst of all, what had the enemy done to him?

There was no answer, and at last they rejoined their comrades in the hope that questioning of the German lieutenant or some of his men might tell them what they wanted to know.

The first precaution that the corporal had taken was to disarm and bind his prisoners. Then the farmer and his son were released. They were wild with rage at the treatment they had undergone and the wanton havoc wrought in their home. If the choice had been left to them they would have killed every prisoner on the spot.

At the corporal's command water was brought from the well and buckets of it were dashed over the Germans. There was sputtering and yelling, but the soldier boys enjoyed it hugely, and they worked with a hearty good will.

It was a drastic remedy for sleepiness but it worked, and before long the Germans, looking like so many drowned rats, had come out of their stupor and began to realize their situation. The privates were sheepish, but the lieutenant went almost crazy with anger when he realized how he had been trapped. His eyes looked venom at the girl, who laughed at him triumphantly. His rage was increased by his consciousness of the pitiable figure he presented. His smart uniform was dripping, his hair was matted over his face and even his ferocious mustache had lost its Kaiser-like curl. Even one of his own men ventured to snicker at him, and the look the officer turned on him was not good to see.

The corporal began to question him, but the lieutenant looked at him in disdain.

"A German officer does not answer the questions of a corporal," he sneered.

"Just as you like," retorted Wilson coolly. "Perhaps you'd like to have me leave you here with the owner of the house and his son. I think they'd like nothing better than to have five minutes alone with you. Perhaps even one minute would be enough."

The lieutenant took one glance at the glowering faces of the farmer and his son and wilted instantly.

"I will answer your questions," he said, shortly.

CHAPTER XIII

A DEEPENING MYSTERY

"He came off his perch mighty quick," remarked Bart to Frank in a whisper.

"I don't wonder," replied Frank. "He'd be a pretty poor insurance risk if these people could get a whack at him."

The corporal asked a few formal questions as to the lieutenant's regiment and division, which were answered sullenly though promptly. But these had little interest just then, and their asking was really a matter for headquarters. They were simply the prelude to other questions in which the company were much more deeply concerned.

"You had a prisoner here?" asked the corporal.

"Yes."

"Where is he now?"

"He was placed upstairs."

"He is not there now. What have you done with him?"

"Nothing."

"What were you going to do with him?"

The officer moved uneasily.

"Take him back to my quarters," he finally answered.

"Why did you have that rope put over the tree by the well?"

There was no answer, but the officer grew red in the face.

"Did you hear the question?"

"It was to frighten him," the lieutenant finally blurted out. "Anyway he was a spy and deserved to be hung. He had come into our lines in disguise."

The corporal motioned to Frank.

"Ask the girl again if she is sure the prisoner had on an American uniform," he directed.

Frank did so.

"*Oui, oui*," she affirmed emphatically.

To make sure, Frank repeated the question to the farmer and his son and received the same answer.

He reported to the corporal.

"These people all say that the prisoner was not in disguise, Lieutenant," said Wilson. "Do you still wish to insist that he was?"

"Yes."

"That is enough," replied the corporal with quiet scorn. "Line up the prisoners, men," he commanded.

This was quickly done, and the homeward march commenced, but not until another search had been made for the missing captive of the Germans.

It had the same result as the previous one and the boys were full of questionings and forebodings as they marched back guarding their prisoners. But there were some elements of comfort in their perplexity.

In the first place, they had saved some American soldier, whether Tom or another, from a horrible death. Then, too, they had in their power the brute who had planned that death. It was not impossible, too, that, under further questioning of the lieutenant and his men at headquarters, more might be learned of what they wanted so badly to know.

Another subject of congratulation also was that the prisoner, if he had escaped, was not far from the American lines. He might find his way in at any time.

But there was one thing that bothered Frank considerably, and he mentioned it that night when he found himself alone with Bart and Billy.

"Do you remember the minute at the edge of the wood when the corporal gave the order to fix bayonets?" he asked.

"Sure thing," replied Bart. "What about it?"

"Just this," replied Frank. "At that minute I caught sight of a man running away from the farmhouse into the woods on the other side. I got the picture of him in my mind, but I didn't have time to think about it just then, for we were making a rush for the house. Then other things crowded it out of my mind altogether. But it came back to me on the way home this afternoon."

"What did the man look like and how was he dressed?" asked Billy eagerly.

"He had on an American uniform," replied Frank slowly, as he tried to make the picture clear in his own mind.

"Perhaps it was Tom!" cried Bart.

"No, it wasn't," said Frank positively. "The uniform was smart and newer than ours. Tom's must be in tatters and you remember the girl said it was. Then, too, I'd know Tom's gait among a thousand just as you would. No, it wasn't Tom, worse luck."

"Who was it, then?"

"I think it was Nick Rabig," replied Frank.

"Nick Rabig!" the others cried together.

"Mind, I only say I think," repeated Frank, looking around to see that no outsider was within hearing. "I wouldn't be willing to swear to it. But the motions were Nick's—you know he runs like a cart horse—and you know that Nick has been togged out in a new uniform since he came back from that queer captivity of his among the Huns."

"Nick Rabig there," mused Bart perplexedly, as he began to pace up and down. "What on earth could he have been doing there?"

"Say," put in Billy with agitation, "could he have done anything to Tom? Suppose he went there, no matter for what purpose; suppose he found that German crowd dead to the world; suppose he found Tom upstairs bound and helpless. You know how Nick hated him."

"Keep cool, old man," counseled Frank, though there was a trace of anxiety in his own voice. "No, I don't think anything of that kind has happened. If it had we'd have found some traces of it. I think we can leave that out of our calculations."

"I'm only too glad to," said Billy. "But what was Nick's reason for being around that farmhouse anyway?"

"What have always been Nick's reasons for being where there are Germans, or where he expects there will be Germans?" said Bart. "Suppose—just suppose—that Nick knew—had a tip, let us say—that a certain German lieutenant on a certain day would be in a certain place, ready to receive and pay for any information about the American forces that Nick had been able to gather. Do you get me?"

"I get you, all right," answered Frank, "and from what we know of Nick we've got a right to think so. Well, he didn't sell anything today anyway. He didn't find the German lieutenant in any condition to talk business."

The bugle blew for "taps" just then, and the conversation came to an end. And the two days that followed were so crowded with events that their own personal interests were thrust into the background.

For the great drive was coming, the drive for which they had been looking for months, looking not with fear but with eager anticipation, their ardent young hearts aflame with the desire to fight to the death the enemies of civilization.

The weather had favored the enemy in his preparations. Usually at that time of the year the ground was soft and not fit for military operations on a grand scale. But the ground this year had dried out unusually early and was suitable for the bringing forward of men and guns.

There were all sorts of rumors afloat as to what the enemy had in store. There were said to be monster guns that could throw shells more than seventy miles. There were new and diabolical inventions in the way of gas that were to cause unspeakable agonies to their victims. There was talk of gigantic mirrors that would act as burning-glasses and blind the opposing troops.

Some of these things proved to be true. Others were mere lies, designed to sap the morale of the Allied armies and civil populations before the fight began.

"Heinie's the biggest boob that ever happened," grinned Billy, when the boys were discussing the coming conflict. "He acts as if the Allies were a lot of children. He thinks that all he has to do is to dress up a bugaboo and we'll all roll over and play dead."

"He'll get something into that thick head of his after a while," predicted Frank. "It will have to be jabbed in, but there are a lot of us ready to do the jabbing."

"Let him bring on his bag of tricks," scoffed Bart. "When all's said and done, it's going to be man-stuff that will decide this war. And there's where we've got him on the hip. Man to man we're better stuff than the Huns. We know it and they know it. They can't stand before our bayonets."

"Right you are, old scout!" said Frank, enthusiastically, giving him a resounding slap on the back. "Let them bring on their old drive as soon as they like. They can begin the drive. We'll end it. And we'll end it in the streets of Berlin!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE STORM OF WAR

"Listen to that music," said Frank to his comrades the next morning, as a furious cannonade opened up that made the ground shake and filled the air with flying missiles of death.

"Too many bass notes in it to be real good music," remarked Billy with a grim.

"Maybe it's the overture just before the rising of the curtain," suggested Bart.

"Perhaps it is," agreed Frank. "The Hun has got to start his drive some time, and this would be just the kind of morning for it. See how heavy that mist lies on the ground? We couldn't see the Germans at a distance of fifty yards."

"It's mighty thick for a fact," observed Bart. "But I guess our advanced posts are on the job. They'll give us warning in plenty of time."

"Not that we need much warning as far as I can see," said Billy. "We've been ready for a long time to fight at the drop of a hat. I'll bet the Hun doesn't carry a foot of our line."

"That's where you're wrong, Billy, old scout," warned Bart. "It stands to reason that he'll get away with something at first. You take any one man, no matter how strong he is, and if ten fellows rush him all at once they're bound to drive him back at the start. The Huns have got the advantage of knowing where they're going to strike. We don't know and so we have to spread our forces out so as to be ready to meet him at any point. Then, too, the man who comes rushing in has the advantage of the fellow who's standing still because he's got momentum. That's why generals would rather fight on the offensive than on the defensive. They're able to pick the time and place and the other fellow has to follow his lead."

"I don't see why the Allies can't take the offensive," grumbled Billy. "It gets my goat to let the Huns hit first."

"It does mine too," admitted Frank, "and if it hadn't been for Russia quitting, we'd be looking now at the coattails of the Kaiser's generals as they scooted back to Berlin. But that's a bit of hard luck that we can't help. Russia's back-down has taken ten million soldiers from the Allies' strength. But America will make that all up in time and then you'll see us doing the chasing."

"It can't come too soon to suit me," said Billy. "I only wish Uncle Sam had started sooner to get ready."

"So do I," replied Frank. "But there's no use crying over spilt milk. We're getting ahead now with leaps and bounds. I was talking to Will Stone the other day, and he'd just got back from a flying trip to one of the French seaports. He says it simply knocked him stiff to see the transports coming in loaded to the guards with American troops. And he says the roads are fairly choked with doughboys moving this way. They're coming like a swarm of locusts. And there's millions more where they came from. Oh, Uncle Sam is awake now, all right, and don't you forget it! And when he once gets started there's nothing on earth can stop him."

"Right you are!" said Bart.

"We've won every war we've ever been in and it's got to be a habit," grinned Billy.

The old Thirty-seventh was stationed on the second line, or what is called in military terms, "the line of resistance." In modern fighting, when a heavy attack is expected the defending army is usually arranged in three lines. The first is the advanced line, and this is hardly expected to be held very long. Its chief aim is to hold back the enemy for a while and weaken him as far as possible. Not many troops are employed on this line nor many big guns. The chief reliance is on rifle fire and machine guns, which are so placed as to deliver a withering cross-fire and cut up the enemy divisions.

By the time the first line is driven back the defending army knows where the enemy has chosen to strike and is ready for him on the second line or "line of resistance." Here the battle is on in all its fury. If here again the enemy advances, there is still a third line of "battle positions." This is practically the last entrenched position that the defenders have. If they are driven back from this into the open country beyond, it becomes a serious thing for the retreating army, as many of their big guns will have been lost, and their forces are apt to be more or less disorganized, while the enemy is flushed with the victory he has so far gained.

The cannonade kept on with increasing fury all through the early morning.

"Heinie must have plenty of ammunition," remarked Frank. "He's spending it freely."

"It beats anything we've been up against since we came to the front," observed Billy.

"It seems to be coming nearer and nearer all the time," said Bart. "I guess this is going to be our busy day."

There was intense activity all through the lines. Orderlies galloped from place to place with orders. Big motor cars rumbled up, loaded with troops who were hastily placed in position. The big guns of the Allied forces had opened up and were sending back shell for shell over the enemy lines.

For over two hours the artillery kept up the Titanic duel. The fog was lifting, though still heavy in some of the low-lying sections. The Thirty-seventh was resting easily on its arms, ready for whatever might happen.

"We may not see so much fighting after all," remarked Billy, after a while. "The fellows in front seem to be holding pretty well. Perhaps they'll throw the Huns back right from the start."

"Don't kid yourself," replied Frank grimly. "That first line is almost sure to go. It's expected to. It's only a forlorn hope anyway. We'll get our stomachs full of fighting before the day is over."

Even while he spoke there were signs of confusion up in front. Groups of men came in sight evidently retreating. Machine gun crews, bringing their weapons with them, were hurriedly setting them up in new positions. There would be a few discharges and then they would be forced to retreat still further. They were fighting splendidly, and putting up a dogged resistance, yielding ground only foot by foot, but to the experienced eyes of the boys there was no mistaking the signs. The enemy had broken through the first line positions.

"Well, it's nothing more than we knew would happen," remarked Frank, as his frame tingled with the excitement of the coming fight which he knew would soon be upon him.

"That's so," agreed Bart. "But what gets me is that the line was broken so quickly. I thought it would be afternoon at least before the Huns got as far as this."

The lines opened up to let the newcomers through so that they could go to the rear and re-form.

"How about it?" Frank asked of a machine gunner whom he knew, as the man limped by him, supported by a comrade. "We didn't expect to see you fellows so soon."

"It was the mist," was the reply. "The Huns got within thirty yards before we tumbled to it. We did the best we could but they just swamped our position before we could get our cross-fire going. Even at

that we mowed them down in heaps with our rifle fire, but they kept on coming. For every dead man there were twenty live ones to take his place. We put up a stiff fight, but there were too many of them. It seemed like millions. They're coming now like a house afire and you boys want to brace."

"We're braced already," muttered Billy through his clenched teeth, as he gripped his rifle until it seemed as though his fingers must leave their imprint on the stock.

There was a short period of waiting, more trying by far than any actual fighting.

Then the storm broke!

In front of them rank after rank of gray-clad troops came in sight, stretching back as far as the eye could see. The mist had wholly vanished now and the boys could see their enemy. It seemed as though the machine gunner had not exaggerated when he said that there were millions. They were like the waves of the sea.

But the stout hearts of the American boys never quailed. Time and again they had met these men or their fellows and driven them back at the point of the bayonet. They had outfought and outgamed them. They had sent them flying before them. They had seen their backs.

The blood of heroes and of patriots ran in the veins of the defenders. Their ancestors had fought at Bunker Hill, at Palo Alto, at Gettysburg. Above them floated the Stars and Stripes, an unstained flag, a glorious flag, a flag that had never been smirched by defeat.

Their eyes blazed and their muscles stiffened.

Then like an avalanche the enemy struck!

CHAPTER XV

FURRY RESCUERS

The satisfaction that Tom felt at having in his pocket the confession of Martel helped to make his imprisonment much more bearable in the week that followed. His heart warmed at the thought of the delight Frank would feel in clearing up the matter that had long laid heavy upon his mother's mind.

For the conviction never left him that some time he was going to put that confession in his friend's hand. He had escaped before from German captivity, not once but twice. What he had done then he would do again. And every minute of his waking hours found that active brain of his working hard at the problem.

He confessed to himself that the solution would not be easy. The guards were many and were changed frequently. The windows of the old barracks where he slept were fortified with steel bars, and the open camp where the prisoners were employed in outside work was surrounded with wires through which a strong electric current ran. To touch them would mean instant death, and they were so close together that it would be impossible to squeeze through without touching.

He fell to studying the routine of the various conveyances that were constantly arriving and departing. Some of them brought bales of goods, others barrels. The latter were especially common. They were in a part of the country that abounded in vineyards, and great hogsheads of wine were being constantly brought in to supply the demands of the division stationed there.

They did not stay full long. The German officers were notoriously heavy drinkers, and there were days when there were great drayloads of empty hogsheads ready to be taken away to be refilled.

Tom developed a great interest in these hogsheads. The work of loading them on the drays was performed by prisoners, and he managed to be in the vicinity as often as possible to help. He was stronger than most of the prisoners and he worked with such good will at loading the bulky hogsheads that little by little it became a habit with the guards to assign him to this work whenever it was to be done.

A day came when the rain poured down in torrents. Tom had waited and prayed for just such a day. The air was full of fog and a cloud of steam rose from the horses' backs. Everything in the prison yard was dim and gray and spectral. The guards were enveloped in heavy raincoats and the flaps of oilskin on their caps fell halfway over their faces.

Tom had managed to get on one of the trucks and was tugging at one of the hogsheads to make room for others further back. Other prisoners were lifting on the last hogsheads. Tom leaned over one of the hogsheads and suddenly let himself go into it headfirst. It was all over in a flash.

There was an awful moment of suspense. Had anyone seen him? He listened intently. No shout was

raised. Nothing happened out of the usual.

The driver climbed up to his seat and the horses started. There was a momentary delay as the gates were opened to let him pass. Then the horses started on a jog trot and the truck was bumping its way over an uneven country road. A thrill of exultation shot through Tom, crouching at the bottom of the hogshead. He had made the first step on the road to freedom.

He was still in the most imminent danger. At any moment he might hear the clattering of horsemen in pursuit. And he knew the kind of treatment he would get if he were recaptured.

How to get out of the hogshead without detection was another problem. But this worried him least of all. He felt sure that the driver would stop at the first tavern he came across to refresh himself. Then he would make his break.

His faith was justified, for before long the truck came to a halt and the driver got down. The weather had driven all the tavern idlers indoors and the streets of the little hamlet were deserted. Like an eel, Tom squirmed over the edge of the hogshead, dropped into the roadway on the side of the truck away from the tavern, and, with assumed carelessness, went on down the road.

A few rods brought him into the open country. He had not the least idea where he was. In the gloom he could not tell which was north or south or east or west. But for the moment he was free.

He made his way across some fields in the direction of a dark fringe of woods. There he would find shelter for the present. It would be a poor kind of shelter, but just then Tom asked nothing better. The day would bring counsel.

For some days past he had been stowing away fragments from his scanty meals in his pockets. They were only dry and mouldy crusts, but they would at least sustain life.

Up in the streaming woods he hollowed out a place under a fallen tree. He was drenched to the skin, but he was so exhausted with the strain he had undergone that no bodily discomfort could prevent his falling asleep.

When he awoke the rain had ceased and the sun was striking through the branches of the trees. With the morning came new courage. He would yet win through.

He studied the sun and got a general idea of the direction in which he must go. He knew that the American lines lay to the south and west. He could hear the distant thunder of the guns.

All that day he traveled in the friendly shadow of the woods. He did not dare to approach a cottage or go to any of the peasants he could see working in the fields. Some of them, he felt sure, would befriend him, but at any moment he might come in contact with one of the oppressors who held the land in their grip. He would take no chances.

His food was almost gone now although he had husbanded it with the greatest care. But he tightened his belt and kept on.

On the morning of the second day he was crossing a small brook and was just stepping up on the other side when a wet stone rolled beneath his foot and threw him headlong. His head struck a jagged stump and he lay there stunned.

When he regained consciousness, he found himself looking into the face of a German officer who was amusing himself by kicking the youth.

"Awake, are you, Yankee pig?" the officer greeted him. "It's time. I had half a mind to give you a bayonet thrust and put you to sleep forever. You needn't tell me how you came here. I know. You're the schweinhund that escaped two days ago. Here," he called to some of his men, "tie this fellow and throw him over a horse. We'll settle his case later on."

The command was promptly obeyed and poor Tom found himself once more in the grasp of his foes. And from this captivity there seemed little promise of escape. The deadly purpose of the brute who held him in his power had been plainly written on his face.

After what seemed an endless journey, the party reached a farmhouse. The detachment took possession of the place and an orgy of pillage and destruction ensued. Tom was taken to an upper room and thrown roughly on the floor. Here he lay bound hand and foot. He could hear cries of terror and smashing of furniture going on below.

He had no companion but his own thoughts, except when some of the drunken roysterers invaded his room to remind him of the rope that hung over the tree near the well and to drive home the information with kicks of their heavy boots.

His thoughts were black and bitter. This, then, was the end. He was to be hung to furnish an occasion of laughter to a horde of drunken brutes. Well, there would be no whine from him. He would show them how an American could die.

His attention was attracted by a pattering of tiny feet. He looked in the direction from which the sound came.

A rat had emerged from a hole in the corner and was busy nibbling a lump of cheese that had been dropped by one of the soldiers who had just left. The nibbling ceased as Tom turned his head and the rat scurried back to the corner. There he stayed, his bright eyes looking longingly at the cheese.

A thought shot through Tom's mind that set him tingling from head to foot. Was it possible? Of course it was only a forlorn hope. But he would try it. He would be no worse off if it failed.

He rolled himself over to the cheese and rubbed the rope that tied his hand in the soft substance until it was thoroughly smeared with it. Then he lay on his side with his hands outstretched and pretended to sleep.

Through his nearly closed lids he watched the rat. For some minutes it stayed motionless. Tom never moved a muscle. Then the rat crept stealthily forward, and, with many half retreats, at last started in to nibble at the rope to get the cheese. Soon another rat came and then another.

Tom conquered the sense of repulsion that their close proximity inspired in him. His life depended on his self-control. The least movement might send them scurrying back to their holes. And out in the yard there was that rope that hung from the tree near the well!

So he nerved himself and his reward came at last. He could feel the tension of the rope yielding as one strand after another was torn by the tiny teeth of his unknowing rescuers.

Finally they ceased and sat up on their haunches washing their faces, and the need for inaction had passed. With a mighty effort Tom strained at the rope and it snapped.

He could have shouted with exultation. He waved his arms in the air and the frightened rats vanished. He rubbed his hands and arms until the circulation came back. It was an easy matter then to untie the rope that bound his feet.

The noise on the floor beneath had ceased. He stole to the window and looked out. No one was stirring in the space around the house. He shuddered as he saw the dangling rope on the tree near the well.

There was the sound of a stealthy step below. Tom drew his head from the window. Standing in the shadow of the frame he could see a young girl emerge and run swiftly away.

Where were the others? Consulting perhaps as to how they could get the most enjoyment from the spectacle of his hanging.

There was only one way of exit that promised safety. He must escape by the window.

He measured with his eye the distance from the ground. It seemed to be about eighteen feet. He himself was six feet high. That would leave a clear drop of twelve feet. He could probably make it without injury. At any rate he had no choice.

He let himself down gently with his hands and dropped. The shock brought him to his knees, but he arose unhurt.

The next moment he was racing for the woods with the speed of the wind.

CHAPTER XVI

CLOSING THE GAP

A sheet of flames leaped from the American rifles. A blasting torrent of death poured from the machine guns. The heavy field artillery, that had the range to a dot, tore gaping holes in the serried German ranks. Great lanes opened up in the advancing hosts. The target was broad and there was no need to take aim, for every bullet was bound to find a mark.

The enemy ranks faltered before that terrific fire and fell back, leaving hundreds of dead and wounded on the open space in front of the lines, while hundreds more were strewn along the barbed wire entanglements.

But the German commanders were prodigal of the lives of their men, and after a brief time for reforming, the divisions came on again, only to be hurled back again with still more fearful losses. A third attempt met with a similar result. The Americans were standing like a rock.

"Guess Fritz is getting more than he bargained for," grinned Billy, as the Germans were forming for another attack.

"Yes," agreed Frank, "but he'll try again. He'll stand a whole lot of beating."

For several hours the fight continued with a bitterness that had not been paralleled before in the whole course of the war. Again and again the enemy attacked, only to be beaten back before the stonewall defense.

But the Americans were not satisfied with merely defending their position. About two hours after noon they organized a counterattack. With splendid vim and ardor, and in a dashing charge, they smashed the division confronting them, driving them back in confusion and bringing hundreds of prisoners back with them to the trenches.

"I guess that will hold them for a while," crowed Billy, as they rested for a few minutes after their return.

"We certainly slashed them good and plenty," exulted Frank, as he washed up a scratched shoulder that had been struck by a splinter of shrapnel.

"If the rest of the line is holding as well as our fellows, the drive will be ended almost as soon as it began," remarked Bart.

"And Heinie was going to walk all over us, was he?" grinned Billy. "He's got another guess coming."

But their amazement was great a few minutes later when the order came for the regiment to fall back.

"Fall back!" howled Billy when he heard the order. "What is this, a joke?"

"Why should we fall back, when we've just licked the tar out of the Heinies?" growled Bart.

"Orders are orders," said Frank briefly. "I suppose our commanders know what they're doing. But it certainly is tough luck."

Their officers no doubt felt an equal chagrin, but the need was imperative. The Germans had struck along a front of fifty miles. At many points they had encountered a resistance as fierce and determined as that put up by the old Thirty-seventh and its companion regiments of the same division.

But at others they had been more successful. They had introduced a new kind of tactics that had never been used before on the western front, although it had been employed successfully in Russia. These were the so-called Von Hutier tactics whereby, when a division was used up, instead of falling back it simply opened up and let a fresh division pass through and take up the burden.

The old plan had been to clear up everything as one went along. The idea of the new tactics was to press swiftly ahead even if they left behind them machine-gun nests and strong enemy positions. These could be cleaned up later one by one, while in front the swift advance was intended to demoralize the opposing army and throw it out of formation by the very speed of the progress.

The plan, like every other, had its weak points. It involved a very heavy loss of men because of the masses in which they moved forward, and it also exposed its flank by penetrating too rapidly into the host lines before the artillery could be brought up for support. But if successful, it was almost sure to break the enemy's line and throw it into confusion.

Later on the Allies were to learn how they might most easily frustrate these tactics. But at the start of the great drive the plan met with considerable success because of its novelty.

It was this that had brought the command to retreat. The British forces on the right wing of the Allied armies had been forced to give way. The line had not been broken, but it had been badly bent. The British retreated doggedly, fighting with the splendid heroism that was in accordance with their traditions, and at no time did the retreat become a rout. But in order to keep the line straight the American forces too were ordered to fall back, even though they had been successful on their section of the line.

"It's a shame!" growled Billy, as the retirement began. "It makes me sore to have those Heinies think they've got us going."

"We'll come back," said Frank cheerfully. "It's a good general that knows when to retreat as well as to advance. We're only going to get space enough to crouch for a spring."

The division withdrew in good order, keeping up a rear-guard action that kept the enemy at a respectful distance. When night fell the Americans had reached the position assigned to them, and the backward movement was halted. The troops entrenched, and with the Allied line straightened out once more, faced the foe that it had decisively defeated earlier in the day.

"Nothing to do till tomorrow," exclaimed Frank as he threw himself on the ground.

"Don't fool yourself that way," said Corporal Wilson, who had just come up and heard the remark. "Unless I lose my guess you've got something to do tonight. Didn't you tell me the other day that you understood how to handle a motorcycle?"

"Why, yes," said Frank. "I've ridden one a good deal. I won a race on Campport Fair Grounds a couple of years ago."

"Then you're just the man the general wants to see," replied Wilson. "He sent a message to the colonel asking for the services of a man who was cool and plucky, and who could also ride a motorcycle. I don't know of any one else who can fill the bill better than you."

"I'll be glad to do whatever's wanted of me," replied Frank, and with a word of farewell to his comrades he accompanied the corporal to headquarters.

Here he was ushered into the presence of a group of officers who were poring over a large map spread out upon a table.

"Is this the young man you were telling me about, Colonel?" asked the general, a tall, powerfully built man, looking sharply at Frank from beneath a pair of bushy eyebrows.

"Yes, General," replied the colonel. "Captain Baker vouches for his coolness and courage and his quick thinking in an emergency. And I'm told he understands all about motorcycles."

"Just the man," commented the general. "I want you," he continued, addressing Frank, "to carry a message for me to the British commander on our right. Our division has lost touch with him and the field telephone is not working. Probably it has been cut by the enemy. The message is most important and I want you to make all the speed you can. Go and get ready now and report to your captain, who will hand you the papers. He will have a machine ready for you. That is all."

Frank hurried back and made his preparations, which were brief. While he worked he told his eager companions of the errand with which he had been entrusted.

"Wish I were going with you," remarked Bart.

"Same here," said Billy.

"That would be dandy," agreed Frank.

He shook hands with them and hurried away to the captain's quarters, where he found that officer waiting for him with the papers.

"There's no answer," he said, as he handed them over. "When you've delivered the papers your work is done. Good luck."

Frank thrust the papers in his pocket after receiving full directions as to his route. The motorcycle was standing at the door. It was a powerful machine of the latest make and everything about it suggested strength and speed. He noticed that there was a saddle in the rear and a thought came to him.

"I see that this machine will carry double," he said. "Would you mind if I took a companion with me? The machine will carry two as swiftly as it will one. Then, too, if one of us were hurt or shot the other one could still go on with the message."

"An excellent idea," said the captain after pondering a moment. "Get him, but make haste."

Frank rushed back to his chums.

"Which one of you wants to go with me?" he asked breathlessly.

"I do," they yelled in chorus.

"Sorry," laughed Frank, "but there's only room for one. Toss a coin."

The luck favored Bart, much to Billy's disappointment. In a jiffy Frank and Bart had bidden Billy good-by, jumped to their places, and with a leap the powerful machine darted off.

The night was clear, and as soon as they were away from the camp Frank had no trouble in finding the road that he had been ordered to take. It was a good one in ordinary times, but now it had been torn by shells from the German guns in many places and care had to be taken to avoid a spill. The shaded light threw its rays a considerable distance ahead, but they were going at a speed that did not leave them much time to avoid obstacles even after they were detected.

The road swung around in a wide semi-circle and led through a number of French villages. These the Army Boys found in great confusion. The approach of the Huns was a terrible threat to the towns that might fall into German hands. What the enemy had done in the occupied parts of France and Belgium had given warning of what any other places they might capture would have to expect.

Wagons were being hastily piled with household belongings, men were shouting, children were crying, and the whole scene was desolate and pitiful beyond description.

The roads were so congested at these places that rapid progress was impossible. They had to thread their way among the crowd of vehicles, and in some cases were compelled to resort to the fields. But they made up for this on other stretches, and were congratulating themselves that on the whole they were making pretty good time when suddenly they were startled by a number of rifle shots and bullets whizzed by uncomfortably close.

"It's the Huns!" cried Frank.

"I didn't know they'd got as close as this!" exclaimed Bart. "More gas, Frank! Quick!"

There were hoarse commands to halt, and another volley followed the first. At the same time a number of dark figures threw themselves in the road, shouting and waving their hands.

Frank leaned forward, threw on all speed, and the machine responded with a leap that almost unseated the riders. The crowd in front scattered as the machine rushed at them, but one of them was not quick enough and was hurled twenty feet away.

More shots followed the daring riders, but they were now beyond range. For another mile they kept up the killing pace and then Frank slowed up a little.

"Ran right into their arms that time," he ejaculated.

"We were mighty lucky to come through with a whole skin," replied Bart.

"More than the machine has done, I'm afraid," remarked Frank. "I can tell by the way she runs that there's something wrong with the tires."

He looked behind, and seeing no signs of pursuit, he stopped the motorcycle and dismounted.

Something had indeed happened to the tires. Both the front and rear ones had been punctured by bullets. The air had gone out of them.

"Hard luck," exclaimed Bart.

"Never mind," returned Frank. "We'll ride her flat as long as we can and if worse comes to worse we'll ride her on the rims. We've got to get that message to the general no matter what happens."

"We'll get it there if we have to travel on our hands and knees," affirmed Bart.

"It won't come to that, I hope," laughed his companion, as he bound the flat tires fast with straps. Then he settled himself again in his seat and started the machine.

It went along more slowly now, and their troubles were increased by the fact that their route had carried them into a main road that was filled with motor lorries—huge trucks loaded with men and supplies that rushed on with the speed almost of an express train.

The lorries had the right of way, and individual riders had to look out for themselves. Sometimes they came down two abreast, filling the whole width of the road, and in such cases the boys had to dismount and draw to the side of the road until they had passed. If their machine had been in condition, they might have kept ahead by sheer speed, but in its present crippled state they would have been run down. And to be run down by one of those Juggernauts would have meant instant death.

On one such occasion they were hugging the fence, with their machine standing between them and the road. A lorry came thundering by, but just as it was nearly opposite, it swerved and struck the machine. It was torn from Frank's hand and hurled in front of the lorry which ran over and completely wrecked it.

The lorry tore on, leaving the two chums looking at each other in consternation.

"That's worse by long odds than the German bullets," exclaimed Frank. "I guess we'll have to do the hands and knees stunt you were talking about a little while ago."

"We must be pretty near to the English general's headquarters now anyway, aren't we?" asked Bart.

Frank consulted his route by the aid of a flashlight that he carried with him.

"About two miles," he announced. "Put on some speed now, Bart. We'll run most of the way and jog-trot the rest."

They let no grass grow under their feet, and fifteen minutes later they had reached the general's headquarters and were ushered into his presence. He seemed to be greatly agitated and was talking with great emphasis to a group of officers who surrounded him.

He took the papers that the boys had brought and read them over hurriedly.

"Very good," he announced briefly. "There is no answer. Were your orders to go back to your regiment to-night?"

"No, sir," replied Frank.

"In that case my orderly will find quarters for you," replied the general, and he gave directions to an officer who took them in charge and saw them safely bestowed for the night.

"That was some wild ride?" grinned Frank, as they were getting ready for sleep.

"It sure was," laughed Bart, "especially that part where the German bullets were zipping all around us. Wait till we tell Billy about it. He'll be green with envy."

"Well, we carried out our orders anyway," said Frank. "I'm glad that we'll be able to tell the captain so tomorrow morning."

But they did not report to their captain the next morning, nor for several following mornings, for when they woke they found that a condition had developed that was full of peril to the Allied cause.

The German plan had been to strike at the junction point of the Allied armies. If they could separate them there would be a chance to turn upon one of them and crush it with overwhelming forces and then at their leisure destroy the other.

In this they had come very near succeeding. A threatening gap had developed between two of the most important armies that were holding that portion of the front. The armies had lost touch with each other and the gap had gradually widened until at one place the armies were eight miles apart.

The only helpful thing about the situation was that the Germans themselves did not know of the gap until it was too late to take advantage of it. The very speed with which they had pushed forward had thrown their forces into confusion. Brigades and regiments had become badly mixed and it took some time to straighten matters out.

But if the Germans did not know how matters stood, the Allied commanders knew it only too well. It was this that explained the agitation that the boys had noticed in the general the night before. He had been called upon to close the gap. Upon his shoulders rested for the time the salvation of the Allied cause.

If he had had sufficient forces at his command, the problem would have been comparatively simple, provided he had been given time to solve it. But he had neither time nor men. He had only fifty cavalymen. He lacked guns and ammunition. The hard-pressed armies at the right and left were battling desperately against the on-rushing German hordes and could spare him little.

"Looks as if he had to make bricks without straw," said Frank to Bart the next morning, when the state of things had been explained by the orderly who had taken them in charge.

"It's a case of must," said Bart, "and from the squint I had at the general last night he's the one who can do the job if it can be done at all."

"Will you stay and help?" asked the orderly. "Every man will help. The general's picked up three hundred American engineers working on a road nearby. Every one of them has thrown down his pick and shouldered a rifle."

"Bully for the engineers!" cried Frank.

"Will you stay?" asked the orderly. "Of course you can return to your own command if you want to."

"Will we stay?" exclaimed Frank. "Give me a gun. I know my captain would be willing."

"You can't drive us away," Bart almost shouted.

It was a scratch army that the general finally got together. Some of his men had never handled a gun before. Some were drivers, some were telegraph linemen, some were cooks. But he made the most of what he had. He himself was here, there and everywhere, having trees felled to obstruct the roads, planting machine guns in strategic places, digging shallow trenches, resting neither by day or night.

Frank and Bart worked like beavers. They were placed in charge of machine-gun crews, and their deadly weapons kept spitting fire until they were almost too hot to handle. Again and again they beat back German detachments. They fought like fiends. They never expected to come out of that fight alive. The odds seemed too tremendous.

"It's like Custer's last charge," panted Frank. "There wasn't one of his troopers left alive. But I'll bet that not one of them was sorry he was there."

"I'm glad that motorcycle carried double," replied Bart. "I'd have been cheated out of a lot of lovely fighting if it hadn't."

They fought desperately, savagely, their bodies tired to the breaking point, but their courage never failing. And at last they won out. The armies rejoined each other. The gap was closed. And Frank and Bart rejoiced beyond measure that they had been able to do their part in the closing.

"Some fellows have all the luck," remarked Billy, when they had rejoined their regiment two days later, and were telling him all about it. "Now if that coin we flipped had only come down heads instead of tails——"

"Stop your grouching," laughed Frank. "You'll have all the fighting that's good for you by the time we've driven the boches over the Rhine."

CHAPTER XVII

THE MINED BRIDGE

For several days the drive continued. At first it had been quite as successful for the Germans as they could have hoped. Their initial surprise had carried them a long way into French territory, and this had involved the capture of a considerable number of men and guns.

But they had fallen far short of their ambitious aims. They had not rolled up the Allied armies. They had not reached Paris. They had not captured the Channel ports.

The Allied armies had stretched like an elastic band, but had not broken. They knew now what the enemy's plans were and they were rapidly taking measures to check them.

The Germans had had a great advantage in being under a single command. There was no clash of plans and opinions. If they wanted to transfer a part of their forces from one point to another they could do so.

With the Allies it had been different. There had been a French army, a British army, an Italian army, a Belgian army, a Russian army and latest of all an American army. They had tried to work together in harmony and in the main had done so. But the British naturally wanted above all to prevent the German armies from reaching the coast where they could threaten England. The French were especially anxious to prevent Paris being captured. Either side was reluctant to weaken its own army by sending reinforcements to the other.

But the German success in the first days of the drive changed all this. The Allies got together and appointed General Foch as the supreme commander of all the Allied forces. He had done brilliant work in driving the Germans back from the Marne in the early days of the war, when they had approached close to Paris.

"Have you heard the news?" asked Frank of his chums the day after the appointment had been made.

"No," said Bart.

"What is it?" asked Billy.

"We've got just one man that's going to boss the job of driving back the Huns," answered Frank.

Bart gave a whoop of delight and Billy threw his hat in the air.

"Best news I've heard yet," crowed Billy.

"That's as good as a battle lost for the Huns," exclaimed Bart. "The only wonder is that it wasn't done before. Who's the man they've chosen?"

"General Foch," was the answer.

"Better and better," pronounced Bart. "That man's a born fighter. He licked the Germans at the Marne, and he can do it again."

"What I like about him," commented Billy, "is that he's a hard hitter. He isn't satisfied to stand on the defensive. He likes to hand the other fellow a good one right at the start of the fight."

"That's what," agreed Frank. "He hits out right from the shoulder. Of course he'll have to wait a little while yet until he sizes up his forces and sees what he has to fight with. But you can bet it won't be long before he has the boches on the run."

In the days that followed, the advantage of the appointment became clear. The armies worked together as they never had before. The khaki of the British mingled with the cornflower blue of the French. Reserves were sent where they were most needed, no matter what army they were drawn from. And, fighting side by side, each nation was filled with a generous rivalry and sought bravely to outdo the other in deeds of valor.

The old Thirty-seventh had been in the thick of the fighting and had covered itself with glory. It had taught the Germans that there were Americans in France, and that they were fighters to be dreaded.

The course of the fighting had taken Frank and his comrades in the vicinity of the farmhouse where they had rounded up the German lieutenant and his squad. But it was a very different place now from what it had been when they had first seen it. Shells had torn away part of the roof, and the attic lay open to the sky. But the farmer and his family still stayed there although in daily peril of their lives. They lived and slept in the cellar, which was the only place that afforded them a chance of safety.

One day when only an artillery duel was going on and the infantry was getting a rest that it sorely needed, the Army Boys went over to the house. The girl saw them coming and recognized them at once. She came out to meet them with a smile on her face.

"*Les braves Americains!*" she exclaimed. "You have not then been killed by those dreadful Germans."

"Don't we look pretty lively for dead men?" asked Frank jokingly.

"And that lieutenant?" she inquired. "Oh, I hope you have hanged him."

"No," said Frank, "but he's a prisoner."

"It is not enough," she said with a shudder of repulsion.

"Have you heard anything of the young soldier that the lieutenant was going to hang?" asked Frank eagerly.

"No," she answered. "But stay," she added, "I have something here that you may want to see."

She darted back in the house and quickly returned with a very-much crumpled card in her hand.

"It is a *carte postale*," she explained. "We found it in the yard some days after you had been here. It had been trampled in the mud by the horses' feet and the writing had been scraped or blotted out. Perhaps it belonged to the young man. It may have fallen from his pocket. I do not know."

Frank took it eagerly from her hand, while his comrades gathered around him.

The card was almost illegible, but it could be seen that it was a United States postal. There was not a single word upon it that could be made out in its entirety, but up in the corner where the postmark had been they could see by straining their eyes the letters C and M.

"That's Campport, I'm willing to bet!" exclaimed Bart excitedly.

"And here's something else," put in Billy pointing to where the address would naturally be looked for. "See those letters d-f-o-r—"

"It's dollars to doughnuts that that stands for 'Bradford,'" Frank shouted. "A card from Campport to Tom Bradford. Boys, we didn't guess wrong that day. That was Tom that that brute of a lieutenant was going to hang!"

They were tingling with excitement and delight. To be sure, they did not know what had become of their friend. But he had escaped from this house. He was perhaps within a few miles of them. He was, at any rate, not eating his heart out in a distant prison camp.

Then to Frank came the thought of Rabig. Perhaps Tom hadn't escaped. Perhaps Rabig had added murder to the crime of treason of which they were sure he was guilty.

"Are you sure that you haven't found anything else that would help us in finding our friend?" he asked of the girl, whose face was beaming at the pleasure she had been able to give to her deliverers.

"No," she answered. "There is nothing else. I am sorry."

"Let's take a look around the house again, fellows," suggested Frank. "We may have overlooked something the other day. It's only a chance, but let's take it."

They made a careful circuit of the house, but nothing rewarded the search until Frank, with an exclamation, picked up some pieces of rope that had been lying in the grass not far from the window from which the prisoner had dropped.

"Are these yours?" he asked of the girl who had accompanied them and had been as ardent in the search as themselves.

She examined them.

"I do not think so," she declared. "I do not remember seeing any rope like that around the house."

They scrutinized the pieces carefully.

"Look at these frayed edges," said Frank, laying them together. "You see that these two pieces were part of one rope."

"I'll tell you what that means," put in Billy. "The girl says that Tom was bound with ropes. That cut or broken one was the one that was used to tie his hands. In some way he cut that. He didn't have a knife or the cut would be cleaner. Perhaps he sawed the rope against a piece of glass that he might have managed to get near."

"Good guess," commended Bart. "And this long rope was the one that was used to tie his feet. Tom didn't need to cut that for his hands were free then and he could untie it."

"Good old scout!" exclaimed Frank in tribute to his absent chum. "Trust that stout heart of his to keep up the fight to the last minute. Think of the old boy sawing away at the rope when he didn't know what minute he'd be taken out and hanged."

"He's all wool and a yard wide," agreed Bart.

"The real goods," said Billy. "But what were the ropes doing out here in the grass?"

"Oh, I suppose he hated them so that he chucked them as far away as he could," suggested Bart.

"No," said Frank, measuring the window with his eye. "I'll tell you how I think it was. Tom knew, of course, that he couldn't get out of the house by the downstairs way without being nabbed. He didn't know, of course, that the bunch of Huns weren't in condition to nab anybody. So the window was the only way left to him. He took the ropes to the window with the idea of splicing them and climbing down by them. But that would have taken time, and when he saw that the window wasn't very high up he made up his mind to drop. The ropes were in his hand and he simply threw them out of the window as the easiest way of getting rid of them."

"That sounds reasonable," said Billy. "But, oh boy! if poor Tom had only known that all he had to do was to walk downstairs and bag the whole blooming bunch!"

"I wish he had," said Frank mournfully.

"If he had, that lieutenant wouldn't have got off so easily as he did," declared Bart. "Do you know what would have happened? Of course the first thing Tom would have done would have been to untie the farmer and his son. Can you picture, then, what would have happened to that lieutenant and probably to his men, too? The United States wouldn't have been put to any expense for feeding them."

"That rope by the well would probably have been put to work," agreed Frank. "But poor Tom didn't know and there's no use of our speculating."

Encouraged by the information they had gained, they looked still further. But nothing more was found, and they at last said good-by to the girl and made their way back to their quarters with their hearts lighter than they had been for days. In a sense they had got in touch with their missing comrade, had seemed near to him, and their hopes were high that before long they would have him with them again.

"It's disposed of one thing that was worrying me anyway," remarked Frank. "We know that Rabig had nothing to do with making away with Tom."

"Yes," said Bart, "that's one thing the fellow can't be charged with. But I'm still mighty curious to know what he was hanging around that farmhouse for."

"It sure was a mighty strange coincidence that he should be there at the time the Germans were," declared Billy. "But Rabig is the only one who knows why and you can bet that he won't tell."

The comparative lull that had occurred in the fighting was only temporary, and the next day the drive was resumed in all its fury.

This time the use of gas was greater than it had been at any previous time in the battle. And the Germans had made still greater strides in this diabolical contrivance which they were the first to inflict upon an outraged world.

At first the gas had been light and volatile. It caused terrible suffering to those caught by it, but it did not hover long over any given place and a gust of wind was sufficient to drive it away.

But that was not vile enough to satisfy the infernal ingenuity of the foes of humanity. Now they were using gas that settled on the ground so that nothing but a gale would drive it away, and that lasted for hours and even for days. And then there was mustard gas, that penetrated everywhere through the clothing, through the skin, and that burned and ate up the living tissues like so much vitriol.

But the Allies were on the alert and soon found a way to avert or modify the worst consequences of the various kinds of gases. And they were forced to fight fire with fire simply in self-defence. It was a question of kill or be killed, and they were left no alternative. They asked nothing better than to fight as knightly and honorable nations always have fought and always will fight when they are left free to choose their weapons.

But whatever the methods used by the Germans, whether gas or guns or men, they were finding increasing difficulty in keeping up the momentum of their drive. Sheer force of numbers had sufficed at first to carry them forward, but now the Allies with American help coming over the sea at the rate of two hundred thousand men a month—and the finest kind of men at that—were gradually getting on even terms.

"I see the Germans had a good day yesterday," remarked Frank, as he and his comrades were at mess.

"I didn't notice it," said Bart, looking at his friend in surprise. "We drove them back and gained

ground from them."

"Oh, I don't mean here," exclaimed Frank. "I mean in Paris."

Billy almost choked in surprise and alarm.

"You don't mean to say they've got to Paris?" he sputtered.

"Not by a jugful," laughed Frank. "But they're sending shells into it."

"Then they must be pretty close to it," said Bart in some apprehension.

"The gun they're shooting with is seventy miles away from the city," replied Frank.

"Quit your kidding," commanded Billy.

"Where do you get that stuff?" asked Bart incredulously.

"Cross my heart and hope to die," said Frank seriously. "Honestly, fellows, they've got a gun that shoots a shell seventy miles or more. The shell weighs two hundred pounds. It rises twenty miles in the air, and it takes three minutes on the trip to Paris."

"Is that straight goods?" asked Billy suspiciously.

"It sure is," Frank assured him. "I was reading about it in a Paris paper I got hold of this morning."

"What was it you were saying about yesterday being a good day for the Germans," asked Bart, when he had digested the facts.

"Oh, one of the shells hit a church where they were having a service and killed seventy-five people, mostly women and children," answered Frank. "Don't you imagine the Germans call that a good day? Can't you see them grinning and rubbing their hands? It's as good as bombing a hospital or an orphan asylum. The Kaiser felt so good about that he sent a special message of congratulation to the manager of the Krupp works, where the gun was made. Oh, yes, it was a good day!"

"The swine!" exclaimed Bart furiously, while Billy's fist clinched.

"Let's get busy," cried Frank, springing to his feet. "I can't wait to get at those barbarians. I hope there's lots of bayonet work today. I never felt in better trim for it."

They fought that day as they had never fought before, for they had never felt so strongly that the world would never be a decent place to live in until their barbarous enemies were humbled to the dust.

The next day the old Thirty-seventh was ordered to take up its position at a bridgehead that it was of the utmost importance should be strongly held. The enemy attacks were converging there, and it was evident that they were planning to cross the river in force. The country behind the American troops was flat and difficult to defend, and if the enemy should make good his crossing the consequences to the Allied cause might prove serious.

The enemy advance had reached the further side of the river, which at that point was about two hundred yards in width. A fierce artillery duel was kept up between the hostile forces. A wooden bridge with stone arches afforded the only means of crossing, and this was swept by such a fierce shell fire from the Allied guns that it did not seem as though anything could live on it for a moment.

As an additional precaution the bridge had been secretly mined by the Allied engineers. Electric wires ran to the concealed charges.

A pressure of a button—and the bridge would be reduced to atoms.

CHAPTER XVIII

A DESPERATE VENTURE

"The Huns will get a surprise party if they try to cross that bridge," remarked Billy with a grin, as the boys were talking over the present situation.

"I don't see why we don't blow it up right away," said Bart. "Then the Germans would have to rely on pontoons and what we would do to them would be a crime."

"Our officers know what they're about," objected Frank. "We might want that bridge to go across on ourselves if things take the right turn. So it's just as well to have it handy. If there's any blowing up to do, we can do it later just as well as now. And it's just as well to have it go skyward when it's

crowded with Germans as when it's empty. Get me?"

"I get you, all right," replied Bart. "But suppose something should go wrong when the time came to blow it up?"

"That would be something else again," laughed Frank. "But I guess there isn't much danger Of that. Just one little pressure of a button—and—zowie!"

Just then Frank caught sight of his friend, Colonel Pavet, coming toward him and went forward to meet the French officer.

The colonel's greeting was a very cordial one.

"I'm glad to see that you've come safely so far through this fierce fighting," he said.

"Fierce is the right word," answered Frank smilingly.

"I was at Verdun," went on the colonel, "and I thought at the time that nothing could be more ferocious than the fighting there. But this has been much worse."

"We've got a pretty stiff proposition right now in holding this bridge," observed Frank.

"Indeed you have," agreed the colonel, "and it is a compliment to the American forces that the defense of such an important position has been entrusted to them. Oh, you Americans! Where would we have been without your aid? And your fighting qualities! You grow men on your side of the ocean, Monsieur Sheldon."

"The superb fighting of the French has been an inspiration to us," replied Frank warmly.

"To come to personal matters," went on the colonel, "I have heard more in detail from my brother Andre about your mother's property. He has traced the butler—Martel is his name—in the official records, and has found that he was taken prisoner in an attack several months ago. He was very anxious to cross-examine him on some testimony he had given previously. It seems that Martel had testified that he had witnessed the execution of a later will than that in which the property was left to your mother. You can easily see how unfortunate that might be if it could be proved. Andre has a suspicion that cross-examination might show Martel's testimony to be false."

"It is too bad that the man is a prisoner," said Frank anxiously.

"There is more to be told," went on the colonel gravely. "I myself have put investigations on foot through the Swiss Red Cross. They were able to find out from German prison records that Martel died recently."

Frank started back visibly perturbed.

"Died!" he echoed. "Then his statement about the will stands uncontradicted."

"As far as he is concerned, yes," replied the colonel soberly. "I am bitterly disappointed, and I know that Andre will be, too, for he has made a very strong point of disproving that special testimony. But we will not remit our efforts in the least, *mon ami*. Be assured of that. I will let you know when I have any further news," and with a friendly wave of the hand the colonel passed on.

"What's the matter, Frank?" asked Billy as he went slowly back to his friends. "You look as jolly as a crutch."

"I'm no hypocrite, then," answered Frank soberly, "for that's exactly how I feel."

He told his chums of what the colonel had said, and they were sincere in their expressions of sympathy.

"I don't care a button about it for myself," explained Frank, "but I hate to have to tell my mother about it. She has little enough to make her happy nowadays, and I know how badly she will feel about this."

All that day the artillery kept up a ceaseless fire and the Germans did not venture on the bridge. But great activity was observed among them, and Dick Lever, who was leader of the aviation detachment that was operating in that sector, brought the news that evening that they were preparing pontoons and other small boats with which they would probably attempt a crossing at points that were not so well guarded.

"Your officers over here want to keep their eyes peeled," he remarked to the Army Boys after he had just made his report at division headquarters. "Those Heinies have made up their minds to get across this river by hook or crook. They figure that with the open country behind you they'll have a good chance to throw you back if they can only get a footing on this side."

"Don't you worry about our officers," replied Frank with a conviction that had been deepened by the skilful leadership the American troops had had so far in the drive. "It'll be as hard to find them napping as it is to catch a weasel asleep."

"I know they're good stuff," agreed Dick, "but we're all human, you know."

"All except the boches," grunted Billy. "They're inhuman."

"We've had plenty of proofs of that," laughed Dick. "They like to think they're superhuman, but we're teaching them differently."

"Seen anything of Will Stone lately?" asked Frank.

"Ran across him about a week ago," replied Dick. "He's fighting about ten miles north of here, where the country's suitable for tank work. He's doing some great fighting, too."

"I don't need to be told that," replied Frank. "That fellow would rather fight than eat."

"Well, so long, fellows," said Dick, as he rose to his feet. "Keep a sharp eye on those boches across the river."

"Trust us," replied Frank. "They'll never get over here."

The aviator's warning had been heeded by the officers, and detachments were stationed at places along the river above and below the main bridge.

Suddenly one morning, a whole fleet of boats, large and small, shot out at the same instant from the enemy side of the river. They were loaded with men and machine guns, and the evident plan was to get a footing on the American side which could be held until reinforcements could be hurried over and make the footing secure.

At the same time a tremendous gunfire strove to protect the crossing and clear the banks at the points where the boats were planning to land.

Before the American guns could get the range on the rapidly moving targets, the boats were halfway across the river, and the rowers were pulling like mad. One boat after another was struck and the occupants thrown into the river. But the Germans had allowed for the loss of some of the boats, and were perfectly resigned to lose them, provided a certain percentage of all could effect a crossing.

"Let them get here," muttered Frank, who, with Bart and Billy, was among the force which had been assigned to that point where the passage was being attempted. "They'll never get back again."

The surviving boats drew closer to the shore. The men on the boats were using their machine guns, and the banks were swept by a rain of bullets. More of the boats went down under the return fire, but a full dozen of them finally struck the shore. The crews jumped out in the shallow water and commenced to wade ashore.

But they were doomed men. With a yell the American boys swept down upon them. Frank and his comrades rushed into the water, and there was a battle that must have resembled those of the old Vikings. Back and forth the combatants struggled, shooting, hacking, swinging their gun butts. Some of them, locked in a death grip, went down together in the water that was taking on a reddish tinge. Others floated away on the stream. Others of the enemy, seeing that the fight was going against them, leaped back into the boats and strove desperately to push out into the river. But Frank leaped at the bow of one boat and held it, while Bart and Billy with their comrades did the same to others.

In a few minutes the fight was over. It had been a hot one while it lasted. Several of the Americans had been killed and quite a number wounded, but their loss had been largely exceeded by that of the enemy. Not a boat got back, and all who had not been killed remained as prisoners in American hands.

While the action was in progress, another fleet of equal size had started out. This had been designed to reinforce the first party if it had succeeded in gaining a footing. But the utter collapse of the first effort had taught the enemy that the bank was too strongly held and they stopped in midstream and rowed back.

"Even a Heinie can see through a milestone when there's a hole in it," commented Billy, as he watched the enemy retreating.

"It's a pity they don't keep on," said Bart. "I'm just getting my blood up."

"First bit of marine fighting we've done yet," laughed Frank. "We can say now that we belong to both branches of the service."

"All we need now is a fight in the air to make the thing complete," said Bart, "and we came pretty near to that, too, when we were with Dick that time in his bombing machine."

With their boat plan thwarted, the German commanders now centered all their attention on the bridge. One or two surprise attacks at night were detected and driven back, but the enemy did not give up.

At dusk on the day following the fight in the stream they made the great attack. True to their tactics, they apparently took no account of the lives of their men. The taking of the bridge was bound to result in tremendous slaughter. Every foot of it was swept by the American guns. But the enemy

leaders had determined that the bridge must be taken, no matter how high a price they paid for the taking. It was easier for the leaders to reach this conclusion since it was the men who would pay the price rather than themselves.

A tremendous artillery fire paved the way for the operation. Then, just as twilight was gathering, a strong body of enemy troops, marching in heavy columns, attempted to storm the bridge.

Beyond the first ranks could be seen other columns standing in reserve. The great climax was approaching. The German command at that point had determined to stake everything on one throw.

On they came to the death awaiting them. The American artillery and machine guns swept the bridge with a withering fire. The front ranks melted away like mist.

But their places were filled with others and still others, despite the frightful slaughter. The American machine guns got too hot to handle from their unceasing fire.

And still the German horde kept crowding forward as though their reserves were inexhaustible. It was known that they had been heavily reinforced of late and that they largely outnumbered the American troops opposed to them. Over the dead bodies of their comrades which strewed the bridge they were creeping nearer, urged by the irresistible pressure from behind. Considering the disparity of forces, it was sound tactics to destroy the bridge before the foremost ranks could get a footing on the side where their overwhelming numbers would begin to tell.

The American commander gave the order to blow up the bridge. But when the button was pressed that should have sent the electric current into the powder mine there was no response.

Several times the pressure was repeated and still no explosion followed. A hasty consultation ensued between the leaders who were standing close by the place where the Army Boys were fighting.

"The electric wires must have been cut by the enemy's fire," Frank heard one of them say.

Cut! Then all the elaborate plans for blowing up the bridge had come to naught. And that apparently inexhaustible gray force was getting nearer and nearer!

CHAPTER XIX

THE JAWS OF DEATH

"There's just one possible chance," said Frank's colonel.

"What is that?" asked the general in command.

"An explosive bullet sent into the mine might explode it," replied the colonel. "But it would have to be fired from a boat. We can't do it from here."

"It would be certain death to whoever tried it," replied the general, looking at the shell-swept stream.

"Not certain, perhaps, but probable," said the colonel. "It's the only chance, though, to explode the mine. It can only be reached from underneath."

"We'll try it," said the general with decision. "But I won't assign any one to it. It's a matter for volunteers."

When the call came for volunteers, Frank sprang forward and saluted. Bart and Billy followed close behind him.

The officer's eye swept the three and rested on Frank.

"You volunteer?" he asked. "You know the danger?"

"Yes, sir," they responded.

A gleam of pride and admiration came in the general's eyes.

"Very well," he said. "I'm proud to be your commander."

Orders were hurriedly given, explosive bullets were furnished; and a few minutes later a small boat carrying the three Army Boys shot out from the shore.

The dusk had thickened now, and Bart and Billy, who were rowing, hugged the bridge as closely as they could, so as to profit by its shadow.

None of this bombardment had been directed at them as yet, because their little boat had not been seen. But when they were forced to move a little way from the shadow of the bridge, so that Frank could get the proper angle from which to fire, they were detected, and a perfect tempest of fire opened up not only from the batteries on the further shore, but from the soldiers who were on the bridge.

Frank knew exactly where the powder charges had been located. His rifle was loaded and he had sufficient confidence in his marksmanship to believe that only one shot would be needed.

All he dreaded was that a bullet might strike him before he had done his work. After that it did not so much matter. He knew that he had taken his life in his hand and he had already counted it as lost.

Bart and Billy were rowing like fiends. At last they reached the point that Frank had indicated. He peered through the dusk and could see the outlines of the mine.

The bridge now was black with Germans. They had covered two-thirds of the distance over it, and they were packed so closely, crowding on each other's heels, that the rails of the bridge bulged outward with the pressure.

Frank raised his rifle to his shoulder, took steady aim and fired.

There was a hideous roar, and then the shattered timbers of the bridge went hurtling toward the sky. Hundreds of bodies were mingled with the debris, and the water surged up in great waves as the mass fell back into the river.

Where the bridge had been there was a yawning gap of two hundred feet. At either end there was a remnant of the bridge still standing, and on these the survivors were rushing frenziedly toward the land before the remaining timbers should give way.

Those Germans who were left on the American side, severed from the help of their comrades, were surrounded and disarmed as soon as they reached the shore. The attempt at capture had ended in a terrible disaster to the German forces.

The instant Frank fired. Billy and Bart plunged their oars in the water and started rowing with all their might away from the bridge.

But despite their efforts they could not get out of the danger zone in time. A heavy piece of timber struck the side of the boat, crushing it in and throwing the occupants into the water.

Frank and Billy came to the surface a moment later and shook the water from their eyes. They looked about for Bart, but he was not to be seen.

Instantly Frank dived, searching frantically for his chum. His arm came in contact with someone's hair. He grasped it and drew the body to the surface.

It was Bart, but he was unconscious. The timber that had smashed the boat had caught him a glancing blow on the head and stunned him.

Frank held his comrade's face above the water and shouted to Billy, who also had been searching and had just come up. He swam to Frank's side and helped him in bearing up Bart.

They found a floating plank, over which they placed Bart's arms and then with Frank holding on to Bart's body and Billy guiding the plank they struck out for the nearer shore.

They had been nearer the American than the German side when the explosion took place. But the current was bearing strongly toward the German side and they had been carried some distance by it while they were taking care of Bart. The consequence was that, while they thought that the nearer bank was that held by their own troops, it was the German side towards which they were moving with their unconscious burden.

They were within a few feet of the shore at some distance below where the bridge had stood, when Frank's quick ear heard the sound of voices speaking in German. At first he thought it was probably some of the prisoners whom the American troops had captured. But a moment later he recognized a dilapidated fishing pier that he had often gazed at from his own side of the river, and the truth burst upon him.

They were on the wrong side of the river! If Bart had been in the same condition as Billy and himself, their situation, though dangerous, would not have been desperate. They were all strong swimmers and although fearfully tired from their exertions would have been able to swim across to comrades and safety.

But it was another matter with Bart unconscious. Frank did not know what had caused his friend's injury. Perhaps he had been shot. At this very moment, for all Frank knew, his chum might be bleeding to death. Above all things he wanted to find dry land, where he could examine his chum and render him first aid if necessary.

He communicated with Billy in whispers.

"We've gone and done it, old scout," he whispered. "We're on the German side."

"That's good news—I don't think," returned Billy.

"Let's swim in under this old pier," suggested Frank, "We'll be out of sight then and we may strike a bit of beach up toward the head of it."

They followed the suggestion and were relieved to find that there was a little stretch of dry sand beyond the water line. They took Bart from the plank and bore him out on the sand. Here they rubbed his wrists and tried as far as they could in the darkness to ascertain the extent of his injuries. Frank did not dare to use his flashlight for fear of betraying their presence to the enemy.

To their immense relief Bart soon showed signs of returning animation. He opened his eyes and was about to speak, when Frank put his hand gently on his lips.

"Don't speak, old man," he whispered. "You're all right. It's Frank speaking. Billy's here. Just whisper to me and tell where you're hurt. But be careful, for the Germans are all around us."

"Guess I'm not hurt much," whispered Bart. "Got a clip on the head when that beam struck the boat."

"Sure you didn't get a bullet?" asked Frank anxiously.

"I don't think so," replied Bart. "Head's dizzy from that crack, but I feel all right everywhere else."

"Bully!" said Frank. "Now you just lie there till you get your strength back, and then we'll figure out what's to be done."

It was a hard problem, and it became none the easier a few minutes later when a boat came along under oars and was tied up at the end of the pier. It was a big boat and similar to those in which the Germans had made their unsuccessful attempt to cross the river a few days before.

It had evidently been out in the river picking up the wounded who had been thrown into the stream by the explosion. The rickety planks creaked as the soldiers carried the wounded survivors over the pier to the bank beyond. It would have been an exceedingly bad time for the Army Boys to be discovered and they crowded back as far as they could to escape detection.

The Germans were in a terrible rage over the body blow that had been dealt them in the destruction of the bridge. Apart from the heavy losses in men their entire plan of campaign would have to be reconstructed.

"That one bullet of yours was a mighty effective one, Frank," whispered Billy.

"It was classy shooting," said Bart. "From a rocking boat with shells bursting all around and so much depending on it, there'd have been lots of excuse for missing."

"Maybe the old Thirty-seventh isn't feeling good over the way the thing went through," chuckled Billy.

"And maybe we won't get the glad hand when we get over there," murmured Bart.

"We've got to get there first," whispered Frank, "and we've got a mighty slim chance of doing that as long as this boat stays here."

Every instant was fraught with peril. They had no weapons and even if they had they would have stood no chance against the throng of enemies surrounding them. Their only hope of safety lay in not being discovered.

But at last, to their great relief, the German rowers resumed their places at the oars and the boat pulled out into the darkness.

"Thank heaven, they're gone at last!" breathed Billy.

"Do you feel equal to the swim over, Bart?" asked Frank.

"Sure thing," replied Bart. "My head's dizzy yet, but with you and Billy to give me a hand, if necessary, I'll get through all right."

As silently as so many otters they slipped into the water and struck out for the other side.

The current was strong and the work was arduous, especially with the care they had to exercise lest any splash should be heard by the enemy. There was also the chance that one of the boats that were abroad might come in their direction. But aided by the pitch darkness that prevailed, they made the trip in safety and Bart had no need of calling on the aid of his comrades.

As they drew near the other side a sentry hailed them.

"Halt!" he cried. "Who goes there?"

"That's Fred Anderson," murmured Billy, as he recognized the voice.

"Friends!" called Frank. "Hello, Fred. It's Raymond, Waldon and Sheldon."

There was a shout of delight, and Fred, accompanied by several other sentries, came running to the water's edge.

"Glory, hallelujah!" shouted Fred, as eager hands pulled the Army Boys up on the bank. "So you pulled through after all. The whole regiment had given you up. Say, if they'd known you were coming every mother's son of them would have been down here to meet you and they'd have brought the band with them. Come along now, but I warn you in advance that all the fellows will shake your hands off."

They still had their hands when their mates got through with them, but Fred had not over-estimated the royal welcome that awaited them. They had always been prime favorites with the boys of the old Thirty-seventh, and that afternoon's exploit made them more popular than ever. Their officers, too, were jubilant at their return.

They were taken to headquarters, where the general thanked them and shook hands with each in turn.

"I don't need any report from you," he smiled. "I heard that when the bridge went up. It was a brave deed, most gallantly done. I thank you in the name of the army. Your names will be cited tomorrow in the orders of the day and I shall personally bring the matter to the attention of General Pershing."

CHAPTER XX

A TRAITOR UNMASKED

When Tom Bradford found himself racing toward the woods, the only thought in his mind was to put as great a distance as possible between himself and his would-be executioners.

At every step he expected to hear a shout raised and see a crowd of pursuers rush from the house like a pack of wolves after their prey.

The thought lent wings to his feet and he covered the distance in record time. And not until he was safe in the shelter of the friendly trees did he pause to draw breath and cast a glance toward the house.

If his escape had been noticed, there was absolutely no sign of it. The landscape lay in serene and smiling beauty. Not a trace of life was to be seen about the house. It seemed scarcely possible that so much tragedy and so much peace could exist side by side.

But he had no time for musing, and after a moment's glance he turned and burrowed deeper into the woods. There alone for the moment lay safety. In those leafy coverts he could lie concealed, while he took breath and thought out the situation.

He had no idea of where the American lines lay. Bound hand and foot as he had been during that terrible journey, and tortured by the thoughts that had assailed him, he had taken little note of the way he was traveling. And even if he had, he could not have told with certainty what was the dividing line between the hostile armies.

All that he could do was to exercise the utmost caution, get as deeply into the recesses of the wood as he could, and let his future course be guided by circumstances. In a battle area that was so full of soldiers it would not be long before he would catch sight of some of them. The great thing was to see them before they saw him. If they wore German helmets he would keep his distance. If, on the contrary, he should see the old familiar khaki uniform of his American comrades, his troubles would be over.

But if the most important thing was concealment, another problem almost as important was the question of food. He had had only the scantiest kind of nourishment since his escape from the prison yard. The last crumb had been eaten that morning. He had no weapon of any kind with which to shoot squirrels or rabbits or birds. And he did not dare to approach a cottage for fear that he might again be placed in the power of his enemies.

But he was not yet starving, though exceedingly hungry, and he kept on in the woods, intent upon putting as many miles behind him as possible before he stopped for rest.

Far up in the wooded hills he came in sight of a little cabin. It was a dilapidated little shack that perhaps had been used by hunting parties in happier days. It seemed to be entirely deserted, but he was wary and lay in the bushes for an hour or more, watching it closely for any sign of life. Only when he felt perfectly sure that there was no one about, did he creep up to the door and look in.

He drew a sigh of relief when he saw that it was indeed uninhabited. Not only that, but there was no evidence that any one had visited it of late. There was no sign of a path and the bushes had grown

up close to the door. One of the hinges of the door had rusted away and the door sagged heavily upon the other.

There was absolutely nothing in the hut except a rough board table and a three-legged stool. Tom searched about eagerly in the hope that he might find some food left by its last occupants. He was not particular, and even mouldy crusts would have been eagerly welcomed. But even in this he was doomed to be disappointed.

Still it was something to be under a roof. Human beings once had been there, and the fact seemed to bring him in contact with his kind. And even this rough shelter was better than being compelled to sleep in the woods. If he had only had something to still the terrible gnawing at his stomach he would have been content—at least as far as he could be contented while a fugitive, with his life and liberty in constant danger.

After he had rested a while he went outside, with the double purpose of watching for enemies and trying to find something to eat. He fashioned a club from a stout branch and made several attempts to get a squirrel or a bird by hurling it at them. But the weapon was too clumsy and they were too quick, and this forlorn hope came to nothing. So that when night at last dropped down upon him he was more hungry than ever and had to go to sleep supperless.

The next morning he was more fortunate, for he came upon a stream that abounded in fish. He improvised a hook and line and landed several fair-sized ones. He had some matches in an oilskin pouch, and he made a little fire in a deep depression, so as to hide the smoke, and roasted fish over it. He had no salt, but never had a meal tasted more delicious in his life.

Now a burden was lifted from his mind. At least he would not starve. Fish, no doubt, would grow wearisome as a diet if it were varied with nothing else. But at least it would sustain life and give him strength for the tasks that lay before him.

He listened for the booming of the guns and tried to figure out from the sound just where the contending armies were facing each other. Sometimes they grew louder and fiercer, and at other times seemed to recede, as the tide of battle ebbed and flowed. But there was rarely any lull in the ominous thunder, and Tom knew that the fiercest kind of fighting was going on. He thought of Frank and Bart and Billy, who he felt sure were in the very thick of it, and he grew desperate at the thought that he was not at their side, facing the same dangers, and, as he hoped, sharing in the same victories.

Gradually he worked his way down the mountain, taking the utmost care to avoid detection, until he felt sure from the increasing din that he was not far from one or the other of the hostile armies. But it was of the utmost importance to him to know whether he was within the German or the American lines.

The question was solved for him when, some days later, he caught sight of a file of German soldiers passing through a ravine a little way below him. These were followed by others. He sought shelter instantly upon catching his first glimpse of them, but the bushes were thin at that point, and a huge tree seemed to offer a more secure refuge. He climbed it quickly, and, peering through the leaves, tried to figure out the situation. Rank after rank passed, and seemed to be taking up a position with the view of making an attack. Batteries were drawn up, and their guns pointed in a direction away from where Tom was hiding. This was a valuable, but at the same time a painful, bit of information, because it showed Tom that he was behind the German lines instead of in front of them. If he had been in front, it would be simply a matter of making his way in all haste to where the American armies lay. Now he knew that in order to reach his own lines he would have to cross through the German positions. And without weapons this could only be a forlorn hope. Even had he been armed it would have been a desperate chance.

He was pondering this fact with a sinking of the heart, when suddenly he saw approaching a man in American uniform. What could it mean? The man was not a prisoner, or he would have been under guard. Yet what other explanation was there for the appearance of the uniform in the midst of the Germans, who swarmed all about?

The man came nearer, until he paused beneath the tree. He looked about as though expecting to see some one. Then he glanced at the watch on his wrist, and uttered an exclamation of impatience. It was evident that he had made an appointment, and that the other party to the tryst was slow in coming.

The day was warm, and the upward climb through the woods had been arduous. The man took his hat from his head and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. As he did so, Tom caught his first glimpse of the newcomer's face, and his heart gave a leap of surprise as well as repulsion when he recognized Nick Rabig.

The last news that Tom had had of Rabig was that he had been taken prisoner in the preceding Fall. He had not known, of course, of Nick's alleged escape from German captivity, and of his return to the American lines, but his quick mind readily reached the correct conclusion. He had always distrusted Rabig and had felt sure that the fellow was at heart a traitor. He was morally certain that the German corporal, whom Nick had been assigned to guard, had escaped with Rabig's connivance, and he remembered what Frank had told him about hearing Rabig's voice in the woods the night the German spy was shot. But Rabig's cunning, or perhaps his luck, had prevented his treachery being proved.

Whatever errand had brought Rabig to this spot, Tom felt sure that it boded no good to the American cause, and even in the precarious position in which he found himself he rejoiced at the thought that he might be instrumental in unmasking a traitor.

While these thoughts were passing through his mind, a German officer approached from another direction. He saw Rabig, and hastened toward him. He greeted Nick coldly, and with an air that scarcely concealed the contempt he felt for the man whose services he was using.

An animated colloquy began at once. But unluckily for Tom it was in German. He hated the language, but just then he would have given anything if he could have understood what was passing between the two men.

The conversation continued for some time. Rabig handed over some papers which the German officer carefully looked over, using a pencil to follow some lines that seemed to be the tracing of a map or plan. Then he folded them up and put them carefully in his pocket, and after a few more sentences had been exchanged Tom heard the clink of money and saw Rabig tuck something away in his belt. Then the officer stood up and with a curt nod went away toward the bottom of the hill.

For some minutes more Rabig remained sitting at the foot of the tree. Then he took money from his belt and counted it carefully. Tom couldn't help wondering whether it consisted of thirty pieces of silver!

In Tom's mind a plan was rapidly forming. He looked through the trees in every direction. No one was in sight. From the slope below came the hum of the camp, but no helmets were visible.

If Rabig had come through the German lines he had done so by means of a pass. That pass would take him back just as it had brought him through. He must have it in his pocket now.

Tom measured the distance between himself and the figure sitting beneath him. Then with the litheness of a panther he dropped plump on Rabig's shoulders.

The shock was terrific and knocked the breath from the traitor's body. He rolled over and over. Tom himself was thrown forward on his hands and knees, but the next moment he had risen and his hands fastened like a vise around Rabig's throat.

CHAPTER XXI

CROSSING THE LINE

Nick Rabig was a young man of powerful build, and under ordinary conditions Tom would have had his work cut out for him. But the surprise and the shock had taken all the fight out of the traitor, and Tom's sinewy hands never relaxed until Rabig's face was purple and he lay limp and gasping. Then Tom improvised a gag and thrust it into the rascal's mouth and rapidly bound his hands and feet.

When he had the miscreant helpless, Tom rose panting to his feet and looked about him. There was no sign that the struggle had attracted attention. Rabig himself had had no time to utter a cry for help.

The renegade had revived sufficiently now to understand what had happened, and his face was a study of conflicting emotions. Rage and hate and fear showed in his features. He recognized Tom, and he knew that his treachery stood discovered. He knew that with the evidence against him he was doomed to stand before a firing squad if he should be taken into the American lines.

Tom looked at him as one might look at a leper.

"You low-down traitor!" he said bitterly. "You vile scoundrel! I've caught you at last and caught you dead to rights. You're the most contemptible thing that breathes. You're a disgrace to your uniform. You ought to be wearing a wooden overcoat and you will when Uncle Sam lays his hands on you. I ought to kill you myself this minute."

His hand clenched the pistol which he had taken from Rabig's pocket, and a look of craven fear came into the traitor's eyes.

"Oh, don't be afraid," said Tom scornfully. "I'm not going to do it. Perhaps you'll suffer more if I let you live than if I killed you. You're a marked and branded man. You're a man without a country. The very men you've sold yourself to look upon you as a yellow dog.

"Now, Rabig, listen to me," Tom went on with deadly earnestness. "I'm going to strip you of the uniform you've disgraced. I'll have to untie your hands for a minute to get the coat over your arms, but I've got the drop on you and if you make the slightest move except to do what I tell you to you're a dead man."

Rabig was too cowed to do anything but obey, and in a few minutes Tom had stripped him of coat and trousers and put them on himself. He re-bound Rabig's hands tightly. Then he went through the pockets of the coat.

As he had expected he found the pass that had admitted Rabig to the German lines. Opposite the word "*Losung*," which Tom knew meant "countersign," was scribbled the word "Potsdam."

"I guess this thing that brought you over will take me back," Tom remarked. "Now, Rabig, I'm going to leave you here with your German friends. They'll pick you up after a while, though I don't care whether they do or not. I'm going back to the boys of the old Thirty-seventh and tell them just what has happened to Nick Rabig, the traitor. So long, Benedict Arnold."

With a parting glance of contempt Tom left the traitor and went down the hill with a confidence that he was very far from feeling.

He had the pass and the countersign, but he was not sure that these would be sufficient. Perhaps an officer would be called by the sentry to make sure that everything was all right. Perhaps the sentry at the point where he should try to pass the line might be the same one who had let Rabig through, and he might notice the difference in personal appearance. Any one of a dozen things might happen to arouse suspicion.

Luckily it was growing dark and Tom had pulled Rabig's hat well down over his face, yet not so far as to make it appear that he was trying to evade scrutiny. He walked on briskly to a point where a sentry on duty before an opening in the wire fence was standing.

"*Halt! Wer da?*" hailed the sentry.

"*Ein Freund*," replied Tom.

"*Losung*."

"*Potsdam*."

At the same time Tom carelessly extended the pass which the sentry glanced at and returned to him with a curt gesture, in which Tom thought he saw contempt. But it meant that he was free to pass, and he did so with an air of indifference.

His heart was beating so fast that it seemed as if he would suffocate. At every step he feared to hear a shout behind him that would tell him that the ruse was discovered. But the fortune that had frowned upon him so many times of late this time was friendly. Behind him were the usual camp noises and nothing more.

In a few minutes he had gotten out of sight of the lines and was in the woods at a point where the trees grew thickly and only a half-beaten trail led through the underbrush. Then he quickened his pace and soon found himself running.

If he were pursued, he had fully made up his mind what he would do. He would never again see the inside of a German prison. He had the revolver and he would fight to the last breath. He might go down, probably would, considering the odds that there would be against him, but he would die fighting, and would take one or more of his enemies with him.

He was racing along now at top speed and he only slackened his gait when he knew that he had put miles behind him. By that time it had grown wholly dark, and in the woods it was as black as pitch. He was safe for that night at least. His enemies could not have seen him if they had been within ten feet of him.

And the darkness brought with it a word of warning. While in one sense it was a protection, on the other it had in it an element of danger. He could no longer know the direction in which he was traveling. He knew the danger there was of traveling in a circle. If he kept on he might swing around in the direction of the German lines. And it would be a sorry ending to his flight to have it finish at the very point from which he had started.

He made up his mind that he would curl himself up in some thicket and snatch a few hours of sleep. At the first glimmer of dawn he would resume his journey. Then he could see, no doubt, the American lines, from which he knew he could not be very far away. The big guns, too, that had now settled down to their nightly muttering, would be in full cry at dawn, and sound as well as sight would help him.

He found a heavy clump of bushes into which he crawled. He had no fear of oversleeping. He knew that his burdened mind would keep watch while his body slept, and that he would surely wake at the first streak of dawn.

Some distance ahead of where the old Thirty-seventh was posted on the far-flung battle line, the Army Boys were on sentry duty. It was the turn of Corporal Wilson's squad to perform this irksome task, and they were glad that it was nearly over and that soon they would be relieved.

Their beats adjoined each other and there were times when they met and could exchange a few words to break the monotony of the long grind.

"This sentry stuff doesn't make a hit with me," grumbled Bart. "I'm getting blisters on my feet from walking."

"Where do you expect to get them, on your head?" laughed Frank. "Cheer up, old man. The sun will be up in a few minutes and then the relief will be along."

"It can't come too soon," chimed in Billy. "Gee, but I'm hungry! This early morning air does sure give you an appetite."

"If only something would happen," complained Bart. "It's the deadly monotony of the thing that gets my goat. Now if a Hun patrol should come along and stir things up, it would be worth while."

A sharp exclamation came from Frank.

"Look out, fellows!" he warned. "I saw those bushes moving over on the slope of that hill just now and there isn't a bit of wind."

In an instant they had their rifles ready.

The bushes parted and a figure stepped forth into the open.

"Why, it's one of our fellows!" said Bart, as he saw the American uniform.

"Been out on scout duty, I suppose," remarked Billy.

Frank said nothing. His keen eyes noted the newcomer and his heart began to thump strangely.

As the soldier came nearer he took off his hat and waved it at them.

A yell of delight broke from the startled group.

"It's Tom! It's Tom! It's Tom!"

CHAPTER XXII

A JOYOUS REUNION

Shouting like so many maniacs, they rushed toward him. At the same instant Tom, too, began to run, and in a moment they had their arms around him, and were hugging him, pounding him, mauling him, exclaiming, questioning, laughing, rejoicing, all in one breath.

Tom was back with them again, good old Tom, their chum, their comrade, Tom, over whose fate they had spent so many sleepless hours, Tom, for whom any one of them would have risked his life, Tom who they knew was captured, and who they feared might be dead.

There he was, the same old Tom, with face and body thin, with hair unkempt and matted, with traces showing everywhere of the anxiety and suffering he had undergone, and yet with the same indomitable spirit that neither captivity nor threatened death had broken, and the same smile upon his lips and twinkle in his eyes.

"Easy, easy there, fellows," he protested laughing. "Let me come up for air. And before anything else, lead me to some grub. I haven't eaten for so long that there's only a vacuum where my stomach ought to be."

"You bet we'll lead you to it," cried Bart.

"An anaconda will have nothing on you when we get through filling you up," promised Billy.

"What did I tell you, fellows," cried Frank delightedly. "Didn't I say the old boy'd be coming in some morning and asking us if breakfast was ready?"

Tom was giving Frank the long-lost letter he had been carrying when Corporal Wilson came up with the relief and their greeting was almost as boisterous and hilarious as that of his own particular chums had been, for Tom was a universal favorite in the regiment, and they had all mourned his loss.

They would have overwhelmed him with questions, but Frank interposed.

"Nothing doing, fellows," he said. "This boy isn't going to say another word until we've taken him to mess and filled him up till he can't move. After that there'll be plenty of time for a talk and we'll keep him talking till the cows come home."

It was a rejoicing crowd that took Tom back to the main body of the regiment, where he almost had

his hands wrung from him. They piled his plate and filled his coffee cup again and again and watched him while he ate like a famished wolf.

"Tom's running true to form," joked Frank, as they saw the food vanish before his onslaught.

"Whatever else the Huns took away from him, they left him his appetite," chuckled Billy.

"Left it?" grinned Tom, as he attacked another helping. "They added to it. I never knew what hunger was before. Bring on anything you've got, and I'll tackle it. All except fish. I'm ashamed now to look a fish in the face."

It was a long time before he had had enough. Then with a look of seraphic contentment on his face he sat back, loosened his belt a notch, and sighed with perfect happiness.

"Now fellows, fire away," he grinned, "and I'll tell you the sad story of my life."

They needed no second invitation, for they had been fairly bursting with eagerness and curiosity. Questions rained on him thick and fast. Their fists clenched when he told them of the cruelties to which he had been subjected. They were loud in admiration of the way in which he had met and overcome his difficulties. They roared with laughter when he told them of the alarm clock, and Tom himself, to whom it had been no joke at the time, laughed now as heartily as the rest.

"So that's the way you got those ropes gnawed through when you were at the farmhouse," exclaimed Frank, when Tom told them of the aid that had come to him from the rats. "We figured out everything else but that. We thought that you must have frayed them against a piece of glass."

"I used to hate rats," said Tom, "but I don't now. I'll never have a trap set in any house of mine as long as I live."

"If you'd only known how safe it would have been to walk downstairs that day!" mourned Frank.

"Wouldn't it have been bully?" agreed Tom. "Think of the satisfaction it would have been to have had the bulge on that lieutenant who was going to hang me. I wouldn't have done a thing to him!"

"Well, we got him anyway and that's one comfort," remarked Bart.

"To think that you were legging it away from the house just as we were coming toward it," said Billy.

"It was the toughest kind of luck," admitted Tom. "Yet perhaps it was all for the best, for then I might not have had the chance to get the best of Rabig."

"Rabig?" exclaimed Frank, for the traitor had not yet been mentioned in Tom's narrative.

"What about him?" questioned Billy eagerly.

"Hold your horses," grinned Tom. "I'll get to him in good time. If it hadn't been for Rabig I wouldn't be here. I owe that much to the skunk, anyway."

It was hard for them to wait, but they were fully rewarded when Tom described the way in which he had trapped and stripped the renegade, and left him lying in the woods.

"Bully boy!" exclaimed Frank. "That was the very best day's work you ever did."

"Got the goods on him at last," exulted Bart.

"The only man in the old Thirty-seventh that has played the yellow dog," commented Billy. "The regiment's well rid of him. He'll never dare to show his face again."

"He can fight for Germany now," said Frank, "and if he does, I only hope that some day I'll run across him in the fighting."

"You won't if he sees you first," grinned Billy. "He doesn't want any of your game."

Tom had left one thing till the last.

"By the way, Frank," he remarked casually, "I ran across a fellow in the German prison camp who came from Auvergne, the same province where you've told me your mother lived when she was a girl. He said he knew her family well."

"Is that so?" asked Frank with quick interest. "What was his name?"

"Martel," replied Tom.

"Why that's the name of the butler who used to be in my mother's family!" cried Frank. "Colonel Pavet was telling me that he had been captured, and had died in prison. I was hoping that he was mistaken in that, for the colonel said he had information that might help my mother to get her property."

"The colonel is right about the man's dying," replied Tom, "for I was with him when he died."

"It's too bad," said Frank dejectedly.

"I shouldn't wonder if he did not know something," said Tom, "for he seemed to have something on his mind. He told me one time that his imprisonment and sickness happened as a judgment on him."

"If we could only have had his testimony before he died," mourned Frank.

"I got it," declared Tom triumphantly.

CHAPTER XXIII

CUTTING THEIR WAY OUT

Frank sprang to his feet.

"What do you mean?" he cried.

"Just this," replied Tom, taking the confession from his pocket. "He told me the whole story and there it is in black and white, names of witnesses and all."

Frank read the confession with growing excitement, while his comrades clustered closely around him.

"Tom, old scout!" Frank exclaimed, as the whole significance of the confession dawned upon him, "you've done me a service that I'll never forget. Now we can see our way clear, and my mother will come into her rights."

"I'm mighty glad, old boy," replied Tom with a happy smile. "I've held on to that paper through thick and thin, because I knew what it would mean to you and your mother. But now," he went on, "I've been answering the questions of all this bunch and turn about is fair play. Tell me how our boys are doing. How is the big drive going on? Have we stopped the Germans yet?"

"They're slowing up," said Bart.

"We're whipping them," declared Billy.

"I wouldn't quite say that," objected Frank. "We haven't whipped them yet except in spots. Of course we're going to lick them. The whole world knows that now except the Germans themselves, and I shouldn't wonder if they were beginning to believe it in their hearts. But they'll stand a whole lot of beating yet, and we don't want to kid ourselves that it's going to be an easy job. But we're holding them back, and pretty soon we'll be driving them back."

"I'll bet the old Thirty-seventh has been doing its full share," said Tom proudly.

"You bet it has," crowed Billy. "Tom, old man, you've missed some lovely fighting."

"You fellows have had all the luck," replied Tom wistfully.

"Don't grouch, Tom," laughed Frank. "There's plenty of it yet to come. And I'll bet you'll fight harder than ever now, when you think of all you've been through. You've got a personal score to settle with the Huns now, as well as to get in licks for Uncle Sam."

"You're right there," replied Tom, as his eyes blazed. "I can't wait to get at them. My fingers fairly itch to get hold of a rifle."

"But you ought to have a little rest and get your strength back before you get in the ranks again," suggested Bart.

"None of that rest stuff for me," declared Tom. "When you boys get in I'm going to be right alongside of you."

His wish was not to be gratified that day, however, for there was a lull in the fighting just then while the hostile armies manoeuvred for position. But the pause was only temporary, and the next day the storm broke in all its fury.

Of course Tom had to make a report at headquarters. There his story, especially as it related to Nick Rabig, was listened to with much interest.

When the fighting began again it was not trench work. That was already in the past. Of course the armies took advantage of whatever shelter was offered them, and there were times when shallow

trenches were dug with feverish haste. But these were only to be used for minutes or for hours, not for weeks and months at a time. The great battle had become one of open warfare, and it ebbed and flowed over miles of meadow and woodland, of hill and valley.

It was just the style of fighting that suited the American troops. They wanted action, action every minute. They wanted to see their enemies, to get at grips with them, to pit their brawn and muscle, their wit and courage against the best the enemy could bring forth. It was the way their ancestors had fought, man to man, bayonet to bayonet, where sheer pluck and power would give the victory to the men who possessed them in largest measure.

"We'll be in it up to our necks in a few minutes now," muttered Bart, as they waited for the order to charge.

"It's going to be hot work," remarked Billy. "They've got a pile of men in that division over there, and they've been putting up a stiff fight so far this morning."

"They're in for a trimming," declared Frank. "Just wait till the old Thirty-seventh goes at them on the double quick."

"Why don't the orders come?" grumbled Tom.

They came at last and, with a rousing cheer, the regiment rushed forward. The enemy's guns opened up at them, and a deadly barrage sought to check the wild fury of their charge. Men went down as shot and shell tore through them, but the others never faltered. The old Thirty-seventh was out to win that morning, and a bad time was in store for whoever stood in the way of its headlong rush.

In the front ranks the Army Boys fought shoulder to shoulder, and when the regiment struck the enemy line, they plunged forward with the bayonet. There was a furious *melée* as they ploughed their way through.

So impetuous was their dash that it carried them too fast and too far. They found themselves fighting with a group of their comrades against a fresh body of enemy troops who had just been thrown in in a fierce counterattack. For the moment they were greatly outnumbered and as the enemy closed around the little band it seemed as though they were doomed to be cut off from the support of their comrades.

They must cut their way through and rejoin the main body. And not a moment must be lost, for the ring surrounding them was constantly being augmented by fresh reinforcements.

A shot tore Frank's rifle out of his hands. He looked around and saw an axe that had been left there by some one of an engineer corps.

He stooped and picked it up. He swung it high above his head. In his powerful hands it was a fearful weapon, and the enemy detachment in front of him faltered and drew back.

With a shout of "Lusitania!" Frank leaped forward, his eyes flashing with the fury of the fight, his axe hewing right and left. Foot by foot he cut his way through the crowded ranks.

Then suddenly a great blackness came down upon him and he knew nothing more.

CHAPTER XXIV

WOUNDS AND TORTURE

When long hours afterward Frank came to himself, he lay for a time wondering where he was and what had happened to him.

His brain was not clear, and he had the greatest difficulty in concentrating his thoughts. Little by little he pieced events together. He remembered the charge made by his regiment, the pocket in which he had found himself when he had gone too far in advance of his comrades, the axe with which he had started to cut his way through the ring of enemies that surrounded him. There his memory stopped.

He must have been wounded. He raised his head painfully and looked himself over. He did not seem to be bleeding. He put his hand to his head. There was a cut there and a great lump that was as big as a robin's egg. The movement set his brain whirling, and he fell back dizzy and confused.

How thirsty he was! His mouth felt as though it were stuffed with cotton. His veins felt as if fire instead of blood was in them. His tongue seemed to be double its normal size. He would have given all he possessed for one sip of cool water.

He seemed to be alone. There were bushes all about him. He remembered that he had been

fighting on the edge of a wood where there was a great deal of underbrush. This no doubt accounted for his being alone. Out in the meadow beyond there were lying a number of dead and wounded, as he could see by peering through the bushes. There were some dead men in the bushes, too, but no wounded. It would have been a comfort at that moment to have had some wounded companions to whom he might speak, whom he might help, or by whom he might be helped. He felt as though he were the only living man in a world of the dead.

He tried to rise, but a horrible pain shot through his right leg as he bore his weight upon it, and it crumpled under him. He wondered if it were broken. He felt of it carefully. No bone seemed to be broken as far as he could tell, but the ankle was swelled to almost double its normal size. He must have strained or twisted it. The mere touch gave him agony and he was forced to desist.

His fever increased and he was afraid that he was getting delirious. Some way or other he must get back to his own lines before his senses left him. He got up on his hands and feet and began to crawl in what he thought was the right direction.

He had no idea of time. Things seemed dark around him, but he was not sure whether this was due to the sky being overcast or to the approach of twilight. Perhaps it was neither. It might be only that his eyes were dimmed by the fever that was raging in him.

His wounded leg dragged behind him as he slowly worked along and every moment was torture. Sometimes it caught in a bush, and the resulting wrench almost caused him to swoon. But he kept on doggedly.

He passed many dead men, and painfully worked his way around to avoid touching them. One of them, he noticed, had a sack full of hand grenades. But the stiffening hand of the owner would never hurl another of those messengers of death.

On and on Frank toiled. His head felt so light that it seemed to be detached from his shoulders. He caught himself talking aloud, speaking the names of Bart and Billy and Tom. Where were they? What were they doing? Why were they not there with him?

And what had happened to the regiment? Had it been driven back? He remembered the heavy reinforcements that the enemy had thrown into the fight. Perhaps the old Thirty-seventh was getting ready for another attack. But the effort to think was too painful and Frank gave it up.

Suddenly he heard the sound of voices a little way in front of him, and a thrill of joy shot through him. He was paid at that moment for all his suffering. How lucky that he had steeled himself to the task of crawling back to his comrades! Soon he would be with the boys again. They would give him water. They would bind up his leg. His head would stop aching. The hours of torture would be over.

He was about to shout to them, when through a thick clump of bushes he saw the helmets of German soldiers. They were working feverishly to get some machine guns in position. It was evident that they were expecting an attack.

In that moment of terrible disappointment Frank tasted the bitterness of death. All that agony had been endured only to bring him into the hands of the Huns!

But this revulsion of feeling lasted only for an instant. The sight of his enemies had cleared his brain and awakened his indomitable fighting instinct. The Huns were working like mad at the machine-gun nest. That meant that the old Thirty-seventh was coming back! He must help them. These guns, cunningly placed, would do terrible execution if they were allowed to work their will.

But what could he do unaided and alone? He was wounded and weaponless.

Like a flash the thought came to him of the dead man whose sack was full of hand grenades.

His body quailed at the thought of the journey back to where the man lay. But his spirit mastered the flesh.

With his dragging leg one quivering pain, he crawled back. It seemed ages before he got there, but at last he had secured three of the grenades and started back for the machine-gun nest.

He had no more than time. Behind him, he heard the well-known cheer of his regiment. The boys were coming!

The gun crews heard it, too, and they gathered about their weapons, whose deadly muzzles pointed in the direction from which the rush was coming.

Supporting himself on one hand and knee, Frank hurled his grenades over the top of the bush in quick succession. They fell right in the midst of the startled Germans. There was a terrific explosion and the guns and crews were torn to pieces. Another instant and the old Thirty-seventh came smashing its way to victory.

CHAPTER XXV

DRIVEN BACK

Two weeks later and Frank had left the hospital and was back again with the Army Boys. The injury to his head was found to be not serious, and the leg although badly wrenched and strained had no bone broken. It yielded rapidly to treatment, and Frank's splendid strength and vitality aided greatly in his cure.

There was immense jubilation among the Army Boys when their idolized comrade resumed his place in the ranks.

"You can't keep a squirrel on the ground," exulted Tom, as he gave his friend a tremendous thump on the back.

"Or Frank Sheldon away from the firing line," grinned Bart, looking at his friend admiringly.

"You didn't think I was going to stay in that dinky hospital when there was so much doing, did you?" laughed Frank. "Say, fellows, if my leg had been broken instead of just sprained, I'd have died of a broken heart. I've got to get busy now and get even with the boches for that crack on the head they gave me. It's a good thing it's solid ivory, or it would have been split for fair."

"You don't need to worry about paying the Germans back," chuckled Billy. "You paid them in advance. You don't owe them a thing. Say, what George Washington did to the cherry tree with his little hatchet wasn't a circumstance to what you did to the Huns with that axe of yours. The axe is your weapon, Frank. A rifle doesn't run one, two, three, compared with it."

"I'll admit that the axe work was good as a curtain raiser," remarked Tom. "But the real show was when those machine guns and their crews were blown to pieces. That made the work of the regiment easy."

"It was classy work," agreed Will Stone, who came along just then and heard what they were talking about.

"How are the tanks?" asked Frank of the newcomer. "I suppose old Jumbo is just spoiling for a fight."

"I guess he is," replied Stone, with a touch of affection in his voice for the monster tank that he commanded, "and from all I hear he's going to get lots of it."

"I guess we all are," said Bart.

"All little pals together," hummed Billy.

"And it's going to be a different kind of fighting," went on Stone. "The tide is turning at last. The Hun has been doing the driving. Now he's going to be driven."

"Glory hallelujah!" cried Billy.

"Do you think that General Foch is going to take the offensive?" asked Bart eagerly.

"It looks that way," replied Stone. "Of course, I'm not in the secrets of the High Command, and only General Foch himself knows when and where he's going to strike. But by the way they're massing tanks here I think it will be soon. They're gathering them by the hundreds in the woods, so that the movement can't be seen by enemy aviators. When the blow comes it will be a heavy one. And do you notice the way the American divisions are being brought together here? That means that they'll take a big part in the offensive. Foch has been watching what our boys have been doing, and he's going to put us in the front ranks."

"Better and better," chortled Billy. "That boy's got good judgment. He's a born fighter himself and he knows fighters when he sees them."

"Well, you boys keep right on your toes," said Stone, as he prepared to leave them, "and I'll bet a dollar to a doughnut that within three days you'll see the Heinies on the run."

Two days passed and nothing special happened. Then at dawn on the third day, Foch struck like a thunderbolt!

He had gathered his forces. He had chosen the place. He had bided his time.

The German forces were taken utterly by surprise. Their General Staff was caught napping. They had underestimated their enemy's daring and resources. Their flank was exposed, and it crumpled up under the terrific and unexpected blow.

Thousands of prisoners and hundreds of guns were taken on the first day, and the success was

continued for many days thereafter. The Allies were elated and the Germans correspondingly depressed. Their boasted drive had been held back, and now they themselves were the pursued, with the Allies, flushed with victory, close upon their heels.

The Army Boys were in their element, and they fought with a dash and spirit that they had never surpassed. Other volumes of this series will tell of the thrilling exploits, with the tanks and otherwise, by which they upheld the honor and glory of the Stars and Stripes.

"Well," said Frank one evening, after a day crowded with splendid fighting, "we've put a dent in the Kaiser's helmet."

"Yes," grinned Bart, as he wiped his glowing face. "Considering that we're green troops that were going to run like sheep before the Prussian Guards, we haven't done so badly."

"I guess the folks at home aren't kicking," remarked Tom. "They told us to come over here and clean up, and so far we've been obeying orders."

"We've held back the German drive," put in Billy, "but that's just the beginning. Now we've got to tackle another job. We've got to drive the Hun out of France——"

"And out of Belgium," added Tom.

"And back to the Rhine," chimed in Bart.

"Get it right, you boobs," laughed Frank. "Straight back to Berlin!"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ARMY BOYS ON THE FIRING LINE; OR, HOLDING
BACK THE GERMAN DRIVE ***

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