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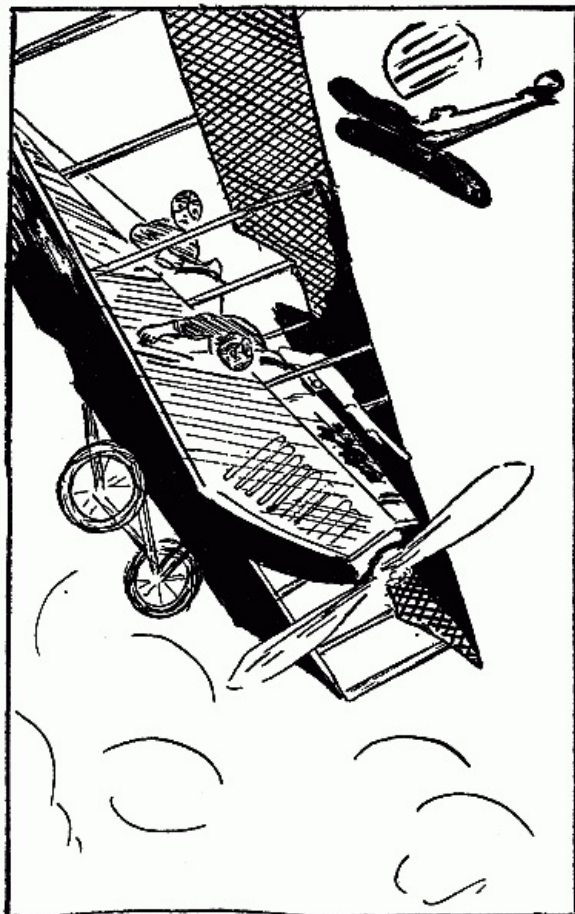
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**THE AIRPLANE STARTED TO SHOOT DOWN AT
A FRIGHTFUL SPEED.**

AIR SERVICE BOYS FLYING FOR VICTORY

OR

Bombing the Last German Stronghold

BY

CHARLES AMORY BEACH

AUTHOR OF "AIR SERVICE BOYS FLYING FOR
FRANCE," "AIR SERVICE BOYS OVER
THE RHINE," ETC.

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AIR SERVICE BOYS FLYING FOR VICTORY

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AIR SERVICE BOYS FLYING FOR VICTORY

[1]

CHAPTER I

IN ACTION OVER THE ARGONNE

"WILL that starting signal ever come, Tom?"

"Just hold your horses, Jack. The other squadron has gone out, and is already hard at it over the Boche line. Our turn next. Keep cool. And here's hoping we both pull through with our usual good luck."

"Wow! See that big Hun plane, a Fokker, too, take the nose dive, will you? But he's overshot his mark. I warrant you he is trying like mad to get on a level keel again."

"Good-night! I could almost imagine I heard the crash away off here, even with all that thunder from Big Berthas and the crackle of hundreds of machine guns."

"It makes the goose-flesh tingle all over me, Tom, to think that some day—or it may be night—one or the other of us may finish up in just that kind of fireworks."

"The life of an air pilot is full of hazards, Jack, just remember. If he's going to make a success of his calling he's got to have nerves of steel."

[2]

"Yes, and let him lose his grip and confidence because of any unusual danger, his usefulness is gone."

"There's our signal at last, Jack!"

"Here goes! And pity the poor Boche I drive off with my new American plane, and its bully Liberty motor!"

Both young men, attired as air pilots, with goggles and gloves as well as heavy coats for extra warmth in the dizzy spaces a mile or two overhead, hastened to climb aboard their waiting machines, which were of the latest type of battleplane.

Each had an assistant, or observer, who would also handle one of the two machine-guns with which those American flying machines were armed.

The time was that period in the fall of 1918, when the fresh American host burst headlong into the battle line in Northern France.

At Château Thierry and St Mihiel they had struck the astounded foe with the force of an avalanche. The Germans, war-weary, were stunned by the vigor of the fresh army that once in action would not be denied.

Back, and still further back, the struggling lines of grey-coated Hun fighters had been thrust. Every day brought a new surprise for the Kaiser's generals. They were aghast at the resistless method of forcing the fighting adopted by these men from overseas, who seemed to have brought new and amazing elements into the work. [3]

Already many of the more astute German leaders had begun to see the handwriting on the wall traced by the finger of Destiny. Nevertheless they had now descended to uttering boasts of how easy it was going to be to make these "crazy Yankees" pay a frightful price for every mile gained.

But the Germans who figured thus confidently failed to reckon on the rapidly growing discontent at home, where the populace was close to the starvation point. Though their soldiers still fought desperately on, it was with the sullen mien of those who had lost their morale and were close to collapse.

On the day when Tom Raymond and Jack Parmly waited, the latter so impatiently, for the anticipated signal to go into the air, the two armies were joined in battle.

The Americans had been given the most difficult task of all, which was to clean up the great Argonne Forest, and then sweep the fleeing Huns back, past Sedan, famous for the defeat of the second Napoleon, over the border into Germany itself.

Here Hindenburg had concentrated most of his best troops, including the crack Guard regiments. He realized that the gravest peril of all lay in the "push" of this new army, which had already given such an excellent account of its fighting qualities. [4]

In that vast tract of wooded country known as the Argonne the Huns had located innumerable machine-gun nests designed to check the advance of the Yankees and make them pay a fearful price for what they got.

Two men secreted in some nook could open a deadly fire on the oncoming boys in khaki and mow them down like ripe grain before they themselves were wiped out in a furious rush. It paid the German commanders to sacrifice two for a dozen or twenty; though at times they had to chain the gunners to their weapon, for fear they would slip away at the last.

Six battleplanes all in a row were now starting off in rapid succession. A whirr that sounded loud and insistent above the dull roar of the heavy guns, a sudden movement that quickly increased in velocity until the plane was bounding like a rabbit over the open ground, then an upward slant, a beautiful curve that left the ground behind, and another air pilot was off for the post of duty.

Jack Parmly's blood bounded joyously in his veins when he thus rose like a speeding swallow. His new plane, one of the first of the latest type built entirely in the United States, had already filled his heart with delight, and its wonderful Liberty engine seemed to fulfill a dream that Jack, like all other American fliers, had long cherished. [5]

As he rose higher and higher, circling as he went, the scene quickly began to take on a most impressive appearance. Below him lay the forest in all its grim aspect, with openings here and there, now given up to batteries of artillery that were pounding the foe with constant energy.

Clouds of smoke arising in many places told of bursting shells, the destruction of munition dumps, or it might even be some little burning hamlet that had served the Huns at bay for a fortress, but which had been blown almost entirely off the face of the earth by the red hurricane the expert Yankee gunners set loose.

It was easy for Jack to tell where the German battleline lay. He had been up so recently that he knew to a fraction just how far back the enemy force had staggered after the engagement of the preceding day.

And it was straight toward that line he now headed, for his work awaited him in that quarter. Hun planes were soaring like great hawks, swooping down from time to time, and engaging some

of the machines bearing the American eagle as their totem.

[6]

As usual, Jack made mental note of the fact that seldom were the Huns willing to join in battle unless they outnumbered their foes. That was a compliment to the fighting qualities of the Americans, for it showed that they had already won the respect of their adversaries.

Jack was out for business. He tried to lure one of the enemy fliers into a "scrap" as he always called an engagement, but found the Boche wary. Some of those opposed to the Americans were well known aces who had gained a great reputation, having brought down scores of British and French planes. Yet to-day they seemed loath to enter into combat with this new type of fighter.

Now and then the young airman managed to glimpse Tom's well known machine, for the two chums had decorated their planes with distinguishing marks that they could recognize even when a great distance away. The other was fighting with two of the foe, and was having a serious time of it, spinning like a reel, darting downward to avoid being raked by machine-gun fire, and then coming up on the tail of a Hun with the advantage all on his side.

Jack, still denied his share of action, continued to watch Tom out of the corner of his eye. He felt like giving a shout when presently he saw one of the Hun machines plunge downward as though a shot had paralyzed the arm of the pilot. Over and over it went, bursting into smoke and flames while speeding toward the earth.

[7]

There could be no doubt but that Tom would add another count to his score, though he was already reckoned an ace, being accredited with seven clear-cut victories.

But the other Hun aviator had taken advantage of the thrilling moment to dart in and deliver a hot fire. Jack could see the spurt of the machine-gun as it blazed away furiously, the two planes passing one another. He felt his heart in his throat for fear that Tom might be caught napping, for the distance was too great to make sure of what was happening.

Suddenly a cold hand seemingly clutched Jack's heart. Tom was falling rapidly! It was no nose-dive, but bore all the marks of either an engine gone dead or of some mishap to the pilot. So did gallant Tom's plane vanish from the sight of his horrified chum, being swallowed up in the dense volumes of smoke rolling upward from the battleground below. Jack's heart felt like lead in his breast.

CHAPTER II

[8]

YANKEE PLUCK

WHEN Tom Raymond sent one of his Hun opponents whirling down toward the far distant earth he naturally experienced the glow that comes to a victor in a stubbornly contested battle.

The gratification was all the more profound because of the fact that he had taken on two adversaries at the same time. Any air pilot who was capable of holding his own against an enemy numerically superior had reason to feel satisfied.

He quickly saw, however, that this did not mean the end of the fight. That other crafty Hun had swung unexpectedly and was now pouring in a furious fire. Tom realized that his assistant had ceased firing. Had the machine-gun become jammed? He was hanging partly from his seat. Was he badly injured in the bargain? Still, despite all this handicap, Tom would possibly have come through in good shape had not something happened to his engine just then. After all, even a Liberty motor could play a trick on its pilot master, just as that fine French engine on his former Spad machine had done a few times.

[9]

The airplane started to shoot downward at frightful speed, leaving the Hun far behind. Tom kept his head, and bent every energy to trying to get the motor started again, meanwhile working also to keep on a fairly level keel. He had passed through a similar experience on other occasions, but never when hovering over the German lines with a battle in progress under him.

A sickening sensation gripped his heart, for it flashed before his mind that this might be the end. Like every other aviator, he had defied Fate every time he went up, and at last the dreadful moment had come for him to pay the price!

Not for a single second, even while feeling that queer sensation grip him, did Tom cease working frantically to start his engine. He knew he had one last forlorn chance left. A few seconds would tell the story, and either he must be lucky enough to have his balky engine suddenly start again in response to his frantic efforts, or else—well, he dared not allow himself to dwell on what would happen to him when he struck the ground with all the frightful momentum of his falling machine.

[10]

The air service boy lived ages in that brief period of time. Never could he forget the agony that gripped his soul. There flashed before his memory the faces of those he loved at home, those whom he might never see again.

Then it was over. The engine had suddenly yielded to his frantic efforts, and once more

commenced to throb with renewed life. Tom, with tremendous exertion, managed to right his tottering plane and steady it on an even keel.

His observer lay in a huddled heap in his seat. But for the safety belt he must have slid into space. Tom could not tell whether he was dead or had simply swooned.

That was a matter for the future. Just now he must concern himself with the task of extricating himself from his fresh perilous position. So rapidly had he fallen that amidst the swirling smoke clouds he could plainly see the Germans just below; and that he must be visible to his enemies he quickly had reason to understand.

Even as he started to spin away, shrapnel burst close beside his plane. Machine-guns also began to chatter underneath, and he saw that the wings of his plane were being cut by the hail of missiles that came up in swarms, like buzzing bees, each armed with a sting.

Dodging this way and that in eccentric lines, Tom brought into play all his acquired knowledge of a pilot's tricks in order to avoid being made a victim of this hot fire. He fully expected that, after all, the enemy would get him, but he was grimly determined that it would be only after he had exhausted every device possible.

[11]

He kept his head, and while dodging back and forth managed to follow a general course that promised soon to carry him closer to the American front. At one time he found himself above what seemed to be a very inferno of destruction. The air palpitated with the shock of a terrible explosion, as though a great mine had been fired. But Tom knew what it meant.

That must be the Big Bertha which for some days now had played an important part in shelling the rear of the American lines, even to knocking a temporary field hospital into fragments.

How Tom wished just then that his had been a bombing plane. With what savage joy would he have dropped his whole supply of air torpedoes down upon that mighty engine of destruction, forever silencing its thunderous voice and ending its power to do injury to the cause in which his whole soul was enlisted!

After that his way became somewhat easier, for Tom had succeeded in climbing higher, so that he was screened from the gunners below. Then he found himself passing over the American front, with the open field in sight where the temporary aerodromes could be seen, looking like dingy patches of yellow earth.

[12]

Of course there was nothing to do but to return immediately. His observer was injured, if not dead, and would need looking after; while Tom felt that his machine could hardly be called in trim for further work, as it needed a thorough overhauling after the recent rough treatment accorded to it by the fighting Boches.

Despite his crippled machine, the young air service boy managed to make a fairly good landing, with the help of several orderlies and attendants. They had come on the run, understanding that something was wrong, because the observer hung part-way over the side, and it could be seen that the plane itself had been in action.

Tom's first thought was of his comrade. He himself had received only one small cut in the arm from flying shrapnel splinters, though it persisted in bleeding profusely, and would have to be tied up at the nearest field dressing-station.

He breathed easier when he discovered that his observer, while badly injured, would have more than a fighting chance to pull through. A doctor was quickly on the spot, and managed to give temporary treatment, so as to stop the bleeding. The poor fellow waved his hand to Tom as he was being taken away on a stretcher to the nearest field hospital for treatment.

[13]

"Here, let me have a look at that left arm of yours, Raymond, while I'm about it," said the surgeon, noticing that the pilot kept wiping drops of blood from his fingers with a handkerchief that had begun to assume a gory appearance.

This satisfied Tom, and the wound was speedily attended to, a bandage being bound in place. The only thing that was troubling the young airman was a haunting fear that he might be kept out of the fighting for several days; and at this exciting stage of the advance that would seem like a real calamity to so ambitious a pilot.

"I suppose you'd kick like a steer," said the surgeon, with a smile, "if I advised you to keep quiet for a day or two, because I know your breed; but if you must join in, be easy on that arm, Raymond. It might give you some trouble if inflammation should set in."

"Oh, I've had much worse scratches than that and never been laid up, Doctor," Tom remarked with the assurance that goes hand in hand with youth and abounding good health. "But I will favor it all I can. Couldn't keep me out of this riot unless you chained me to earth. There's something that keeps calling me up there, some thing that's mighty hard to resist."

"Yes, I know. You're all alike, you daring air pilots," said the other, shaking his head disapprovingly. "But you're splendid, splendid! And I'm certainly proud to be an American these days. You boys have set a pace that every British and French aviator will have to hustle to equal. Your coming has been the turning point of the war. The Hun is already whipped, only he doesn't wholly realize it just yet."

[14]

Tom, instead of seeking his quarters at once for rest, "loafed around" watching all that went on. Never a plane that came back but he was there to receive the comrade with enthusiasm. Some had been in the fight and bore signs of the experience through which they had passed. One especially was burning with disappointment because he had lost his "prize."

"Had him going, too, when this motor of mine went back on me and started in to miss fire so often that he got away," he spluttered. "Never was so mad in all my life as when I had to turn and sneak back home like a dog with his tail between his legs. But me for another machine, and back to the game again. I'll get that Hun yet, see if I don't!"

Often did Tom strain his eyes trying to pick out the plane of his chum among those that from time to time could be seen far distant, some engaged with the enemy, while others were seeking to gain information of value to the American commander.

When a whole hour had gone and there was still no sign of Jack, he began to feel worried. Vainly he questioned some of the returning pilots; for as the battle waned both above and below they were now coming in by shoals, tired, yet full of enthusiasm over their recent exploits. [15]

From one Tom managed to secure the only tip that seemed of value; and it was hardly encouraging.

"I am sure I saw Jack having a lively circus with several Boches about an hour back," this man informed Tom. "Don't know how the jig ended, because I found myself in a mix-up soon afterwards, and it kept my hands full. But let's hope the boy came through O K. I saw you drop your man, Tom; and it must have been a close shave for you in the bargain."

The man went on about his business, and Tom again took up his weary watching and waiting. The minutes dragged by, but still no Jack, nor did there come any further word of him. Finally, weary and discouraged, Tom turned back toward his temporary quarters.

On arriving there, however, he found something that for the moment took his mind off the uncertain fate of his chum.

CHAPTER III

 [16]

JACK'S STRANGE FIND

"LETTERS!" exclaimed Tom, as he entered the building where he had his headquarters. "One for me from home, and two for Jack," he went on, as he hurriedly sorted the little pile.

"Nice!" was his next ejaculation, as he looked at the postmark on the next letter he picked up. "Who is writing to me from Nice? I don't know anybody in the south of France."

The next letter he picked up was also postmarked "Nice." This one was addressed to Jack Parmly, was more than twice the thickness of the one addressed to Tom, and was in the same girlish handwriting.

"Bessie Gleason!" This was Tom's third exclamation. Then he slit the envelopes of his letters one after another and sat down to read his mail.

While he is engaged in this apparently pleasing occupation, and at the same time keeping an anxious eye out for the coming of his chum, Jack, it might be just as well to explain a little further who these daring young American air pilots were, and also tell something concerning their previous exploits. [17]

Tom Raymond and Jack Parmly had both been born in Virginia, and there, at a government school for aviation training, they had taken their first lessons in flying, after the world war broke out. They decided to follow that calling in case the United States should be eventually swept into the war.

Tom's father was an inventor whose secret papers concerning a wonderful airplane stabilizer had been stolen by an adroit German spy. Afterwards the two chums when in France had managed to recover these documents, as well as accomplish many other brilliant exploits, all this being told in the first volume of this series, entitled: "Air Service Boys Flying for France; or, The Young Heroes of the Lafayette Escadrille."

In the second volume Tom and Jack proved their right to be called first-class air pilots by battling with success against Hun fliers. They saw considerable of the tragic happenings that convulsed that portion of France, while they were connected with the famous French flying corps.

Here, too, these young Air Service boys again found an opportunity for proving their worth in the rescue of pretty Bessie Gleason and her mother from an old chateau in Lorraine where Carl Potzfeldt, a German spy, had them imprisoned. These interesting and exciting events will be found in the second volume of the series, entitled: "Air Service Boys Over the Enemy's Lines; or, The German Spy's Secret." [18]

Then came another series of happenings that must always appeal to boy readers fond of thrilling scenes, for in the next book, among many other things, is told how Tom and Jack succeeded in silencing the monster cannon that from a distance of sixty miles and more was bombarding Paris. That will be found narrated in "Air Service Boys Over the Rhine; or, Fighting Above the Clouds."

Then there is the volume just preceding this, in which again the two brave young Yankee air pilots were given an opportunity to prove the value of their training, now in the service of the American forces, for General Pershing had come across the sea, and his army was beginning to make its presence felt at several sectors of the battleline.

What they saw and did, as well as vivid descriptions of the momentous events accompanying the great German drive is told in the fourth book of the series, "Air Service Boys in the Big Battle; or, Silencing the Big Guns." [19]

Among their friends at the front was a young and daring aviator, Harry Leroy by name, who had had the misfortune to be shot down behind the German lines, and it was in connection with his discovery and rescue by the chums that some of the events of the last volume came about.

And it may as well be confessed here that Tom felt more than a passing interest in the pretty sister of Harry, for Nellie Leroy was serving her country as a Red Cross nurse, being just then in one of the American field hospitals to which the wounded were being carried day after day while the Argonne drive was on.

Tom was a full hour and more reading his letters, rereading them, and dreaming over them. After their rescue from the château Mrs. Gleason and Bessie had gone to Paris, where the mother, ably assisted by her daughter, had thrown herself into Red Cross work. Now, so Bessie's note told Tom, her mother was very tired and the two had gone down to Nice for a brief rest. It would be perfect, Bessie wrote, if only Tom and Jack and Nellie Leroy were with them.

For a while Tom lost himself in the thought of being at Nice, by the blue sea, with Mrs. Gleason and Bessie and Nellie—especially Nellie—and with Jack. With Jack! That thought aroused him. [20]

Still no Jack! He grew more and more concerned, and began to picture all sorts of grievous things as having happened to his chum.

Several times he thought he heard the well known voice near by, but on each occasion discovered that he had deceived himself. Tom felt he could stand it no longer, and had even commenced to set forth when, to his delight, he discovered Jack coming.

"But what's he doing with that mite of a French child?" Tom asked himself, staring in wonder and perplexity. "A cunning little girl she seems to be; but a battlefield isn't just the place for such an innocent. Poor thing! I suppose she's lost all her kin, and Jack brought her along because he couldn't let her stay at the ruins of her home and starve."

He was so filled with joy over the coming of his chum, who did not seem to be wounded in the least, that everything else was forgotten.

"Letters from home, Jack, old scout; hurry your stumps!" he called out, waving the epistles above his head.

Jack, still in his pilot's dress, was so eager to hurry that he picked up the little six-year-old French child, and ran the last fifty yards. [21]

"Did you get any yourself, Tom?" he demanded, as he came up; and then immediately added: "I see you have some, and by the same token one of them has a French stamp on it—from Nice!"

"Oh, it's Bessie Gleason," said Tom with a twinkle in his eye. "You remember my telling you she promised to write to me if I'd answer and let her hear what stunts the air boys were pulling off over here in the Argonne. Let you read it if you care to, Jack."

"Very good of you, Tom," grinned the other. "But excuse me while I look over my own letters. And say, perhaps you'll make friends with this little girl here until I get through. I've got something to tell about her that will give you a thrill, I reckon."

It was just like Jack to say enough to set his chum guessing, and then leave him "up in the air" so to speak. Tom looked again at the child. He could see that he had made no mistake when thinking she was winsome, at first sight. He also knew that it would be impossible to make Jack talk until he had read several times over the letter Bessie had written to him, and it was a very fat letter.

"Come and make friends with me, little girl," Tom said. "Can you speak English, I wonder, or will I have to try my stumbling French on you? What is your name?" [22]

"It is Jeanne, M'sieu!" lisped the child, sweetly, and Tom was more than ever drawn toward her when he saw the appealing smile on her face.

"Jeanne, is it? A very pretty name too. Jeanne what?" he went on. And as Tom always won the confidence of children by his kindly manner she drew closer to him, and he took her little hand in his and squeezed it.

"Jeanne Anstey, M'sieu. And my sister's name, it is Helene," she told him.

"Oh! then you have a sister, have you?" Tom continued. "Where is Helene just now, Jeanne?"

The child's eyes immediately filled with tears. Still, with a queer little French shrug that was almost comical in one so very young, she said pathetically:

"Ah, M'sieu, it is the pity that I do not know. That bad man took her away while my poor mamma lay dying, trying to hold Helene. Me, mamma hid from the man. I sometimes wish it had been me he took on his horse with him, instead of Helene."

Tom began to wonder what lay back of all this. He looked toward Jack, to see that the other had paused in his reading as if to listen.

"Tell you all about it as soon as I get through this letter from my mother, Tom," the other remarked. "Well worth waiting to hear, too, I give you my word. One of the queerest things that ever happened to me. I've already more than half promised Jeanne we'll try our level best to find Helene, her twin sister, for her." [23]

"Nice of you I'm sure," chuckled Tom; "but I want to hear what it's all about before I cast my vote. Little time we've got these busy days to go chasing around the country hunting for lost children, sorry as I feel for the little thing."

"Just wait, and don't take snap judgment, that's all, Tom. Guess I know about how it'll strike you. Give me five minutes more to clean up here, and I'll tell you everything."

So Tom continued to amuse himself by talking with the wonderfully bright little French child, who proved more and more interesting on further acquaintance. Undoubtedly one of her parents had been English, a fact which would account for her speaking the language so correctly. From her name of Anstey he concluded this must have been her father, while the mother was very likely French, hence Jeanne and that other name, Helene.

"Now I'm ready to explain things, Tom," announced Jack, who wore the marks to tell that he, too, along with Tom, had reached the rank of sergeant in the Flying Corps.

"Glad to hear you say so, because you've managed to get me as curious as any old woman," grumbled Tom. "First of all, tell me how you fared back there over the battlelines. You didn't seem at all surprised to find me here; yet I reckon you knew I took a tumble?" [24]

"Oh, I met Lefty Marr on the way here, and he told me you'd come back in good shape. But poor Hennessy was badly mauled, they say. How about him? As good an observer as there is in the whole sector!"

"Pretty badly knocked out, and his flying days are about finished, I'm afraid," Tom admitted. "He'll be months in the sick ward; and by the time he gets to going we Yankees will have sewed up the game. Go to it now, Jack."

"Oh, I managed to get in a circus after I saw you go down, Tom," the other replied. "I was feeling pretty punk and ugly because I didn't know whether I'd ever see you again, for it looked as if you'd either been killed or fallen into the hands of the Boches—and that was almost as bad a job."

"Well, we had a glorious little run for our money, and I sent down one Hun, and crippled another chap's machine so that he had to turn tail and scoot for home. Then came three other big Gothas that set me to spinning on my head. But after they'd chased me for miles, a leak in my tank let out every drop of petrol; and so the only thing to do was to drop down and make a landing." [25]

"Luck favored us and we dropped on to a field. The Huns hung around a bit as if they wanted to make sure of us; but Morgan and I managed to crawl into a thicket, and so they went away finally."

"We were several miles from our base, and with no petrol to be had for love or money. Morgan said he'd stay by the plane while I walked all the way to get a supply. Tom, it was the luckiest thing going for this child here that I decided on taking that walk along the woods road; I don't know what would have become of her otherwise."

He stopped speaking to pat the black-haired child caressingly. That was really one of the finest things marking the conduct of the American soldiers in France—their respect for women and their love for children. Those boys in khaki captured myriads of French mothers' hearts by the way they romped with the youngsters and bought them all sorts of dainties at the Y. M. C. A. huts.

"I came on her suddenly, and of course stopped to say a few words, because it is hard for me to pass a child by," Jack continued. "And after I'd asked her a few questions I found that I was getting mightily interested in Jeanne." [26]

"Then she began tugging at something that was fastened by a ribbon about her neck. I soon discovered it was a locket, somewhat battered to be sure, but still pretty. She proceeded to try to open this, but her chubby little fingers didn't seem equal to the task, so I did it for her."

"It held a bit of very thin paper, and on taking this out I found it was covered with writing, in French of course, and done with a lead pencil at that. Slowly I managed to make out what the letter said, for it was a letter, Tom, meant especially for me, simply because I had been, by

chance, the one to stop and speak to the child.

"Listen now, Tom, and I'll read you what is written here on the paper, just as I managed to translate it. And be ready to hold your breath, too, because there's something of a real thrill connected with it."

"Shoot!" was all Tom said in reply.

CHAPTER IV

[27]

THE STORY OF THE LORRAINE WAIF

JACK had taken the locket in question out of his coat-pocket and opened it, extracting the folded paper it contained. This latter he smoothed out, for it was a mass of creases, from having been crushed into so small a receptacle.

"To the kind friend who finds my child,' it starts," said Jack impressively. "Her name is Jeanne Anstey. I am her wretched and dying mother, dying for my beloved France. It is the Boche who has done this. They came at daylight, and burned the poor cottage in which we have been making our home.

"That terrible man was here with them as before, mounted on his horse, and with all his trappings. His name it is Anton von Berthold, and he is my half-brother. To my face he boasted, knowing that I was surely dying, that through Helene he meant some day to claim our estate in Lorraine, where there are deposits of iron that will be worth millions of francs yearly.

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"I believe he has long plotted to get hold of this property, and schemed to secure his ends through one of my poor children. Oh! if you have a heart, my friend, I pray you by all you hold sacred to see that my Jeanne is cared for; and, if it be possible, try to save my poor Helene from that monster.

"This is the plea of a dying Frenchwoman. I have faith to believe Heaven will not desert the innocent in their hour of suffering. So I lay me down to rest, while my Jeanne will go forth in search of you, kind friend. And with my last breath I still proudly say, "*Vive la France!*"

"Is that all?" asked Tom, as his chum stopped.

"Yes, and there are some of the words blurred. I think it must have been through the tears of this poor woman. She seems to have been wealthy before the Huns drove her out of Lorraine because she had French blood in her veins, and was probably married to an Englishman. What do you think of it, Tom?"

"It's certainly a dreadful thing for so small a child as Jeanne to be left alone in the world," replied the other. "What can we do about her, Jack, have you any idea?"

Jack remained for a moment in deep thought. Then he gave his comrade a sidewise look as he spoke again.

"Do you know," he ventured to say, "it has struck me that if we could get an hour or two off duty this evening you and I might take the little thing to Nellie and ask her if she couldn't have her looked after, as long as the Gleasons are out of reach in the south of France."

[29]

"Nellie Leroy!" exclaimed Tom, astonished, "Why, how could we manage it? The last I heard she was in a hospital on the French front, over in the mountain section of Alsace."

"Oh, I've had later news than that," replied Jack. "Met Harry yesterday, and among other things he mentioned the fact that his sister had been transferred to the American front; in fact was right then only a few miles away from where we stood and talked."

"You never said a word to me about it, Jack! Nor has Nellie written—unless her letter was lost."

"Meant to tell you, Tom, several times, but something always butted in; and finally it slipped my mind. And, really, I supposed you knew. But what do you think of my scheme?"

"Perfectly lovely. It's about the only way I see that we can get Jeanne into proper hands. Nellie has a heart of gold, and will manage somehow to see that the little thing is properly cared for."

"Especially when she learns that you've constituted yourself Jeanne's guardian and protector," chuckled Jack.

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"Let up on that, I tell you!"

"Well, this child seems to be thrown in my way for a purpose, and, Tom, I'm going to try my level best to save her twin sister from that scoundrel of an uncle," announced Jack, with returning seriousness.

"Hear! hear!" chuckled Tom. "All the knights haven't cashed in yet, it seems. You ought to have

a Sancho Panza around, Jack, because you're out to rescue beauty in distress; even if in this case the little lady is only about six years old. But tell me again what the name of the arch villain is. At the time you mentioned it before, I thought it seemed sort of familiar to me."

Jack referred again to the crumpled slip of paper to make certain, after which he announced:

"A regular German name, it seems, though he may of course be a Lorrainer, as Jeanne's mother was. Anton von Berthold."

"H'm! Thought so!" Tom burst out. "Don't you remember there's a General von Berthold on the other side, a particularly smart military man, too, who they say originated this machine-gun-nest business as a means for delaying the pursuit of a retreating army?"

"Tom, you're right!" exclaimed Jack, evidently annoyed, thinking that that circumstance might make his self-assumed task the more difficult. "Wouldn't it be queer if he should prove to be the very one? It doesn't seem reasonable to me." [31]

"Why not?" demanded his companion quickly. "Couldn't a German general conspire to lay hands on the property of a relative just as easily as any ordinary person? Haven't they been accused of stealing most of the valuables in Belgium and Northern France as spoils of war, from priceless paintings and works of art to family plate and jewelry?"

"I reckon you're about right, Tom, so far as that goes," agreed Jack, finally impressed by what his chum said. "General Anton von Berthold—if we find out that is his first name it would settle it for me. And then we could perhaps learn from one of the prisoners we find in the barbed wire stockade something about his goings-on, where he's putting up at present, and all that, you know."

"And in the meantime don't you think Jeanne would like something to eat?" asked Tom. "How could she ever have managed to make her way through the Boche lines, and get to where you ran across her?"

"I've tried to find out," Jack told him. "She mentions something about being taken by a neighbor after that man carried her sister away on his horse. They told her that her mother had died, and been buried. Then one day she was taken, hidden under a load of forage, and carried miles away. When she was put down in the end they told her she could soon find the Americans, who were near by. But she had wandered about in the forest for nearly a whole day before I came on her." [32]

"Well, let's skirmish for something to eat. Our chef is a good friend of yours, Jack; suppose you go around and tell him what's doing. He'll not refuse to let you have something for a poor little girl. Take Jeanne along with you. She'll win Erastus over without fail by one of her smiles."

"I'll do it, though I hardly think it necessary. The poor little thing must be awfully tired, too. But I'll carry her, I did that most of the journey here. Then to get some gas and start back to where Morgan is sitting on our plane, waiting for me to come."

"Here, you get busy with that gas and I'll manage the grub part of the programme! If Erastus declines to fork over I'll choke him. But I know he can't refuse when he sees her," and Tom jerked his thumb backward while saying this toward Jeanne, now sitting on a friendly stump looking about her with interest at the bustling scene.

Jack hurried away to secure a can of gasoline, while Tom took Jeanne by the hand and led her toward the air squadron's camp kitchen, or "chuck-wagon." [33]

Erastus, the cook, was as usual about that hour as busy as a bee. With so many hungry men to provide for when meal time came around, he hardly found a minute to call his own.

It chanced, however, that Tom, as well as Jack, had become a favorite with the cook, and he always had a cheery word for either of the young air pilots.

"Ah, there, Sergeant, where'd you get the skirt?" he remarked, giving little Jeanne several winks, though the red of his face was only indicative of good-nature.

It smelled so good around the steamer of coffee and the piles of fresh bread which Erastus and his helper had piled up that even the timid child smiled back at the one who seemed to be the "boss" of all that vast array of good things—much more than she had ever seen before in all her life.

For Jeanne was very, very hungry, having eaten almost nothing since the previous afternoon.

"Jack came across her, you see, Erastus, and—" bending forward so Jeanne might not hear what he said—"she's lost her sister, and the mother has died, a victim of the Huns. Erastus, she's nearly starved, and I was wondering whether you wouldn't give me something for her." [34]

"Against orders, you know, Sergeant," said the other. Then he looked more pityingly than ever at the pretty child. "But just this once I might," he added. "Say, I'd go without my own supper sooner'n see that duck suffer, sure I would. Wait around, and see what happens, Sergeant."

Tom did linger, apparently explaining to little Jeanne all about the wonderful invention in the way of a cook's outfit that could take care of a multitude of hungry fighters, and which was modeled somewhat on the pattern of the "chuck-wagon" long in use on the cattle ranges of the

far Southwest.

Then there was a mysterious passing of something that Tom hastened to stow away, an exchange of muttered words with the rosy-cheeked cook, after which Tom and Jeanne went back to the quarters of the boys, where for some little time he watched the almost starving child devour quantities of bread and butter—actually real butter—made into sandwiches which Erastus had hastily done up for her.

Tom was about to go to headquarters with the request that he and Jack might be allowed a short furlough in order to take the little girl to put her in Nellie Leroy's care when an orderly came with a message from the young airman's superior officer ordering him to go out on special scout duty. [35]

It was with a half sigh that Tom Raymond began his preparations, for his interest in Nellie was deep, and he had looked forward with pleasure to this chance of seeing her, and now he must leave this matter wholly to his chum.

Still, little Jeanne Anstey was Jack's "find," and the young air pilot was evidently deeply interested in the child and wanted to aid her with as little help from others, even from his best chum, as was possible. Perhaps, after all, Tom felt, it was best that the matter was left to Jack.

But Jack was a long time in returning. In a short time Tom must go on duty, and what was he to do with Jeanne in the meanwhile?

"Little girls are all right," murmured Tom, "but I guess they are not much in my line. Gee! I wish Jack would come."

CHAPTER V

A RED CROSS NURSE

HALF an hour later, and just as Tom was growing desperate, his companions in the flying unit having one and all laughingly refused to help him out of his predicament by acting as "nurse maid," as they called it, Jack showed up again. [36]

"Got the old bus safe in its shed all right," he told his chum, nodding cheerily to Jeanne, who greeted his coming with a smile. "Now to hit the grub pile and then to see if we can get off for a short time! Got to make some arrangement for Jeanne tonight, you know, Tom!"

"You do," assented the other, "but I'm out of it." Then Tom told his chum of his own assignment to special duty. "I'm off now, but don't forget to give Nellie my best regards."

"I sure will, Tom," answered Jack.

With that he hurried away to learn if anything worth eating had been left after the ferocious charge, not of the Light Brigade, but a pack of hungry Yankees whose capacity for storing away food seemed unbounded. [37]

Jack either had scanty pickings, or else he tempted an attack of dyspepsia by bolting his food, for inside of ten minutes he was around again. Tom, who had not yet got away on his mission, looked surprised.

"Cleaned out, were they, at the chuck-wagon?" he asked.

"Well, Erastus told me that he had had a most unusual run on his outfit this evening, and so I just took a bite in a hurry. You know, if I feel like it I can stop in at the Red Triangle hut on the way to the field hospital and buy some chocolate. Then if I run across any Salvation Army girls it's possible they'll have a few of their doughnuts left over. That would be a great treat to Jeanne."

"I reckon either of them would," remarked Tom thoughtfully. "If her folks have been back of the Boche lines all these four years they must have lived on short rations. Here, Jack, I insist on standing for half of all the expense. Take this silver and call on me for any amount as you may need it. I won't listen to a refusal, understand."

Jack had been about to decline absolutely, but on second thought he accepted the loose change.

"Fact is, Jeanne will need some things most likely, for you can see how miserable her shoes are, while her clothes look mighty seedy. Now, Nellie, we both happen to know, is a clever hand at such things, and she'll be only too glad to take charge of Jeanne's wardrobe. So I'll accept your offer. Anyway, we've always shared alike in everything, as equal partners should." [38]

"Yes, even to that licking I once got when you were caught under Amos Grimes' peach tree hunting for the ball I knocked over the fence. He vowed you were after his fruit, and started to give you a taste of the switch he carried."

"Yes," broke in Jack, chuckling. "And you, meaning to explain, came over the fence, only to get

a taste of the same switch. I always did believe he divided the honors equally between us, and that you got some of the stripes he'd intended for me. Come, Jeanne, we'll be going now."

"But how about your leaving the camp here without orders, Jack? I was going to ask for this leave when my assignment to duty came; so I did not ask."

"Oh, I met Captain Desmond on the way to the chuck-wagon and explained things to him, so he gave me permission to be gone up to midnight."

"And you'll use it up to the last minute, I warrant," laughed Tom, actually kissing, in the renewed courage Jack's return gave him, the red lips of the little French girl, who already seemed to look upon these two tall young Americans as friends raised up by a special Providence to help her. He then hurried away. [39]

Jack took Jeanne's hand in his and they walked along. Much comment was caused on his being thus seen by many of the other airmen in the camp adjoining the field of the khaki-colored hangars. Jack took it all in his customary happy-go-lucky way and sent back as good as he received.

When they came to the dugout that was serving as a temporary refuge for the Red Triangle workers, the hut of refreshment such as the Y. M. C. A. girls and men were in the habit of putting up, often close back of the firing line, Jack took his little charge in with him.

Jeanne's pretty face and bewitching ways immediately won the hearts of the girls in khaki who were doing war work. They clustered about the pair, and asked many questions; but as Jack was in somewhat of a hurry he could answer them only in a general way.

"She's lost her mother, and her twin sister was carried away by a Boche general who is some relation, though he hates the family. My chum and I mean to provide for little Jeanne. I'm taking her now to a girl friend who is a Red Cross nurse in the field hospital."

He hurriedly made his purchases, and they went on, Jeanne eagerly devouring part of a cake of chocolate, though she also persisted in clinging to Jack's hand. Somehow it made the boy feel much older when he felt that confiding little hand in his. It seemed as though new responsibilities had been suddenly thrust upon him. [40]

The approach of night had put an end to most of the clamor that made day seem so hideous. Only occasionally did a Big Bertha in the far distance growl menacingly, to be followed by the crash of a mighty shell somewhere within a mile or two of the spot where Jack and his charge walked along through the forest.

He was stopped and challenged frequently, but having the countersign, had no difficulty in passing the sentries. Many campfires twinkled under the trees, near and far, where tired doughboys were resting and doubtless exchanging stories of the day's exciting achievements; or talking of home—what Broadway looked like, or Fourth Street, or Canal Street; what the result of the world series of baseball games, a pet subject of dispute among these brawny followers of the national sport.

"Getting tired, are you, Jeanne?" asked Jack presently, noticing that the child dragged her little feet at times, despite all efforts to show a brave front.

Without waiting for an answer Jack scooped her up in his arms, and persisted in carrying her the rest of the way. Before they reached the field hospital poor little tired Jeanne was fast asleep, snuggled in those protecting arms, and as Jack looked down on her baby face, seen in the first lights he came to, he renewed his vow to stand by the orphan through thick and thin. [41]

But here was the long low shed hastily put together, and fashioned so that it could be taken down and moved farther along to the new front every few days. Through the opening he glimpsed figures in white, bearing the symbolic Red Cross on headpiece and left arm, moving about among the white cots, attending to the wounded soldiers.

It was not long before Jack discovered the particular nurse for whom he was looking. Nellie Leroy may have seemed young for such duties, but what she lacked in age she more than made up for by her wonderful skill. Indeed the head surgeon many times declared that the girl was a born nurse; and when there was a particularly interesting case to be attended he made it a point to see that the patient was placed in Nellie's ward.

So Jack and his burden appeared before Nellie. She of course looked very much surprised to see him, but the smile on her pretty face told Jack his coming was most welcome to Harry's sister. Nellie thought a great deal of Tom Raymond but she liked Jack also. [42]

"Put the child on this empty cot, and then tell me all about her," said Nellie. "Who is she and how do you come to be bringing her here? I hope it isn't because the poor baby has been injured; though those Boches seem to be equal to anything that is cruel and terrible."

"I'll be only too glad to explain everything, Nellie," Jack said, after he had done as she told him, and watched, perhaps half enviously, while the tender-hearted nurse bent over and kissed sleeping Jeanne on her forehead. "Can you spare a little time just now? The story isn't going to be very long; although I'm in no hurry to get back."

"It happens that we're through much sooner than usual tonight," she assured him. "And

besides, I'll ask Mollie King to look after my patients, as hers were mostly taken south in the last detachment of ambulances bound for the base hospitals. Here, sit down on this bench, Jack, and I'll be back in a minute. But first, how is Tom?"

On the young nurse's return Jack told his story in detail. Nellie listened with deep interest. She would have been better satisfied if modest Jack had only been more enlightening with regard to his thrilling engagement with the Hun fliers; but then she knew his failings did not lie in the field of boasting, and so she had to picture those incidents for herself.

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Jack was more inclined to go into details when Jeanne came into the story.

"Here's the paper that was in the gold locket, Nellie," he told her. "Read it for yourself. You can get the meaning of the French a heap better than I ever could. It'll make the tears come in your eyes though, when you picture that poor woman dying there, one child carried off by that villain of a relative, and the other about to be cast adrift on a world at war."

"How dreadful it all is, Jack!" said the nurse, after she had finished reading the crumpled bit of paper that held such a tragic story. "Now tell me why you have brought little Jeanne to me?"

"Because, Nellie," said Jack, "Tom and I knew we could depend on your warm heart to manage somehow or other. She's got to have shoes and clothes, and then be placed in the charge of some decent person until Tom and I can come and claim her, after we chase these Boches back over the Rhine, and the war is over. Bessie and her mother have left Paris for a while and are in Nice, too far away for me to send Jeanne to them. We—Tom and I—did not know another girl or woman to turn to, so I have come to you."

Nellie bent her head in deep thought, while Jack waited anxiously. Presently she looked up and smiled into his eager face.

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"I'll manage it all right, Jack, leave it to me," she told him. "I may have to keep her with me for a day or two, though a field hospital is a dreadful place for a child to stay in. When I've found a way to get her the necessities she must have I'll make sure she is placed with some good people who for a consideration will care for her."

"Fine, Nellie! But then it's no more than I expected from you!" Jack told her, in a low tone. "There's another thing I want to explain. Tom and I have money enough, you know, and we've made up a purse to carry our ward along for some time. Take these French notes, and make any arrangement you see fit with the person in whose care you leave her. There's plenty more cash where this came from."

"But Jack, I'd like to share with you two generous boys in this kind deed of yours," protested Nellie. "I have means, too, and wouldn't miss anything we might plan to contribute between us."

"Ah, you'll be doing the hardest part as it is, Nellie," he told her, and then on second thought, realizing that such an arrangement might afford him and Tom many an excuse for seeing Nellie as well as Jeanne, he added: "But I'll talk it over with Tom, and if he's willing we might let you come into the partnership arrangement. Isn't she a little darling, though? I'm speaking of Jeanne now."

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After that they found much to talk about, and it was quite late when Jack finally got up to go. Jeanne was still sound asleep.

"I'll get her into bed presently, when I've looked after several of my more seriously wounded patients," Nellie assured him. "And when you come again perhaps I'll have made a start on her wardrobe; though I imagine it's going to be a serious job to collect anything here. But some of the nurses will be only too glad to help. When shall I see you again, Jack?"

"Oh! Me? Why, I'll try to get around to-morrow night, if they'll give me permission. Tom, too, I hope. Of course there'll be heaps we must talk over. This thing of being guardian to a real flesh-and-blood child is a serious business. So I'll say good-night. Kiss little Jeanne for me, and I'll try not to forget one of your messages to Tom. Now, good-bye."

CHAPTER VI

[46]

CLEANING OUT MACHINE-GUN NESTS

"A BUSY day ahead of us, Jack!" Tom remarked the next morning, after they had breakfasted and were getting themselves ready for going up.

Early though the hour was it seemed as though the whole inferno of terrible noises had broken out much louder than on the preceding day. From every quarter men could be heard shouting; while detachments of infantry were hurrying off with orders to reach certain points before nightfall, no matter what obstacles they had to surmount.

The big guns were "talking," and there began to be heard the chatter of deadly machine-guns; the deep-toned explosion of shells, and the peculiar sound of the German minnewurfer, used with such effect in the former trench battles that the Boche still clung to it through all the retreat.

Then there were close around them planes starting off with a rush, pilots and observers gaily waving their hands to comrades still detained, but just as eager to go as though it were a picnic to which they were thus invited instead of a possible repast with the Grim Reaper.

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"What makes you think it's bound to be any different from yesterday, Tom?" demanded the one spoken to, as he adjusted a strap, and took a last critical survey of the more important wire stays of his machine upon which so much depended.

"Oh! not different, only more of it," Tom explained. "On our scouting expedition last night we found that the Huns have a series of extra strong nests fixed for us to-day. We're to arrange with the batteries for signaling in regard to these, for they would take too big a toll of the boys if rushed like the common variety, where there's only one gun and a couple of Boches to handle it."

"Glad to hear it," snapped Jack. "So far neither of us has had the good luck to locate a big hornets' nest. I hope our chance comes to-day. I've always wanted to see how that game worked."

"Well, perhaps you'll know more about it when we meet to-night, which it is to be hoped will come about," said Tom, a bit seriously.

Indeed, in those strenuous times none in the army could be at all certain he would be in the land of the living a few hours ahead. In particular the daring air pilots who so often took great hazards were in peril. Yet the men went about their duties with apparently light hearts.

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"Here's Harry!" exclaimed Jack, a moment afterwards, as a wideawake looking young fellow stopped for a minute near them, being on the way to his hangar in company with his assistant.

Harry Leroy had become very friendly with the two air service boys, although they had not known him until long after reaching France. But he was a genial boy, known to be an unusually clever air pilot and well on the way to being cited as an American ace, for he had now disabled his quota of enemy machines.

"They tell me we're going to make a big dent in the Boche lines to-day, fellows!" he sang out, with one of his genial smiles. "Our commander has a programme laid out that's said to be pretty ambitious. Some of us are even hoping it may turn out to be the real start for the Rhine, and that we'll clean up this old Argonne region pretty soon now."

"Slow but sure is our policy these days, Harry," Tom remarked. "It takes a heap of time, and makes a hole in our reserves; but the work is done so thoroughly that it'll stay done. And soon we'll be out of the woods."

"The boys are longing for that day to come," said Harry, about to start on once more. "They're just sick and tired of this kind of fighting. Wait till we get Fritz out in the open, and you'll see how well rush him back like hot cakes! So long, both of you. Here's wishing you the best of luck and another notch in your stick by nightfall."

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Of course Tom had secured another observer in place of the poor fellow who had been so badly injured on that other flight of his. His arm, too, had healed.

Shortly afterwards the air service boys received word to start, and along with four other planes mounted upward like birds on the wing.

So far as appearances went the scene below them did not differ materially from the preceding day. There was the same vast stretch of grim forest known as the Argonne, with occasional openings here and there, "breathing spots," they might be called. These marked sites of farms, timber or cutting authorized at some past day by the French government, that controlled the wonderful tract of woods, possibly the largest in all France. Smoke was already rolling upward in great volumes while the air pulsated with the fearful crash of every imaginable type of gun, both large and small. As the day wore on all this was bound to increase greatly, the impetuous Americans pushing forward and wresting rod after rod of the forest from the enemy, paying the price without a murmur, but grimly determined.

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Jack having attained the required altitude commenced "fishing." That was his way of describing the means employed for learning where the Huns were lying in wait, ready to pour in a deadly machine-gun fire on the first detachment of Yankees that came along.

The darting plane would dive down close to the tops of the tall trees, and thus offer such a tantalizing bait that the concealed Hun gunners, unable to resist the temptation, were likely to shoot at the cruising machine.

Of course this would expose their secret hiding-place, but inaccurately located in the darkness the night before, and it was the business of the observer to signal his discovery back to those who were on the watch.

The consequence would be that instead of making a frontal attack on that particular nest, the infantry would resort to Indian tactics, making a flank movement that would carry them past, then closing in from the rear. At a given signal some of their mates would make a hostile demonstration in front to chain the attention of the gunners, while others would creep up so close from the rear that they would be able to get both men.

Of course this meant that the venturesome fliers would be taking additional risks. When that machine-gun should start to pepper their plane they were likely to be struck by one or more of

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the shower of missiles coming hissing up like enraged hornets. What matter, when they were accepting chances just as desperate every minute of the time they remained aloft?

Jack and his assistant, Morgan, found themselves busily engaged inside of ten minutes. They swooped so low that suddenly there was a burst of fire, and bullets commenced to cut through both wings of their plane. The body had been sheathed in metal that would serve to ward off most of this hail, but despite this they took many chances of a mishap.

Immediately Morgan noted the exact spot from which the firing came, so he could locate it in sending out his signal of warning. Jack meanwhile was doing his part, dodging in zigzag curves in all directions in order to baffle the aim of the Hun gunners.

Then, too, the trees helped greatly to conceal them from the observation of the enemy below; so that the firing kept up for a very brief time only. But their trick had succeeded. The Boches dared not come out from their place of concealment lest they be discovered and shot down by the stealthily advancing Americans. Perhaps they were even chained there, as frequently happened. [52]

In consequence they had to cower under their shelter and wait until, later on, without warning, there would come loud shouts from the front, and when they craned their necks to catch the first glimpse of the foe shots from the rear would clean up that nest.

Morgan started with his signal work immediately after they had climbed to the proper altitude, where they might work without being in too great danger from the "Archies," or anti-aircraft guns.

As soon as he had a response, and knew that his directions were accurately noted, he announced the fact to Jack. They were then ready to begin all over and start "fishing" again.

It was very exciting work, and Jack Parmly gloried in it. Though he had to take additional chances in order to tempt the Hun gunners to betray their cunningly arranged coverts, there was also a satisfaction in knowing that by so doing he and his assistant were saving many precious lives of the infantry regiments down in the forest that had proved a graveyard for thousands.

A second time did they get a "bite." Again was the retreat conducted in the midst of a rattling volley, with hurtling missiles burning the air all around them, as well as beating a lively tattoo on the armored parts of their plane. [53]

After that they flew higher, in the hope that some enterprising Boche flier, seeing their challenge, would come over to give them battle. For half an hour, they kept this up, and then, as they tempted forth no adversary, determined to drop down once more and root out a third nest before going in for the noonday meal.

"They're at it hammer and tongs to-day for fair!" called out Morgan, as he used his binoculars and picked out spots far below where there seemed to be open fighting going on. He could discover bodies of German troops being rushed forward and then falling back with decimated ranks before a fierce flame of shot and shell poured in by Yankee batteries.

"Getting desperate, that's what!" announced Jack, starting a dip that by stages would take them down once more into the dangerous quarter of treetops under which lurked the deadly foe with his thousands of rapid-fire guns.

Other planes were in sight here and there, carrying out similar tactics with more or less success, according to the daring of the pilot in tempting the Huns beyond their power to resist. Jack determined to pass further on and see what he could unearth in a new quarter. [54]

What he and his chum had been talking of that very morning was still fresh in his mind. How he would like to discover one of those unusual nests where half a dozen or more gun crews lurked, ready to hold up that entire sector of the advancing line, so the American troops would be unable to reach their objective for that day at least.

So it was in the hope of attaining this end that he now flew to another section of the forest which he had been desirous all morning of visiting, under the impression that it might yield the bag to which he aspired in his search for game.

As they circled over the tree tops Morgan was turning his glasses to the best advantage. Jack kept trying to cover the ground systematically, and yet making numerous quick jumps so as to disconcert the enemy should a sudden fierce burst of firing announce that a nest had been located.

All at once Morgan gave a loud cry. It seemed to spell victory, and Jack instantly called out:

"Struck oil, have you, Felix? Where away does it lie?"

"Look down to the left and you'll just glimpse what seems to be the stone base of an old abandoned windmill, I think, Jack. All overgrown with weeds and brush, it is too. I saw a number of men moving about, and some of them were crouching back of their biggest machine-guns. This is one of those jumbo forts we've heard of; no mistake about it either." [55]

"Grab off the location to a dot then, Felix, and we'll see what can be done for those waiting Yankee batteries!" snapped Jack, greatly excited, as well as pleased, by their important discovery. "Let me know when you have your landmarks, and I'll elevate, so we can get in touch with the battery observer."

"It's the king-pin of all their nests, Jack, a regular bouncer, I tell you!" cried the other, using his glasses again to advantage.

"All right then," the pilot assured him, "we'll see that their name is mud before much longer. Ready, Felix?"

Instead of giving Jack the reply which the other expected the observer gave a sudden startled yell.

"They've got us trapped, Jack! Sure they have! Look up!" came his warning shout, and as the pilot craned his neck to obey he discovered no less than three big German Gotha battleplanes hovering over them, waiting to engage them in a most unequal combat.

CHAPTER VII

[56]

"MOPPING 'EM UP!"

FROM below there suddenly burst a dangerous bombardment. The German gunners hidden in the camouflaged pile of rocks had apparently decided that the airmen in the two-seated plane hovering above had discovered their place of concealment, and, unable to endure the thought of being flanked by the oncoming boys in khaki, had opened fire.

Of course their plan was to bring down the American machine and seal the lips of those who flew in it before they could communicate the nature of their discovery to their comrades.

This made the situation doubly perilous for Jack and Morgan. If they attempted to rise, as discretion suggested, there were those three grim monster Hun Gothas waiting to envelop them with an avalanche of gunfire. This could have only one result; namely, the destruction of the plane bearing the totem of the Red Indian's head.

It was a time for quick decision. As the deadly missiles from below continued to pepper the air around them, and even beat a tattoo against the body of their plane, Jack started into a series of wigwag evolutions which he had evolved for just such a desperate situation.

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This gave him a better chance, although at any second one of the flying bullets was apt to find its way aboard and do either himself or Morgan an ill turn.

Whichever way he turned so wheeled those sentry planes above. They were like a trio of hungry cats watching the twistings and turnings of a poor mouse that had its safety-hole stopped up, and could find no means of escape left open. And with three agile cats on guard what chance had little Mr. Mouse?

But then Jack Parmly had often proved himself to be one of those who refuse to call themselves beaten until the very last effort has been made. He had been in tight places before, and had always managed to wriggle out by some means or other.

Besides this, there was some hope that his predicament would be seen by other American airmen scouring around the skies, who, with the accustomed daring of their breed, would fly immediately to his relief.

Even as this thought flashed through his brain Jack believed he heard the sound of firing directly above him; though it was only because of a sudden lull in the continual fighting all through that region that he was able to discover this fact.

[58]

Then came a yell from Morgan, who, not having to manipulate the motor and handle the levers, had been better able to observe all that was going on around them.

"Shoot up, Jack? We've got to do our share in driving those Boches off!"

Yes, there had been an increase in the number of circling planes hovering over them, since Jack could now count five. All were in violent motion, circling this way, and darting the other, rising and falling in a movement only adopted when a fierce engagement was on.

Even though their flight was so rapid Jack quickly made the two newcomers out to be friends, for they handled machines similar to his own.

That opened a way for him to escape possible destruction at the hands of the gunners below, who were increasing their volume of fire. So up Jack turned the nose of his plane, and quickly reached the elevation where all this work was going on.

So the battle of the six enemy planes began, Jack immediately singling out one of the Huns for his own particular attention. Alert, eager, and fairly itching to get even with the Boche fliers for the fright they had given him, Morgan crouched in his seat, ready to start firing when the first favorable moment came along.

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It must have been an inspiring sight to any who watched the fight from below; at least, if he wore the khaki of the American army boys. The Germans would hardly be so apt to suck consolation from the picture, since it early became apparent that their representatives no longer

attacked with dash and enthusiasm, but seemed to be acting solely on the defensive.

They may have been veteran aces, with a long list of disabled planes to their individual credit, but there was something about the dash and vim of these Yankee fliers that combined all the better qualities of both British and French airmen, and discouraged the enemy greatly.

Jack swooped down upon his antagonist, and fired when he fancied he had the enemy in range of his machine-gun fire. The Boche on his part was reciprocating, so that the exchange of shots was mutual.

They passed at a little distance like swallows on the wing, the guns chattering and smoking, and the air filled with a shower of missiles that for the most part would be utterly wasted.

Then Morgan took up the challenge, and continued to pepper the speeding Gotha as long as it remained within range. A turn on the part of Jack put a temporary end to the bombardment. But now they were once more spinning toward the enemy. [60]

Around them a wild scene was being enacted, with the other quartette of planes swooping down on each other.

Apparently all this work had so far been without result; but Jack could plainly see that the Huns were quite satisfied with what little they may have accomplished in the battle, and were anxious to pull out.

As if a concerted signal had been given, the three Gothas were soon in retreat. No doubt the sight drew many a hoarse, derisive yell from watching Americans below, who could not understand the feeling of extreme caution that would tempt an air pilot to turn tail and run for home when opposed on equal terms.

They made excellent speed, too, and after chasing them for a short distance the Americans turned back. There was work much more important awaiting their attention just then than following the fleeing Boche fliers to some spot, where possibly a swarm of their mates would be turned loose to cut off escape and bring the daring Americans down.

One of the two friendly machines that had so opportunely come to the relief of Jack and Morgan now approached. To the delight of Jack he recognized in the muffled figure waving a gloved hand at him no other than Harry Leroy. [61]

"A bunch of slick runners all right, Jack!" bawled Nellie's brother, as the two planes passed not far distant from each other.

"They're all right when three to one!" answered Jack, as he circled in order to keep close to the other for a brief time.

"What luck?" demanded Harry; for of course that was the one important subject ever on their minds when thus out hunting for hidden snipers' nests.

"Got two to-day so far," called Jack. "Then came over here looking for a boss nest. Found it, too, down there; and we're going now to see what our battery boys can do with it."

"Fine work, Jack! Here's wishing you luck. We'll move along and see if we can duplicate your job!"

"Success to you!"

So they separated there, far above the seemingly endless forest where the two opposing armies were grappling in a death grip, the one bent on victory, the other striving desperately to put off the evil day as long as possible, in the hope of a break in their favor.

Jack knew what he and Morgan had next to do. It was to begin signaling to catch the attention of the observers with the American batteries, doubtless waiting impatiently for a chance such as this, and which thus far had been denied them. [62]

He was at the proper altitude, safe from fire from below, and with all enemy planes driven off. The growl of the big guns came less furiously to their ears, so far removed from the ground were they. The incessant whirl of the Liberty motor that had come from American shops and the buzz of the propellers rendered it difficult for him to hold converse with his assistant.

"Felix, have you got your bearings sized up O K?" he called out.

"I could drop a bomb for a direct hit, Jack, if I had one," came the confident answer.

"All right then; go to it."

As Morgan was the observer and signal man of the combination it now became his duty to make use of the flags intended to convey the news that one of those reported "strong nests," carrying from half a dozen of the largest Boche machine-guns all the way up to twice that, had been located.

Jack managed the machine so that his assistant might be best served. And as Morgan knew just about where to look for an answering flag he presently gave tongue in a way that told of success.

"Raised him, Jack!" he called out joyously. "Swing around more to the left and we'll be exactly over that den. There! I can drop the smoke signal now, all right, and well soon see what comes of it."

[63]

Immediately afterwards those in the distance who were eagerly watching every action of the hovering plane must have seen through their powerful glasses a trail of smoke dropping from its body. It signified that just at that moment the Yankee flier was hanging over the object to which the attention of the gunners was called.

Quickly would the necessary calculations be made, while Jack kept circling around and around, just as a buzzard might when it had located a promising feast below.

Jack, too, watched that sector as well as he could and attend to his duties at the same time. He wished he had the binoculars in his hands just then, while he steered with his knees; but it was more important that Morgan retain possession of the glasses.

A yell from the observer announced that something had happened of a pleasing character. Jack guessed its nature even before he heard the other shouting.

"They've begun business, Jack! The whole battery let loose then in concert! Say, there's yet another close by! And yes, they're breaking into the game too! Oh, you Boche, I pity you now, nix!"

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Jack looked directly below. He realized that a whole flock of Yankee made shells was passing through the air, bound for the point of contact. At the same time he wondered why there had not been a single shot fired first as a feeler. The officers in charge must indeed be very confident that they had figured to a fraction to thus risk wasting precious ammunition.

A second, several of them, slipped away.

Then there came an upheaval below, followed by a succession of similar explosions that must have shaken the very earth. A dense cloud of smoke arose. Morgan now had his glasses fixed on the spot where all this furious hurricane of fire had fallen.

He did not shout, but continued to stare. The wind drifted the pall of smoke aside, and even Jack with unaided eye could determine that a marvelous change had taken place down there since last he looked.

"Let me have the glasses, Morgan!" he cried, unable to believe his eyes and wishing further confirmation.

Still silent as though awed, the observer obeyed. Jack knew from the look on the other's face about what he might expect to see even before he could raise the binoculars to his own eyes.

Then he too held his breath in very astonishment.

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Never could there have been made a finer calculation than the one that sent such an avalanche of shells hurtling through several miles of space, to land exactly on a marked spot. In a thousand times the same result might not have been secured again.

Jack saw desolation down there. For a space of a hundred feet, he judged, earth and rocks and camouflage material had been thrown in every direction by the falling shells, a dozen or more in number and of the most destructive character known. A vast gaping hole told where the nest had been.

Not a single man of all those waiting Boche gunners could have escaped destruction. Jack could see the bodies of several hanging from the neighboring trees, from which in turn most of their branches had been stripped.

He turned an awe-stricken face to Morgan as he cried out:

"Send them the hold-up signal, Morgan, to tell them they've knocked the nest to flinders and that there's no need of wasting another shot on it!"

CHAPTER VIII

[66]

IN THE RED TRIANGLE HUT

NIGHT had come again. The work of the day was over, and weary khaki-clad fighters could rest. For they must be fit for the duties of the succeeding day, which, like all recent ones, would bring its new dangers, glories, and no doubt pain and death for untold numbers of their fellows.

Still, in the camps where they were gathered that night, it would have been hard to run across a single soldier who showed a sign of discouragement or concern. Already they bore themselves with the mien of veterans, ready to joke and laugh, and swarming to the Red Triangle huts for a breath of entertainment, a glimpse of a rosy cheeked "home girl" in the midst of all this ghastly business of tragic warfare.

There Tom found Jack and Harry when he turned up rather late that night. He, too, had had a heavy and exciting though successful day's work in the air, as had Jack. Nevertheless, on his return he had asked and received permission to absent himself from quarters for a time.

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Of course there was need of consultation with the accommodating hospital nurse concerning the disposition of little Jeanne, the ward of the trio, Jack, Tom, and Nellie, and Tom did not wish to neglect his duty—nor his opportunity.

Late though it was, there still lingered a goodly crowd in the old dugout once occupied by a number of German officers, but now taken possession of by the girls and men who wore the uniforms of Y. M. C. A. workers, when Tom reached it.

An old piano had somehow been brought along, and this was in almost constant use, for numbers of the boys could play; and as for singing there was an almost continuous chorus bawling out favorite songs, such as "Over There," "Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag," "When You Come Back," and the like.

When some daring man ventured to play "Home, Sweet Home," however, not a sound was heard; and apparently many of the loudest talkers found something wonderfully important in the magazines they chanced to have before them, to judge from the way they bent persistently over while reading. But then no soldier wants his comrades to see that his eyes are swimming in tears, as pictures of those at home dawn upon his vision.

[68]

Tom quickly found his two comrades, to be instantly met with a rush of remarks that, however, fell from him as water would from a duck's back.

"You seem pretty happy, I must say!" observed Harry, grinning, for he understood what an attraction that pretty sister of his was to Tom.

"Oh, everything looks lovely, and the goose hangs high, whenever Tom has spent an hour in Nellie's company," Jack remarked, going on with the teasing.

"Seems to me, Jack," said the object of this joking, "that you're in something of the same box yourself. What important news did Bessie have in that letter you got this evening, and which you thought I didn't see you smuggle into your pocket on the sly?"

"Oh, I don't mind telling you," Jack announced smiling. "Meant to later on anyway. Why, do you know, Bessie has become a Red Triangle worker now, as she and her mother had been transferred to that service. She said there was some talk of letting them come along here to the American front, since Mrs. Gleason had expressed a wish to do her bit within hearing of the guns."

"That sounds good to me, Jack," remarked Harry.

"Do you know," added Tom, "I had a suspicion there was a hen on in that nest just from a remark Nellie made about hoping to see Bessie before long. Wouldn't explain what she meant, either; so I reckon it's a put-up job between the girls."

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"Well, they have become quite fond of one another, you know," Jack suggested.

Harry pretended to look huffed.

"All very fine," he grumbled; "but where do I come in, I'd like to know?"

"Huh! what about some of those pretty French girls I've heard you raving over, Harry? You might choose one and study French under her direction. Plenty of our boys are doing it, and seem to be pleased."

"If it comes to the worst," added Jack, soberly, "he can wait for little Jeanne to grow up. I imagine she's bound to be a peach one of these days, and well worth waiting for, Harry. But, joking aside, Tom," he continued, "what's doing over there with Nellie and our little charge?"

"Oh, she's making capital progress," came the quick reply. "Told me all about it, you know."

"Sure thing, every word," put in Harry. "A whole hour it took, too, I warrant. There must have been a heap to tell."

"She's already managed to get together quite a number of things for the child," Tom went on to explain. "A pair of fairly decent shoes and some material that one of the nurses will make into a dress, for she used to be a seamstress over in the good old U. S. A. before the call came. Best of all, Nellie has found just the family to leave our ward with."

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"That's news worth while," asserted Jack. "What else do you know that's interesting, old scout?"

"This family is named Desplanes," Tom continued. "They have a fine home in Paris, from which they have been kept ever since the war began, because of the Germans getting between. They are glad to take charge of your little girl, Jack, since they mean to start immediately for the capital, having only been able to get into our lines a few days back."

"Then that part of our job is settled, if you've got their Paris address!" Jack exclaimed. "The other connected with the finding of Helene is going to prove a harder task I reckon."

"Oh! I've picked up a bit of information in that direction," the newcomer told them, an announcement which of course caused Jack to look intensely interested.

He had often found himself repeating that sad message and picturing the suffering of the poor woman who, in dying, did not know what would be the fate of her twin children, thus rudely separated, the one to be carried away by a remorseless relative and the other cast adrift in the midst of the fighting zone. [71]

And so when Tom hinted that fortune had allowed him to secure valuable information connected with the abduction of Helene Anstey Jack's interest leaped upward by bounds. The spirit of laughter passed, and he was now only alert for news that would perhaps stand them in good stead.

"Was it about that man, Von Berthold, Tom?" he demanded.

"No other," came the answer. "Nellie gave me the tip, and I made some inquiries of a prisoner she had picked out from among those who claimed to be Lorrainers and fighting for Germany against their wishes, because they were forced into it. She had dressed a wound for him, and had got to talking with him. I was able to treat him to some cigarettes, and also gave him a cake of chocolate on the sly; because that's really against orders, you know. But he promised to nibble it in secret, and not let any one see him."

"I'm really ashamed of you, Tom!" said Harry, shaking his forefinger in a threatening fashion, and pretending to scowl. "A fine example to set to other pilots in our unit, or any of the doughboys in fact. But then you'll claim you had a good object in doing it; and of course circumstances alter army rules, as well as ordinary cases. Go on, and talk some more." [72]

"Well, from this prisoner I learned that General von Berthold's first name is really Anton, which you remember she used in telling of his carrying little Helene off."

"We'll call that point settled, then," affirmed Jack decisively. "This German officer whose brilliant work has often been mentioned in dispatches to the Paris newspapers, is Jeanne's uncle. What else did you pick up?"

"He's quartered right now in an old chateau on a height that overlooks this whole sector of country, though some miles beyond the Argonne forest," explained the one who was telling the story.

"For a short time only," grimly announced Harry, "because the doughboys have got the Boche on the run, and before long we'll see him skipping out for Sedan and the border. I suppose when this famous general does have to give up his fine chateau he'll send it sky-high with explosives, as they always do, so as to leave nothing that is French made to comfort their enemies."

Tom nodded his head in assent.

"Do you know this Lorrainer told me that had already been arranged," he hastened to say. "He himself had been one of a party of engineers to plant terrible mines secretly in certain places under the walls, so the whole building could be blown up in a flash. But that cunning old fox managed it so that no one but himself knows how to start things moving." [73]

"Why should he do a thing like that?" asked the puzzled Harry.

"Oh, it seems that a good many of the Boche soldiers have no particular love for General von Berthold," Tom answered briskly, as though he had anticipated that very question and was prepared to meet it.

"I see. He's afraid that if they chanced to know the combination," chuckled Harry Leroy, "they might be tempted some fine night, when he was asleep in his featherbed, to give him a rise in the world, since no one would be any the wiser. Yes, he's a sharp old duck, believe me!"

"I wonder," remarked Tom, "if he could have taken little Helene to that chateau and is waiting for a chance to send her on to Munich, or some other German capital."

"Do you know, I've got a big hunch that way, Tom!" Jack exclaimed. "And I mean, for one, to take the very first chance that comes along to run over back of the Hun lines so as to find if I can the chateau."

"Sainte Mershon, I learned the place is called," said Tom. "And I'll do the same, boy."

"You said it was located on a height, so that it commanded an extensive view, didn't you?" [74]

"Yes, that's what the prisoner told me. Said it looked very much like a lot of castles he knew about along the Rhine. We've all seen pictures of those, so it's easy to guess what they resemble. But he also said the building had been twice dynamited, though only one section was in ruins."

"If either of us is lucky enough to make a find, remember, Tom, nothing must be done until we've had a chance to talk matters over."

"Oh, sure thing," affirmed Tom. "I wouldn't dream of trying to cut in and steal your thunder Jack. Jeanne is your find, and we're pals in this game, as we've always been since we were kids together in the U. S. A. When the hour strikes for General von Berthold to have uninvited guests drop down on him from the skies, we'll be in cahoots, as usual. And you may lead off."

Jack looked relieved. Apparently he had begun to suspect dimly that his ambitious chum might have thought to cut the ground out from under his, Jack's, feet, by planning a bold raid on the chateau, spurred on to such a rash deed by his ardent desire to impress Nellie Leroy.

Tom began to stretch himself.

"Feeling some tired after such a rushing day's business," he told them, in a vein of apology. "And I think, mates, I'll turn in after I've munched a cake or two and had a drink of lemonade. Join me in a glass, will you, Jack, Harry? I feel like treating to-night, I'm so perfectly satisfied with the way things are going."

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The other two exchanged looks and chuckles, which, however, Tom pretended not to notice; for he had made up his mind not to be disturbed any longer because of his comrades' jokes concerning his warm friendship for Harry's sister. What boy among the tens of thousands of Americans in that sector but would be pleased to have such a delightful "sister" with whom to hold occasional interesting chats when opportunity arose?

They accepted the invitation, however, for really it was rather warm in the Red Triangle dugout, mostly underground, just as the fleeing Hun officers had left it when compelled to run. Somehow those enterprising Y. M. C. A. workers managed to keep constantly on hand a supply of certain articles deemed necessary to the comfort of the fighting men; and lemons stood near the first in this preferred list.

When coming in on a hot day from hard work in the trenches, or after creeping through tangled undergrowth where not a breath of breeze stirred, with their nerves strained every second of the time, nothing could revive the flagging energies more quickly than a lemonade mixed by the dextrous fingers of a clever girl in khaki, a sunny smile on her face, and a love for everything connected with America in her warm heart.

[76]

Those huts erected by the Red Triangle corps, what oceans of comfort they brought to the boys over there! Sometimes they were large and commodious, possessing almost every conceivable means for gratifying the normal appetite of a healthy-minded but tired and homesick soldier boy. Then again it might be, as in the present instance, that circumstances prevented any display, and the restoration bivouac had to be opened under rather discouraging conditions, while the supplies also ran low, for it was not easy to get them so far up along the line.

But the main thing was that there could be found the cheerful, never-failing services of those who gave every minute of their time to working for the boys wearing the khaki, and braving death itself under Old Glory.

The night had up to then been fairly quiet.

Tired after the day's fighting, both armies lay down to rest, looking forward to a renewal of hostilities when another day dawned. Doubtless the retreating Huns would utilize this time in preparing many more of the machine-gun nests, each of which was calculated to hold up the advancing Americans for a certain period.

As for the Americans trying to advance during the night, that was utterly out of the question, since under those trees a pall lay that might hide any number of deadly traps, into which they, in their ignorance, would surely stumble.

[77]

The three Air Service boys were still standing chatting with the girl in khaki, whom they knew very well, and sipping their lemonade when, without warning, there broke out a terrible din. The ground under their feet seemed to shake with the force of an explosion, which they realized must be quite near at hand.

Another explosion immediately followed, and then still more in irregular succession. The boys had learned by now to tell what such explosions signified, so they looked at each other aghast, and Jack cried out:

"The Huns are making an air raid on our lines back here! They must be in great force, too, with all those bombs dropping! Tom, didn't it strike you those explosions came mostly from the quarter where our Red Cross field hospital lies?"

Tom felt a cold chill, the same thought having gripped him.

CHAPTER IX

[78]

THE NIGHT RAID

"It struck me," exclaimed Harry, amidst the Babel of sounds that had broken out all around them, girls and soldiers chattering like magpies in concert, "that most of the explosions came from over where our hangars are strung out! Yes, there they start up again! Boys, I tell you it's a big raid on our aviation camp! Let's chase over there!"

They all seemed of one mind, for hardly had Harry shrilled this proposition than the three of them bolted from the exit of the hut and commenced a mad dash through the intervening woods,

heading for the opening utilized by the air squads for their canvas hangars. The successive bursts of flame accompanying those frequent explosions benefited them in one way, since they were enabled to see fairly well and thus avoid pitfalls, although once or twice there was a grunt as a member of the group struck some obstacle which he had not noticed soon enough.

[79]

It did not take them long to cover the intervening ground, for by rare good luck the rest-house of the Y. M. C. A. happened to be within reasonable reach of the aviation field.

A new development in affairs had by then taken place. There was a rattle of machine-gun fire from high up in the air that seemed very significant to the Air Service boys.

"Some of the fellows were on the ground—went up—engaged the Boche! Oh, boy, how I envy them!"

Jack gasped out these words as he ran on. He was short of breath, or he might have said more. The others did not reply, partly for the same reason, and then again because of similar views. Knowing the intrepid nature of the boys so well, any one of their friends would have felt confident that both Tom and Harry were feeling jealous of those whom fortune had picked out to shower favors on by allowing them to be the first aloft and after the Boche. But now they had reached the field.

Everything seemed in the greatest confusion there—men dashing this way and that, yelling, asking questions, giving orders to hostlers, getting machines ready for flight, preparing to go aloft to share in the pursuit of the enemy planes.

There had been some damage done, Tom could see; just how much it was impossible for him even to guess. But several bombs had struck close enough to smash a number of planes, as the débris scattered around disclosed. Great was the relief of the three pilots on learning that their machines had not been in the list of those scrapped. It might have taken many days before they could be supplied with fresh "mounts," such was the demand upon the cargo space of the French railway leading to this sector of the front. That would surely have been considered little short of a calamity by such ambitious fighters as Jack Parmly, Tom Raymond, and Harry Leroy.

[80]

"No observer on hand, Jack. Would you mind going up with me?" Tom called out almost immediately.

Nothing would please Jack better than being once more the flying companion of his dearest comrade. To get a chance at the German airmen he stood ready to accept any position offered him. And, besides, he would have the handling of one gun, at any rate.

"You'd better believe I will, Tom!" he cried excitedly. "Harry, there's your assistant, with your plane ready. Get going, fellows!"

The racket still continued above, though with a fresh American air pilot leaving the ground every quarter minute the chances were the Huns would soon conclude that their usefulness was past in this neighborhood, and run for home like a herd of wild horses in full flight.

[81]

Both boys earnestly hoped the fight would carry on until they had been given a chance to get in a few shots, even if prevented from bagging any game.

"Those Huns must be taught that it isn't going to be a safe thing for them to come knocking at our door under the belief that no one is at home, and pickings will be easy," muttered Jack.

Away they sped, mounting from the ground as soon as free. Yet Tom knew better than to take too many chances. Night flying was always bound to carry more risk than when the daylight held good; so it would be the utmost folly to increase the peril in any unnecessary way.

It was a time when a pilot had full need of every faculty. To the right of them came flashes of flame accompanied by the spiteful crackle of gunfire. Rival marksmen were trying to riddle one another, sometimes flying perilously close in their eagerness.

Great shapes were coursing this way and that like giant bats. Now came a dazzling flash from far down below. The Huns had not as yet entirely exhausted their supply of bombs, and were endeavoring to make every shot count before turning homeward.

[82]

Tom fancied he could locate the Hun machine from which that bomb had been shot downward like a projectile from a catapult, passing through a tube with a forward slant in the bottom of the big bombing plane.

"Over to your right, Tom!" shrieked Jack just then, showing that he, too, had guessed the same thing, for already was the pilot in the act of swinging around in that direction.

The Boche must have sensed their coming, for he started to flee; but they were on his trail almost immediately, going like the wind. Tom opened on him, as he had charge of the bow gun. He worked the mechanism with all his old-time skill, not showing signs of any undue haste or excitement. When in the course of the chase he found that he was getting a bit too close, for the bullets were cutting the air all around them, he changed his direction.

Nor was Jack at all slow to seize upon the splendid opening which this fresh maneuver afforded him. He took up the refrain just where Tom left off; and, if anything, showed more vim in his bombardment, for he did not have the manipulation of the plane to interfere with his work with the gun.

The Hun dived and squirmed, in the hopes of throwing off such a persistent pursuer, but Tom kept after him as if grimly determined to bring one of the night-bombers down, even if he had to follow the other to his own line.

[83]

That sort of excitement was meat and drink to those daring fellows, who lived in anticipation of engaging in just such combats. Tame indeed did that day seem to them upon which they could not exchange shots with at least one enemy pilot.

Some one had met with disaster over to the left, for Tom saw a flash of descending flame and had a vague view of a figure jumping hopelessly from the doomed plane, having found means to cut loose from his safety belt. It was only "jumping from the frying pan into the fire," however, for death in another form awaited him, the ground being a quarter of a mile below.

At one moment it happened that both boys were firing together, the position of the Yankee plane allowing this unusual demonstration. And as to which of them was responsible for the bullet that sent the Boche downward in erratic circles, like a wounded duck, he trying desperately to gain an even keel before it was too late, was always fated to be a little bone of contention between Tom and Jack.

CHAPTER X

[84]

A SURPRISE FOR JACK

THE two Air Service boys followed the enemy down with a risky nose-dive, determined to make sure that he did not get away; and so were able to see him strike amidst the upper branches of the trees with a horrible crash. They themselves had a close call, and only for Tom's clever handling of his machine might have shared the fate of their victim.

Marking the spot as best they could in the darkness of the night, the boys again started upward, in the hope that there might still be other work for them to do.

"Too late!" called out Jack. "The Boche has had a stomachful and is beating it for home like all get-out. He's lost two planes and pilots, which is a heap more'n he counted on giving up for the fun of bombing our hangars. Shall we call it off and go in, Tom?"

Indeed, there was nothing else for them to do. The enemy had been forced to run before he could have dropped more than half of his stock of destructive bombs.

[85]

Back to the hut went the three boys. Harry was limping, a fact Tom noticed for the first time.

"Look here, did you run up against a Boche bullet while you were chasing around up there, Harry?" he asked solicitously.

"Not quite so bad as that, I'm glad to tell you," came the reply, as Harry stooped to rub the calf of his left leg gently. "But something struck me a nasty blow. Don't know exactly what it was, but I warrant I'll have a nice black-and-blue mark to show for it. Felt mighty queer, too, just as if you'd gone and slapped me with a lathe, flat-side out."

"I reckon," spoke up Jack, "it was a bullet striking the part of your machine that you've got sheathed in steel. You must have been resting your leg against it just where the Boche bullet struck."

"Now, strange to say, I hadn't thought of that explanation before, Jack. But I wouldn't be surprised if you'd guessed the answer. But it stung like everything for a while, and feels sore still."

"But for all that you've cause for being satisfied, Harry," Tom told him.

"Considering what would have happened to me if I didn't have that sheathing outside the frame of my plane, I guess I ought to be grateful. Do you know only to-day I was figuring whether it paid for the extra weight, and had nearly made up my mind to have it ripped off. Nothing doing about that from this time on. Saved me a bad leg I tell you, boys."

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Arriving at the Y. M. C. A. shelter the boys halted at the door. It was so cozy in there the boys could always find some good excuse for bending their footsteps in that direction; and also loitering after they had finished the business that took them to the hut. So no one was surprised, or disappointed, to hear Jack call out:

"I think I upset my glass of lemonade in my hurry to clear out; and as the thirst seems worse now than ever I reckon I'll have to indulge in another of the same kind, if Miss Sallie has the fixings. Will you join me, fellows?"

"Not me, for one, Jack," said Harry. "I got all of mine down without spilling a drop. I'm not so keen as you about lemonade. But I'll go along, because these rest places are the only homelike signs we run across on the front these days."

Jack thereupon gave Tom a sly nudge in the ribs.

"I was right, it seems," he managed to whisper aside. "Keep your eye on that blue-eyed Miss Sallie, and watch for any tell-tale signs in Harry's face when he's chatting with her. But she's a mighty nice girl, all the same, and I don't blame him. Comes of a fine family, too, I'm told."

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Sallie, however, was only "conspicuous by her absence," as Jack put it. In fact she had retired to seek rest, for another day's arduous work came with the morning.

Tom, as did Jack, ordered another glass of lemonade, but drank only a small portion.

"Somehow or other I seem to have lost my taste for the stuff," he explained, when this fact was drawn to his attention by Jack; "or else this girl hasn't learned the wrinkle of mixing a drink as well as Miss Sallie has. But there's something bothering me, and I was just going to ask Harry if he didn't want to take a run over to the field hospital with me."

"What's that?" exclaimed the one mentioned. "You don't think any of those Boche bombs could have fallen there, do you, Tom?"

Jack looked worried at these words.

"Well, it's to be hoped not," replied Tom. "But somehow lately the fiends have taken a savage delight in bombing British hospitals and also sinking their hospital ships when crossing the Channel, in spite of their being marked and running with all lights on. As I said before, I'm worried some. Will you go with me, Harry?"

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"But we couldn't undertake the trip without special permission, don't you know?" objected the other; though his manner told how gladly he would accompany Tom if given half a chance.

"Oh, I've got my permit, which is good until one A. M. to-night," explained Tom. "And as you're still limping some I can manage that you're allowed to keep me company; only you must make sure to let the hospital surgeon take a look at that leg of yours while we're there, and have it bound up. I must save my face, understand?"

Harry gave Tom an eloquent look.

"You are certainly the limit, Tom," he avowed. "But I've always heard that a poor excuse was better than none at all. So, as you've got me anxious about my sister, why, yes, I'll be glad to go along with you."

"How about you, Jack?" Tom queried, turning on the remaining member of the trio.

"Thanking you all the same I believe I'll stay here for a while longer, as two ought to be enough to see the job through. The raid was not in that direction, so the hospital is safe. Jeanne will be asleep so we can't see her, or else I would go. No, I'll stay here, and when I get good and tired I'll drop over to quarters, and hit the hay for a sound sleep."

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"I reckon we can trust you. Especially," added Tom, with an eye on Harry's face, "since Miss Sallie has disappeared for the night."

When he saw Harry turn red Tom felt satisfied that he and Jack had indeed guessed the other's secret, though he said nothing to indicate the fact.

Jack saw the two depart, and wandered here and there, chatting with some of the boys, who evidently meant to hang around until the last minute before closing time came.

He found himself yawning several times, and admitted that he would be foolish to spend any more time in trying to keep awake, when even a half-way decent bunk awaited his occupancy.

He had reached the door in the act of departing when he became aware of the fact that there was an unusual bustle without. On looking to see what it meant Jack found that a Red Cross ambulance had drawn up alongside the dugout entrance. Some persons were issuing forth from the interior of the motor vehicle.

Jack knew that these long distance ambulances, after taking a load of badly injured fighting men all the way it might be to Paris, on the return journey would often be loaded down with fresh surgical supplies. Yes, and on several occasions he had even known them to bring new nurses to the fighting front, to take the place of those who had been injured or fallen sick.

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As everything of that sort had a special interest for Jack, he watched several trim figures emerge from the motor transport vehicle. All of a sudden he gave a start, straightened himself up, looked eagerly again, rubbing his eyes at the same time, and then with an exclamation hurried forward.

A girl in khaki garments that told of the Y. M. C. A. worker had just alighted. She was followed by an older woman, who seemed to be the last of the quartette and who was evidently in charge of the detachment, for Jack saw that the others deferred to her judgment.

In half a dozen strides he was over at the spot.

"Bessie!"

The girl with the rosy cheeks and bright eyes turned quickly on hearing him call this name softly. A smile flashed over her face, and instinctively her hand was extended cordially:

"Oh, Jack, how glad I am to see you!" she exclaimed.

Jack then greeted the older woman. After a few words Mrs. Gleason said:

"I hardly know what to do, as we ought to be at the field hospital, and here the driver has dropped us, naturally from our costumes, before the Y. M. C. A. hut. But of course you can advise me."

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"Certainly I can," Jack hastened to say. "I'll see that he takes you on as soon as he unloads some things I notice he has for the people here. Yes, and for fear that you get lost I'll try to go along with you, for there's the officer who can give me permission to leave quarters."

"Where are Tom and Harry?" asked Bessie, for she noticed that the nurses who had also come in the ambulance were listening with smiles to this conversation, and it embarrassed her.

"Over at the hospital. We'll possibly meet them there," replied Jack. "But I'll tell you all about it while on the way, Bessie."

CHAPTER XI

[92]

THE PROWLERS

THE officer must have thought there was a great attraction over at the field hospital for certain members of his air squadron, considering the frequency of the calls upon him for permission to visit there.

However, he granted the request without hesitation, though Jack thought there was a quizzical gleam in his eyes as he turned and took a good look at the younger of the "friends" whom the lad said he wished to pilot to her temporary quarters.

Besides, the two Air Service boys happened to be prime favorites of his, and consequently he was in a humor to go far out of his way to grant any reasonable request either of them might make.

So presently they were seated once more in the ambulance along with the nurses and heading for the spot where the humble sheds and tents stood which constituted the American field hospital in that sector of the Argonne.

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"Now tell me all that's happened since I saw you last, Jack," demanded Bessie, with a little show of authority that amused, yes, and also pleased the other; for boys like to be domineered over at times by a pretty tyrant.

"Couldn't begin to do it in this little ride, Bessie," he assured her. "But I'll take the first chance I can find to spin the whole yarn."

"I'm certain you boys have been carrying on up here with your usual rashness," she told him. "I've had my heart in my throat, so to speak, every day, when the news would filter in from our front, together with a partial list of the lost, for fear I'd see one of your names there. And when some particularly daring feat of a Yankee air pilot was mentioned I could just picture you or Tom as the hero."

At that Jack laughed, although feeling highly complimented.

"Thank you, Bessie, for being such a fine little champion!" he exclaimed. "But we don't claim to be the equal of a lot of the clever aces now strafing the Boche along our American sector. Of course we meet with our little adventures in the course of our daily work; but they've been mere trifles beside some of the fine things others of the boys have done."

"Well," Bessie told him, "knowing you as I do, Jack, I wouldn't accept your judgment in the matter. Your friends are better able to decide that."

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"Here we are already at the hospital," put in Mrs. Gleason. "I couldn't write to Nellie just when we were coming, for that depended on when we could get transportation. But she had told me she could put us up temporarily until we found quarters with the Y. M. C. A. outfit. She will be surprised to see us, and I hope pleased, too."

"I warrant you she will be delighted," asserted Jack confidently.

Great was the surprise of Nellie and Tom when Jack and the Gleasons burst upon them. Harry was at another part of the temporary makeshift building talking to an orderly at the time.

Such subdued chattering as followed. Jack, seeing that Bessie and Mrs. Gleason were very tired, did not mean to linger long. Bessie would probably speedily take up her duties at the hut, and consequently he could see her every evening if he chose.

So the three boys a little later on once more turned their faces in the direction of the camp. As they walked along they found much to talk about, although it might have been noticed that Tom and Harry did most of the exchanging of opinions, Jack seemingly being too much engrossed with

his thoughts, a fact that caused the others to pass many a significant glance back and forth.

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It chanced that some question arose, bringing out quite a warm discussion concerning a certain appliance which Harry was trying out on his battleplane, and of which a friend was the inventor.

"I've tested it twice now, Tom, and no matter what you say I believe it will do the business," Harry stoutly affirmed.

"That may be," Tom answered him. "Mind I'm not stubborn enough to condemn a thing I don't quite understand; but I'd want to be shown before I owned up beaten in the argument. Somehow, it doesn't seem possible to me that it can work."

"That's what they all told Columbus before he started on his trip into that unknown western sea," jeered Harry. "Poor old Fulton, too, was laughed at when he said he could make a boat go through the water without sails or oars. And what of Morse sending telegrams hundreds of miles by using a wire and a battery?"

"Oh, I know that's so," retorted Tom, unwilling to back down. "But I refuse to believe this will work automatically without ever a hitch. An air pilot's life hangs in the balance, and if it fails to make connections it's good-night for him."

"I warrant I can convince you inside of five minutes after you've examined the contrivance!"

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"All right then, I'll take you up on that."

"When will you go to my hangar with me?" demanded the other, at which Tom laughingly answered:

"Any time you say—right away, if you feel like it. I'm a firm believer in the old saying, 'Never put off till to-morrow what you can do to-day.' Besides, Harry, I admit that you've got my curiosity aroused."

"Call it a bargain, then!" snapped the other, not to be outdone. "Won't take twenty minutes in all, and perhaps I can give you something to sleep over."

"Seems to me," Jack remarked, with a yawn, "you fellows are bound to keep on the go all night long. What with that raid, and our chase after the Hun, then the trip to the field hospital for various purposes, and now back once more to the hangars, just to settle a disputed question, you're keeping things moving pretty well."

"Oh, well," remarked Tom, "you can climb into your little bed, such as it is in these strenuous days, Jack—and dream."

Jack did not reply. Perhaps he considered that it would be wise not to appear to notice these sly thrusts on the part of his chum. Perhaps he did not care who noticed that he and Bessie were such good friends.

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So when they arrived in camp he turned aside to seek his sleeping place under a khaki-colored tent, while the other boys continued along the trail leading to the field of the hangars, which had so recently been the objective of the Boche bombing raid.

It took the boys considerably longer to pass from one to the other place than on the occasion of their last trip; but then the night now was comparatively quiet, and no hostile squadron hovered overhead to drop terrible engines of destruction from the sky and arouse a furious bombardment in return, from the batteries of anti-aircraft guns below.

Harry was still feeling ugly toward the enemy who could show such disregard for all the accepted rules of civilized warfare. He continued to vent these feelings as he walked along, unable to get it out of his mind. But this could be understood since he had a sister in an exposed hospital, whose life was in danger from the barbaric acts of the Hun fliers.

"They seem nowadays to take a savage delight in bombing hospitals, and then finding all sorts of excuses for doing such a thing," he told Tom. "I declare, they put me in mind of a cruel wolf more than anything else."

"On my part," his companion immediately asserted, "I'd liken them to a mad dog, snapping and snarling as he runs along the street, but it shows how desperate they feel their cause to be."

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"Guess you're right, Tom. I humbly apologize to the wolf," chuckled the other quickly. "He's had a bad name out West, but on the whole those cow-punchers must call him a clean fighter alongside some of these Huns."

"Well, here we are at the field," observed Tom. "Now I'm waiting to be shown, if I'm not from Missouri. And, Harry, understand that I'm open to conviction. If I find that you've got something wonderful here, I'll frankly acknowledge the fact, and eat humble pie."

"I know you will. That's why I'm so eager to show you what a fine thing my friend Jason has got up in this little trick. My hangar lies over this way. Come along and—"

Harry stopped in the middle of the sentence, stopped walking too, and laid a hand on his companion's arm.

"What did you see?" asked Tom in a whisper; for somehow he sensed the fact that Harry had made some sort of discovery calculated to thrill them both.

"Stand still, Tom!" hissed the other. "I didn't like the way that chap dodged down over there. Couldn't have been one of the guards, for they stick to their posts. I wonder now if one of those Boche planes dropped a spy close to our field here!"

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The idea was in line with Tom's reasoning. According to his mind the Germans were getting desperate, and ready to attempt the rashest of enterprises in the hope of checking this daily advance of the Yankees under Pershing.

As much of the success of the latter depended on the work of their flying squads in discovering the hidden machine-gun nests, and betraying their position to the gunners, it stood to reason that the Germans felt an ever growing hatred toward the airmen. Hence that night raid which had been so neatly parried. Yes, Tom could easily believe what his comrade suggested.

"Show me where you saw the sneak, Harry," he pleaded, as they continued to crouch in the semi-gloom; for after that recent attack from the skies almost every light about the aviation field had been extinguished, and they felt obliged to depend on the stars to show them where the various hangars lay.

"Notice that extra high hangar over there," came the soft reply. "That's Beresford's, you know, where he keeps his monster four-man plane. The Huns may have got wind of something unusual, and are plotting to destroy his jumbo aircraft before he smothers them in a fight. There, did you see that again?"

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"It was a man slipping across from one shadow to another, as sure as anything," breathlessly admitted the second watcher.

"No fellow would act that way unless he wanted to keep from being seen, would he?" asked Harry.

"You're right there. Oh! I saw a second one follow him then, Harry!"

"Yes, there's a pair of the creepers. That makes me believe more than ever they were aboard one of those bombing planes, Tom."

"It might be they fell when one of the Hun raiding planes was knocked out," suggested the other, as an idea struck him. "Only one went down in flames, I remember now. Those in the other may have managed to make a safe landing, and bent on hitting us a crack before trying to get back to their lines, they've crept into the camp here."

"Carrying some grenades, I'd like to wager, which they can use in kicking up a big row, under cover of which they'll scoot off," Harry went on.

"We must put a peg in their plans then," whispered Tom. "It'd be a shame to let them do what their pilots failed in, and blow up a part of our hangar field here."

"If they do they'll go up with the planes then!" Harry gritted between his set teeth. "Come, let's move on and corner the Huns!"

[101]

This suited Tom. Discretion might have caused them to alarm the camp and in this way cause the prowlers to disappear. But ambition, on the other hand, had fired the hearts of the two boys. They saw an opportunity to get in a telling blow by capturing those two spies. It was a chance to gain a little fresh glory, as well as to protect the monster plane of Beresford.

Accordingly they commenced to move forward, bending low and taking advantage of every dense shadow that came in their way. Their objective was the hangar that afforded shelter during the night to the novel and as yet untried monster plane, of which so much was expected, and rumors concerning which might have even sifted into the enemy lines.

Of course both Tom and Harry were keenly on the alert for the first fresh sign of the prowling enemy, whose designs they had set out to balk. Very probably the Huns would resist desperately, and there might be a fight. Tom felt his heart beat tumultuously, but such a thing as fear did not enter into his calculations.

CHAPTER XII

[102]

A LIVELY CHASE

"THEY'VE gone," presently whispered Tom, in a disappointed tone.

"Only hiding somewhere near by," Harry assured him, equally careful to lower his voice. "We'll begin to circle around, and presently rout them out. Be ready to jump the first chance you get, and let out a whoop at the same time. It'll give 'em a shock, and start 'em to running. Then we'll soon have a pack on their heels."

"What if they use their trench grenades on us?" asked Tom.

"Not likely to except as a last resort. But we've got to take the chances. Dodge, that's all. Now to swing around the big hangar."

Harry squeezed his companion's arm while saying this. Both of them were fairly quivering with the excitement, just as highly strung race horses can be seen quivering while prancing up and down awaiting the tap of the bell that summons them to the wire for the start.

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It was not pitch-dark, but even the possessor of keen eyesight would have had to look closely in order to make certain that a moving object was a human being and not a dog.

Harry's surmise proved to be well founded, for they quickly discovered a suspicious movement close to the large hangar. Yes, the two Hun spies were undoubtedly there, and already busily engaged in doing something that could only mean trouble for the American escadrille.

Closer the pair of watchers crept. They could now hear the men whispering as they worked, and Tom even believed he caught a guttural German word used. This convinced him their theory was founded on fact, and that these were secret enemies in the camp.

Another half minute and he felt Harry nudge him. That meant the other believed the time had arrived for them to make their leap; and when he felt his companion start Tom stirred himself.

Both let out a yell as they sprang forward. Tom more than half expected to hear an explosion, thinking the Huns, on finding themselves caught in the act, would fire their grenades promptly.

Nothing of the kind came about. Instead both men instantly dropped flat and started to roll away with incredible swiftness, as though escape was the first thought in their minds.

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Tom hurled himself through space. His intention was to pin one of the spies to the ground and try to hold him there until help came. Their outcries would of course arouse every man within hundreds of yards of the spot, and lights must soon be brought to bear on the scene.

Although Tom's calculations may have been all right, he did not meet with as much success as he had probably anticipated. Perhaps the wary Boche guessed what was coming; at any rate he succeeded in squirming from under, and when Tom landed it was only to feel the other rolling out of his reach.

But he went after him like lightning, bent on attaining his goal.

The Hun was scrambling desperately in the endeavor to get on his feet. Tom hurled him over, and closed with him. Finding his escape thus cut off, the other commenced to fight like a tiger, clawing and struggling furiously.

They had it "hammer-and-tongs" for a brief space of time. Then Tom slipped and lost his grip, upon which the other rolled over several times, got to his knees, then his feet, and started to run.

But he counted without reckoning on the staying qualities of the American. Tom had always been called a "sticking-plaster" by his fellow players on the football field. He was not to be counted out of the game until the last whistle sounded and the referee's falling hand closed the fun.

[105]

So he was after his man with grim determination not to let him get away. Having gone to so much trouble, and received in addition several scratches in the contest, he meant to keep everlastingly at it.

The Boche dodged to one side, as there were men running toward them, and already several lights had sprung up. Tom was close at his heels, and gaining rapidly, being spurred on by an ambition to complete the good work he and Harry had started.

He saw the spy glance back over his shoulder. The situation must have appeared very grave to the other, who could expect to meet with short shrift if caught in the act of trying to destroy the hangars and planes of the American aviators in this bold fashion.

Just then Tom saw the man raise his arm. Guessing what he intended to do, the Yankee air pilot dodged just in time. Some object went hissing past, close to his head. An instant later there was a loud explosion in his rear that seemed to make the very air quiver.

Of course the Boche had hurled a grenade with the intention of making further pursuit on the part of his persistent adversary impossible.

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Tom hoped that was the extent of his supply of such ammunition, for he might not be quite so successful in avoiding the bomb another time.

Again was the fleeing spy compelled to whirl aside because of threatening peril ahead. Dodging in and out between the khaki-colored canvas field hangars he sought desperately to throw Tom off his track; but no hound ever followed its quarry with more pertinacity than the Yankee air pilot followed now.

Then something happened. Tom came in collision with a runner, so that the two of them fell headlong to the ground. By instinct Tom hugged the other in his arms. He suspected on the spur of the moment that this might be the other spy, trying to elude Harry, and cutting across his track by the merest chance.

The fellow struggled furiously, but Tom managed to get a good hold on him, and kept it

tenaciously. As the other was also clutching him his further pursuit of the fleeing spy seemed doomed to failure; and so Tom felt that the only thing left was to make sure of this party.

"Hey, Tom, let go! You're choking me!" came a voice that electrified him, and caused him to release his clutch.

After all it was Harry upon whom he had fallen, Harry who having lost all track of his man was rushing wildly this way and that in hope of once again getting in touch with the fellow. [107]

"Quick, before it's too late, join me!" shrilled Tom, scrambling to his feet again as best he could, and feeling angry because of this ridiculous accident. "There he goes, Harry! After him again!"

So they both started once more to run at top speed. The agile spy had been able to put considerable distance between them while his pursuers struggled on the ground, and seemed likely to escape. But there was one thing that stood in his way.

Men were running this way and that in every direction, calling to one another, and trying to understand what all the row was about. A squad of oncoming hostlers blocked his passage. They evidently were beginning to get light on the situation, for discovering the panting runner they now set up a concerted shout.

This compelled the hunted Boche to turn again on his heel, and so he lost a portion of his previous gain. Tom took fresh heart on seeing this. Given one or two such lifts as this, and he believed he would again come to hand grips with the fellow. And with Harry close at his heels he fancied the next encounter would surely terminate badly for the Hun spy. [108]

"Spread out some, Harry!" he managed to shout.

His object in saying this was to make it more difficult for the Boche to hold his own when necessity compelled him to veer to one side. They dodged the hangars that barred the way, running in and out of the lines with the swiftness of a hare followed by the eager hounds.

Once awaiting figure tried to bar the path of the spy, only to be promptly bowled over. Desperation nerved the arm that struck that blow. The German knew that his chances were almost at the zero mark, and for the time being he was like a wolf at bay, ready to snap right and left and do what damage he could before yielding himself a prisoner.

Once more Tom had made a gain. The Fates were favoring him, it seemed, and with set teeth he kept up the hot chase.

Suddenly the Hun collapsed.

Tom almost fell over him as he ran on; and when Harry came up was bending above the spy, muttering to himself after the manner of a sadly disappointed person.

"What rotten luck for us, after all our work, Harry!" he complained, to the utter bewilderment of his comrade.

"I don't get your meaning, Tom!" exclaimed Harry. "This is one of the Huns, all right, and we've got him at last. What is there to kick about, I'd like to know?" [109]

"Why, don't you understand? He's wounded!" said Tom scornfully.

"Wounded! How?" echoed the other, still groping for the truth.

"Somebody shot him in the leg!" explained Tom, in disgust. "Just as I was bound to jump him in another ten seconds! Did you ever hear of such tough luck? Took the wind right out of our sails, he did, by using his gun. If he'd put a bullet in my leg I could hardly feel madder, for a fact."

Harry, however, quickly chuckled, as though he did not look at the matter in the same way as his chum seemed to.

"Oh, well, the main thing isn't that we'd get a little glory from the capture of the Hun," he said, "but that their desperate game has been blocked. But this chap seems to be groaning as if suffering, Tom. He ought to be taken care of, Boche or not."

"Yes, that's right, Harry," added the other, for the time being crushing down his disappointment.

As some of the attendants of the aviation field came up just at that moment there was need for explanations. Among them Tom noticed one who, as he well knew, had charge of the hangars during the night. [110]

"Lieutenant Simmons, here's a Boche spy who, with a companion, was trying to bomb the big Beresford plane. Sorry we couldn't round up both of them. This fellow has been shot, and ought to have attention. Now, Harry, if you don't mind, we'll step around to your hangar and look into the little job that brought us over here from the camp."

Tom really wished to get away from the crowd that was gathering. He had no liking for being made an object of special interest. Although always eager to attempt unusual exploits, it was only to please himself, and not because of any reward or a morbid desire to be looked on as a hero.

Harry was not quite as diffident, and might have liked to linger a bit to explain further how they had managed to discover the creeping figures, and, having their suspicions aroused, closed in on them.

"I can see you later, Lieutenant, and answer any questions you may want to ask about this stuff," he remarked, as he followed Tom away from the group.

Tom was still "huffy" as Harry called it. He seemed to feel that the ambitious marksman who had taken a pot-shot at the runner ahead had really cheated him out of half the pleasure accompanying the capture of the spy. [111]

"I heard one big splash," Harry said, "which I take it was made by a trench grenade. Did that Boche try to knock you out, Tom?"

"Oh, he let loose with one of his sort, but it was the easiest thing going to duck under. He's got a lot to learn about flinging those little knockers underhand. It takes a baseball pitcher to do the trick right. How about your man, Harry?"

The other gave a grunt of disgust.

"Nothing doing with that slick dodger, I tell you, Tom. He must have been a premium sprinter when at home, for the way he dodged in and out made my brain reel. I kept after him as best I could, but, shucks! he was in another class from me. And so I lost him in the shuffle. He disappeared just like a wisp of smoke in the breeze."

"But you were still running like a hare when we banged into each other, unless I'm greatly mistaken," continued Tom humorously.

"Sure I was! Trying to get a fresh glimpse of my duck. When I hit you I thought it was that Boche, and then a light fell on your face, coming from that head-lamp on a motor truck some one suddenly turned on. I reckon I'll have a beautiful lump on my forehead where I struck against a pole while running. It knocked me flat, and that was when I lost my man." [112]

Tom now began to laugh.

"A pretty lively skirmish, all told, when you come to think of it," he observed. "I'll have to forget about that chap who was too quick on the trigger, and only add up results. One Boche spy captured, wounded; and the other gets away. But he's had his scare good and hard, and there's little danger of his giving us any more trouble."

Whatever became of the captured Boche neither of them ever knew. Perhaps he was simply taken to the hospital and treated for his wound, as so many of his fellow Huns had been; and then again did time permit and opportunity arise he might be tried by drumhead courtmartial on the serious charge of being a spy.

Having satisfied themselves with regard to the matter in dispute, the two boys later on returned once more to the camp and sought to secure some much needed sleep, fully conscious that the duties of the coming day would again sap their energies and bring them renewed chances for thrilling action.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WINNING OF THE ARGONNE

DAYS passed and each setting sun saw the Yankee boys in khaki further along the terrible trail they had set out to follow to the end. Another mile, perhaps two, of the dense Argonne Forest had been redeemed, and the stubborn foe sent reeling backward.

The end was in sight, many believed. Once they passed out of the vast stretch of woods, the pace of the retreating enemy must be accelerated, though of course he would take advantage of every ravine, abandoned farm building, destroyed hamlet and village that offered sites for machine-guns, on which Hindenburg was coming to rely more than on his Big Berthas.

They made the Yankee pay the price for it all, even though the famous Kriemhild-Stellung line was broken in the end. In addition to the heavy blanketing of woods, hills and ravines intersected the forest at intervals. These very often were knee deep in mud, through which the fighters from overseas had to wade as they pushed steadily on. [114]

Then there were barbed wire defenses, sometimes twenty feet in height, with the hills and surrounding country villages fortified with acres of rapid-fire guns, often in vast nests, and requiring the work of batteries to blast them out of the path.

During all these days they had charged through villages, fought through morasses, forded swollen streams, bayoneted machine gunners at their posts, and used their rifles as clubs when they came to grips with the foe in the wire entanglements.

Hunger and thirst joined hands with the enemy. Gas attack followed charge, and charge succeeded gas attack. From overhead Boche planes rained bombs down upon them. Comrades

fell on every hand, and the cries of the wounded rose above the shrieking of shrapnel and shell.

And day after day the young air-service boys rendered their full duty to the cause they stood for. Filled with the ardor that spurs patriots on to do astonishing feats they never shirked when the order came that sent them again and again into the air to measure wits with the Boche fliers.

Hardly a day but what there was a vacancy in the ranks of those gallant airmen who were so willingly giving their service in answer to their country's call. More than a few had been sent to the hospital from which they would only emerge, it might be, cripples for life, but doubtless thankful to have escaped even a sadder fate. [115]

Tom and Jack, as well as Harry Leroy, had had their close calls, but somehow it seemed as though they were watched over by a kind Providence, for so far none of them had met with a serious mishap.

There were compensations, too; for after a hard day's work in the air how pleasant it was for Jack to lounge in the temporary field hut of the Red Triangle and watch Bessie's nimble fingers handing out hot coffee, sandwiches, or any of the hundred-and-one things which those industrious workers managed to have in store for the wearers of Uncle Sam's khaki, so as to make them feel that here was indeed a touch of home life, though far removed from the actual thing.

And then perhaps from time to time, when Bessie was relieved by some other worker, how delightful it was to find a chance to sit with her, sipping tea, and chatting.

Of course Jack had long ago confided to her all that had happened to him and to Tom and Harry since last they had met in Paris. If he was over modest in his descriptions, especially when speaking of his personal doings, why, Bessie had imagination, and could easily color the narrative to suit her own ideas of what was fit and proper. [116]

This sort of thing could not keep up indefinitely, of course.

The losses which the American army was sustaining were very severe, for they never allowed themselves to be balked of their object. If they found after trying that it was impossible to secure what they were after one way, they turned around and went at it from a second, perhaps even a third angle, but what in the end they gained their objective.

But it was known that they had now arrived close to the northern edge of that vast wooded tract. For twenty-three days they had battled continuously and pushed their lines forward in a way that must have been peculiarly discouraging to Hindenburg.

His generals, who knew the ground best, had assured the Hun commander that no army on earth could ever force the Argonne Forest, defended as it was by every possible contrivance ever invented by a cunning Boche brain. Yet here in October those persistent Yankees were on the point of emerging from the bloody shambles, and ready to continue the drive to the banks of the Rhine, if need be.

It was on one of those never-to-be-forgotten October nights that Jack entered the tent that was being used as the temporary rest house for the Y. M. C. A. workers, with a hastily dug hole adjoining where the girls could seek shelter in case the Boche became troublesome with his shells or bombs. He motioned to Tom whom he found chatting with Bessie. [117]

The place was crowded as usual. Some of the doughboys had taken possession of the battered old piano, moved up each day as though it were their choicest possession, as indeed it really was. They sang their favorite songs over and over again, and seemed to enjoy every minute of the time.

It was no easy thing to make oneself heard with so much noise going on; but Tom obeyed the signal of his chum, under the conviction that Jack must have something of more or less importance which he wished to communicate.

"What's in the wind this time, Jack?" he asked lightly, when he found himself alongside the other. "Any more spies trying to blow up our hangars?"

"Forget all that now. I want to speak to you about Helene, Tom."

"Oh, yes! We've almost forgotten all about Helene these days, what with our many duties in the field and the air. What's new concerning little Jeanne's sister, Jack?"

"Well, I haven't been neglecting the job I undertook, all the same," came the steady answer. "Never a batch of Boche prisoners is put behind the barbed-wire enclosure but what I find a chance to look 'em over and air my limited German vocabulary." [118]

"Trying to find out if there are any Lorrainers in the bunch—is that what you mean?"

"It is," the other told him, smiling at the accurate guess made by Tom.

"I suppose," continued Tom, "you've run across quite a few of them, and some Alsatians in the bargain; for the Prussian war-lords saw to it that few, if any, escaped the draft."

"Oh, I picked out dozens of men who claimed they had homes in Lorraine, and every mother's son of them was fighting in the Hun army because of compulsion. A lot of them lied, of course,

because their names told that they came of German stock, their people having settled there after the war of Seventy-one had given the country to Germany."

"And at last ran across the one you most wanted to meet, did you?"

"I did come on a chap who admitted his home was just on the other side of the border, and who knew all about General von Berthold. Yes, and the Anstey family as well. From him I learned that Gerald Anstey was the name of Jeanne's and Helena's father. He was English, of course, and married into that Lorraine family."

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"Dead, I suppose?" asked Tom.

"It has been believed so for four years now," replied Jack. "Anstey tried to leave the country in order to join the British regiment to which he belonged, but was followed by the Guards, and they say shot down like a dog. Anyway he's never been heard from in all these years."

"And is the general really the man who took Helene away?" Tom demanded.

"No question about it. This man told me he was connected with the family Mrs. Anstey sprang from. Better still, Tom, this same Lorrainer was at the old chateau just a few days ago, sent there on duty because of his being from the same section of country as von Berthold, he says. And, Tom, he saw Helene!"

"You're getting closer and closer all the time, Jack, let me tell you. If you didn't give him a clue to make him say that, it's very important."

"Oh, I was careful not to let him know why I was interested in von Berthold. When he happened to say he had seen a child there that he could remember having noticed at the Anstey home of course I pumped him, and led him along until he declared that he felt certain it was either Jeanne or Helene."

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"I'm glad that point is settled," Tom admitted. "After this we can know what ground we stand on, if ever we find a chance to make a call as uninvited guests on General von Berthold."

"Speed the day!" said Jack. "The sooner it comes the better I'll be pleased. Nellie told me that she hears from Jeanne every few days, for the ambulances pass the door of the little half-demolished house where she has found a temporary home before going to Paris; and the drivers carry notes for Nellie, stopping for answers on the return trip."

"I can easily understand that!" Tom exclaimed eagerly, unconsciously giving himself away. "For who could resist Nellie's sweet smile? Certainly no warm-hearted Yankee ambulance driver with a girl back home who is often in his thoughts. Some fellows would wade through fire and water for a smile from Nellie."

"That's right, too, Tom," admitted Jack promptly. "And they'd feel well repaid for doing it too. I know one who doesn't hesitate to say so. But see here, I'm going to propose something to you, old fellow."

"I can give a pretty shrewd guess what it is. You carry your secrets in your face, Jack. Nothing of the cunning conspirator about you, for a fact. You're going to suggest that we plan some sort of a campaign, by means of which we can pay a flying visit to this old chateau and surprise the famous general, perhaps relieve him of the voluntary charge he's taken on his shoulders by carrying Helene away with us."

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"You hit the bull's-eye the first shot, Tom. That is just what I had in mind. Please don't try to throw cold water on my hopes by saying it can't be done."

"Make your mind easy on that score, Jack. I'm just as eager as you can be to drop in on the general and bring Helene back to her twin sister."

"I'm right glad to hear you say that. Fact is, I ought to be ashamed to suspect for a single second that you'd decline to back me up. Now the only question that's left is to set the time."

"That may have to be settled by circumstances just now beyond our control," Tom told him, very seriously.

Jack seeing him look around so carefully sensed something of importance.

"See here, what ails you, Tom? You've got something held back, I just know. Is that fair to me, your old chum? I've been told there was an extra big event in the air, but no one seemed able to get a line on it. Those who did know kept it a dead secret. Are you one of them? And won't you put me wise, Tom?"

"I've kept it a secret for two days, until I'm ready to burst," admitted Tom, with a sigh of relief. "Just a bit ago I received permission to mention it to you, as the observer who was to accompany me is out of the running, and they gave me my choice of another. Of course I took you, Jack."

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"It's well you did, because I'd never have forgiven you if you'd gone back on your old pal," Jack replied, nodding his head. "Now tell me what it's all about. Are we going to blast the Kaiser out of his throne?"

"It amounts to about that, I'd say, Jack. Listen. The High Command have laid out a scheme to knock the last prop out from under Fritz. There's a certain stronghold they're banking on as a

bulwark of safety in case we do succeed in breaking through here. Get that, Jack?"

"Yes, spin away, Tom."

"All right. Well, they've been getting all kinds of secret information about this particular spot, and it's on the map to knock it sky-high!"

"Bomb it, you mean, of course?"

"We've got a new kind of bomb, it seems, said to be three times as powerful in its effects as the best the Huns handle. Our leaders are anxious that it should be tried out against this stronghold that the Boche seems to think is going to hold Pershing's boys up for ever so long."

"Great stunt! And say, I'm mighty glad you got a chance to pull me into the game, Tom. Never forget it, I tell you." [123]

"Don't mention it, Jack. I'll be three times as happy with you beside me, than if I had to have another alongside. But that isn't quite all, boy."

"What, even more coming?" gasped the delighted Jack.

"It seems that rumors have reached us that Ludendorff has his present headquarters in a chateau among the hills that can be easily reached by the bombing plane squadron on their way to the main objective. Yes, and would you believe it, they even suspect that the Old Fox of the Hills, Von Hindenburg himself, is there right now, in consultation with his chief general. Think of a double killing, Jack, will you?"

Jack went through a pantomime that indicated his abounding joy over the prospect of cutting off the responsible heads of the enemy at a single blow.

"This sounds good to me," he said. "And now, Tom, what has it all to do with the prospect of our paying that visit to Jeanne's uncle, and forcing him to give up little Helene? Tell me that!"

CHAPTER XIV

[124]

SELECTED FOR SPECIAL DUTY

"REMEMBER," Tom said again very solemnly, "this is a dead secret, Jack."

"Not a whisper will get away from me, I give you my word on that," hastily replied the other. "And my word is as good as my bond, any day."

"So it is. I only cautioned you as I did because the same secrecy was impressed on me at the time I was taken into the matter. That was why I couldn't give even you a hint. But it's all right now. As to your question, Jack, it might happen that we would get separated from the rest of the bunch on the return journey, and, if so, why, you see, we could take a little spin around the district where that other chateau lies."

"Yes," added Jack thoughtfully, but with a gleam in his eye, "accidents are apt to happen in even the best regulated families; and it isn't very strange for aviators to get a little mixed in their bearings."

"Especially," Tom went on to say without the ghost of a smile, "when on a night-bombing expedition; for a thousand things are apt to come up, all calculated to bother the best of pilots, and throw him out of his reckoning." [125]

"Why, we've been through that mill more than a few times, you remember, Tom. I could mention at least three occasions when we couldn't tell where we were and had to go it blind for a time. Fortunately, we got home all right where some fellows might have been less lucky."

"Well, that's all I'm going to tell you now, for the reason that it's the extent of my own information," Tom wound up with. "And since the hour is growing pretty late I reckon two tired fellows I know had better be getting over to their bunks."

"One thing more, Tom," urged the other.

"All right, but hurry along, for I saw Bessie looking this way as if she had something to say; and you interrupted our conversation in a very interesting part."

Jack grinned, and said:

"It will stay interrupted, too, for I am going to have the last word with Bessie. But I was wondering whether the officers would want us to work to-morrow, and keep up this flying for victory business, as the boys have taken to calling the work we're doing here over the Argonne these days?"

"Oh! How careless of me to forget to tell you about that! No, all of those who have been selected for this enterprise are to get a holiday to-morrow, so they can be fresh for the night work. We're to lie around, take things easy, eat doughnuts as fast as the Salvation Army girls can [126]

fry them, and get in trim for strenuous work."

Jack sighed.

"Suits me all right," he admitted. "Haven't had much vacation for three weeks or so now, and it gets a bit monotonous buzzing over those treetops, asking Fritz to pop away at you so as to coax him to betray his warm nest down below, and then making signs to our boys so as to locate it for them."

"All of us who haven't been piloting bombing planes will feel about the same way, Jack. I know a day off is going to make me feel fresh and dandy.

"Besides," went on Tom, as if incidentally, "there's a fellow over at the hospital that I'm interested in. His name is Fred Lincoln, and he was hurt yesterday in one of the skirmishes in the woods. I couldn't find out how bad his wounds were, but he was having me take some letters of his only three days ago, telling me then he had a queer feeling he was going to get his before long, and asking me to send them home for him if it happened."

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"I remember Fred," said Jack, looking sorry to hear the news. "He's a fine boy at that. He was married only a week before the draft took him. Said the war had nothing to do with his getting spliced, as they had been engaged for two years. I hope he comes through. Remember me to him; and also to his nurse—if she happens to be named Nellie."

"Sure. Are you off to bed now?" as the other turned away.

"In five minutes or so, after I've spoken to Bessie," came the answer.

Jack was as good as his word, and the two chums were soon preparing for another night's sound sleep, hoping they would not be aroused by any disturbance, such as had occurred on that other night.

In this at least they were lucky. The Germans had evidently suffered so severely on account of that other raid they did not care to repeat it.

So the night passed altogether in peaceful fashion; that is, for such times of warfare, where hundreds of thousands of fighting men, backed by unlimited batteries and monster guns, were daily grappling in what was destined to go down in history as the most extraordinary, as well as the most protracted, engagement of the entire war.

The boys were up early, and Harry Leroy seemed surprised when told that the two air service boys did not expect to fly that day.

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"Something's up, I warrant," he told them bluntly, "and you're bound to keep a tight upperlip about it. All right, I wouldn't ask you to whisper just one word to me; only I feel sore because they have left me out of the game. But I never was lucky in drawing prizes. I'll go out and vent my spleen on some Fritz who happens to get in my way."

When the airmen trailed in toward noon on that October day, first, rumors reached Tom and Jack, and then came the plain story connected with Harry's extraordinary conduct on that wonderful morning.

Other pilots said the boy seemed to be possessed of a spirit such as they had never known him to show before. He hunted out the Boche wherever he could find him, forced him to give battle, and then simply played with him, no matter if he chanced to be one of the best-known German aces.

Two he had sent down in flames, for which he would receive due credit; and there were reports that he had also made as many more drop to the earth in a condition of impotence.

"Why," said a pilot who recounted some of these happenings to the air service boys, "Harry seemed possessed of a reckless spirit that will be the death of him yet unless he curbs it. He'll soon have the entire Boche escadrille on his tail, crazy to fetch him down. And if he keeps up this sort of work and lives, he'll soon make our leading ace look to his laurels."

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When Harry came in finally he looked flushed, but triumphant.

"What's all this we hear about your carrying-on this morning?" demanded Jack, almost immediately.

"Oh, I just made up my mind that I'd got to have a special day of it, that's all," replied the other carelessly. "They wouldn't let me go along with you chaps, and I had to do something to let the ugliness get out; so I put it up to Fritz. And, say, I've had a glorious time, too."

He refused pointblank to tell them anything more at the time, so they had to pick up all their information through other channels; but then it was not so hard to do that, since nearly every working aviator had taken note of Harry's remarkable work that morning.

Then came the afternoon.

Both Tom and Jack might have considered that time dragged, only for the fact that they could pass the hours in a pleasant fashion. Tom managed to get over to the field hospital to see his wounded friend, Fred Lincoln. And, really, he did spend as much as ten minutes trying to cheer that individual up, for Fred had lost an arm, and was feeling blue over his future home-going to

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his young wife.

As for Jack, he haunted the Y. M. C. A. dugout and wrote letters home until he could not think of another person who would want to be remembered. It was a great day of rest to those hard-working air pilots, though from the look on their faces when they were greeting the incoming aviators one might have thought they rather envied them their latest achievements.

Such is the force of habit.

At last came night, and the two air service boys thrilled with the realization of what great things were apt to come to pass in their experience before another dawn brought the grey into the eastern sky.

CHAPTER XV

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OVER THE ENEMY'S LINES

IN all there were twenty planes starting out on that momentous expedition to "strafe the Kaiser," as Jack called it. Half of these were monster bombing machines of a late model, capable of carrying more of the deadly explosives than had ever before been attempted.

The others were battle planes, guided by the most expert pilots, some of whom were already famous aces. These were men whose names had become household words over in America, heroes of the masses, whose pictures always evoked storms of applause whenever shown on the screen in the motion picture houses.

Tom owed the fact of his having been selected to guide one of the bombers, instead of a fighting machine, to the fact that one man had fallen sick, and was thus placed out of the running. In casting around for an efficient substitute they had picked Tom.

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The start was made an hour before midnight. This was done in order to lead the Boche to believe that the night would pass without unusual occurrences.

Quietly, every man who had been called to duty presented himself at his special station equipped for work. The hostlers, under the supervision of the officer in command at the aviation field, had seen to it that every detail had been looked after. Tanks were filled, and each plane carefully examined for defects that might imperil the lives of those who were to trust themselves to its reliability.

As customary, the pilots and observers themselves took one last survey of certain particular features where experience told them there was the most reason to anticipate trouble.

Not a single plane but stood up under the test, which spoke well for the infinite care taken in their manufacture, as well as the handling they had received since being placed in action.

The signal being given, the monster machines began to take the air one after another, units in a vast whole. There was no demonstration, though scores of other aviators and assistants were on the field watching the send-off, speculating as to the momentous business being thus undertaken and often eating their hearts out with envy.

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Tom and Jack were well satisfied with the big plane that had been given into their charge. Of course Tom had handled just such a machine before, and was well acquainted with its possibilities.

Jack on his part was pleased with the fact that the work of releasing the old-shaped bombs would fall to his share of the duties. It was something to feel pride in, this taking part in the most ambitious expedition of the kind in which the Americans had ever embarked, without a single French or British airman along.

Once aloft, they waited for the remainder of the huge squadron to join them. The hum of the many motors made merry music in the ears of the two young Yankee aviators. That droning sound seemed to be spelling the downfall of autocracy, and the rule of real democracy throughout all the world.

It was just the kind of night for such a raid. Clouds partly covered the sky, but there was an absence of wind. Up there, far removed from the earth, it was not dark, and when looking down objects were dimly seen.

The great forest stretched backward toward the south; and in the other direction, had it been daylight, the aviators could have looked off to the open country, where fields lay. These were no longer covered with the fruits of the harvest, as in prewar times, but lay desolate, with ruined farm buildings, and everywhere the indelible mark of the ruthless hand of the Hun showing what had befallen the border Departments of poor bleeding France.

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Finally came the welcome signal that announced the arrival of the last of the air fleet. All was now ready for the start. Every pilot knew what place he was expected to occupy in the formation; and when another flash was seen they took up their positions.

The leader occupied the place of honor. After him came two more planes a little apart. The next pair were even further away from each other, and so it went on to the end. In as far as Jack could make out, the expedition at its start very much resembled the formation seen when a flock of wild geese passes overhead, winging its flight toward the South in the fall or toward Canada in the spring, making a triangle, or spear head, with an old gander at the apex in supreme command.

Later on, as occasion arose, this formation would be changed, the battleplanes surrounding the heavier bombers in order to protect them from any hostile attack.

Far below could be seen occasional lights. These they knew came from some camp of the Huns, where the tired soldiers were sleeping in anticipation of another hard day's work ahead. Off to the right a fire was burning, perhaps some building in the process of destruction to prevent its falling into the hands of the Americans, who were in line to overwhelm it on their next day's drive. [135]

These things, however, received very little attention from the raiders. They were more interested in the possibility of their progress being halted by some block of Hun machines, bent on breaking up the raid before it was well started.

No doubt, information had leaked concerning the assembling of all these latest model planes. There were always ways whereby clever and daring spies could communicate with their mates on the other side of the fighting line, which was the main reason for so much secrecy in planning this particular expedition.

So most of the time both Tom and Jack kept their eyes fixed on the line ahead, waiting eagerly for the signal to close in.

"There she goes!" called out Jack suddenly; but of course his companion had already seen the signal light from the leading plane, and was commencing to carry out his part of the programme.

Enemy planes had been discovered barring their further progress, quite a squadron of them being in the air, with others rising as they caught the sound of the bustling motors coming from the south. [136]

This was the first crisis in the raid. The Huns were "out for blood," as Jack termed it, and would do their utmost to break up the formation. Their object would be to confuse the Yankee pilots, and thus weaken the force to the extent of making them abandon their plan.

But like a speeding avalanche the score of American planes sailed on, bent on forcing their way directly through the feeble defensive line by sheer mass play. It was football tactics over again on a huge scale, as learned by most of those young pilots in their schooldays at home.

The machine-guns commenced to spray around them. Such a furious fire was opened that almost immediately one of the Hun machines took a downward dive, rushed earthward, bursting into flames before it had gone one-quarter of the way to the ground.

This quick result evidently took some of the spirit out of the remainder of the enemy pilots, for they sheered off to right and left, still keeping their guns going, but apparently apprehensive as to their own safety.

A second Boche crumpled up under this mass attack. His plane was seen turning over and over, though it did not take fire, and there was not one chance in ten of its pilot's being able to save himself from the doom that apparently confronted him. [137]

Of course, no one ever knew whose lucky shots had accomplished this double result. These victories must go down in the history of the Yankee flying squadron simply as "general damage inflicted upon the enemy." But they counted just as much in demoralizing the Germans, for after that the attempt to hold up the raiders was abandoned. Fritz had done his best, but it had proved to be far from good enough.

Twenty Yankee machines had gone into the battle, and the same number sailed majestically onward after the last spiteful chatter of machine-gun fire had ceased.

For the first encounter of the night this was encouraging. It seemed to give promise of further successes yet to come; and every member of the expedition felt a glow in his heart on realizing how great their victory had been.

They were now headed for the castle where report placed Ludendorff's headquarters. Perhaps report lied. That was a matter with which they had nothing whatever to do; all they knew was that their orders entailed on them the duty of demolishing that castle in the most expeditious manner known to bombing pilots, and leave the rest to history to record.

The raiders were now of course well back of the German front, though still flying over French soil. Presently they would come upon that part of the country where the enemy had chosen to place his supreme headquarters while trying with might and main to hold the aggressive Americans in check. [138]

Only the leader would know when this was reached, though, through signals, his orders could be passed back along the line.

It was now no longer dark down below, thanks to the heavenly bodies that had appeared once

more from behind the cloud curtain, as though in league with the raiders.

The squadron descended to lower levels, in order to be better prepared for dropping their bombs when the time arrived.

Jack, having nothing to do with the piloting of the machine, kept a vigilant watch ahead. He wondered how the leader would know when they had arrived close to the castle, since the inmates would of course see to it that every light was extinguished that could be of use to an enemy airman.

Then came the signal telling that they had arrived, and downward further swooped the bombing machines, the raiders intent on sighting their intended quarry so as to blot it out of existence.

CHAPTER XVI

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BLOTTING OUT HUN HEADQUARTERS

BELOW them, as they thus swooped downward, the air service boys could see the earth lying in semi-darkness. It was even possible to make out the darker shadows which indicated patches of trees, and a white road stood out like a straight line drawn across a shaded map.

Looking closer, Jack quickly discovered the castle.

It stood among some trees, and was unquestionably well fitted to serve the German High Commander as headquarters until such time as the Americans drawing near forced him to move back to Sedan, and then cross over into Belgium near its junction with Luxembourg.

The bombers now altered their formation. Instead of moving forward in a compact mass they formed two parallel lines but a short distance apart, five machines to each column.

Jack looked across to the companion plane and distinguished both pilot and observer crouching at their posts, eager to get into action. It seemed as though he could easily toss a coin over and make it land in the other machine, so close did they range along, with buzzing motors cut down to slower speed so as not to interfere too much with the dropping of the bombs.

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Each plane was to let just one missile go, and no more. If the castle had one stone left on another after the rain of aerial torpedoes had come to an end, it would be vastly surprising.

True, it was a French chateau, and it seemed too bad to have to expend any of their precious bombs in bringing about its downfall. But of course they knew full well it was the policy of the Huns never to leave anything intact that could be of the slightest assistance or comfort to the enemy. Hence the annihilation of the chateau was already ordained when Ludendorff should be through using it.

Jack primed himself for his work, though it must be Tom who would give the word when the exact second arrived for the bomb to be released. One pressure on the trigger, and down through the slanting tube would speed the messenger of destruction, bent on its fateful errand.

They were one of the last pair in line, consequently they might expect to hear some sign of the dreadful work before their time came to join in.

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Guns were beginning to sound, and the raiders could see spiteful flashes here and there. Evidently, if Ludendorff did have his headquarters here, he had been judicious enough to mount a number of anti-aircraft guns to combat the raiding planes should they appear at any time.

But the firing was only haphazard work, because the searchlight that began now to play upon the airplanes could reveal only one bomber at a time. Thus the shrapnel burst much above their level, so deceptive was the glare.

Then came a sudden, terrific crash, sounding almost as if the battery of Heaven's heaviest artillery had broken loose in one frightful thunderclap. At the same time a blinding flash from below showed Jack flying timbers and scattering stones.

The first shot from the bombers had been well sent and accomplished all that was expected of it. Hardly had the dancing echoes bounded from a neighboring elevation than there came a second explosion, if anything louder than the preceding one.

So the bombs exploded in pairs, just as they were let go by the units in the double column of advancing raiders. Two, four, six had gone, and if all struck as true to the mark as that initial one, there must be little left of the doomed castle by now.

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Jack was in a fever of suspense. He feared that the signal to cease firing might be given before he could drop his bomb, the commander of the bombing fleet having decided enough damage had already been inflicted, and that it would be only a waste of good material to rain down any more bombs.

But seven and then eight were falling, as though it had been settled to make a clean sweep

while about it.

Their turn next!

Jack gritted his teeth and awaited Tom's cry, when he would be the last to burst into the rousing chorus of thunderous reports. The signal came, and Jack pressed the trigger, releasing the hanging bomb, and starting it on its downward journey.

If Tom's judgment was good it would at least strike somewhere in the midst of the débris and add more or less to the wreckage. As to whether the Boche commander-in-chief had been caught napping and buried in the ruins, was a matter about which they could only speculate.

Tom himself doubted whether such a happy solution of the affair could be attained, because he had known of various attempts being made in times gone by to "get" the Kaiser himself when visiting the western front, but always without success.

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They heard a frightful crash, much louder than any of those preceding it. The big plane rocked and swayed as though in a gale, and Tom needed all his skill to keep from being thrown off his balance.

It was no mystery to Jack. He realized that by a strange coincidence his falling bomb and that of the other rear plane had exploded simultaneously, making the ground vibrate, and completely destroying anything that had been left of the French chateau.

Their work in this quarter having been thoroughly accomplished the raiders now climbed higher, to rejoin the battleplane squadron hovering above, waiting to act once more as their armed escort.

Looking down in farewell, Jack could see fires burning. The shattered timbers of the wrecked chateau had been set ablaze. He would always remember that strange event whenever again watching fires from a lofty height in the night-time.

The squadron was off again, the second thrilling event connected with the bombing raid having come off as scheduled without any mishap to the Yankee air fleet.

Jack had kept quiet up to now, but it had cost him a severe effort. Talking when a plane is bombing on its way can never be anything of a pleasure unless it is equipped with an up-to-date wireless telephone for the use of pilot and observer.

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Jack himself had contrived some amateur device of this sort which he rigged up as soon as he seated himself back of Tom, although up to then he had failed to make use of it.

The roar of many propellers and the steady hum of a score of engines combined to make a deafening noise. Nevertheless, when Tom felt a tug at his sleeve, such as had been agreed upon with his chum, he took hold of his little receiver and was delighted to hear Jack's voice as plainly as though there had been no interference.

Plainly then Jack's idea was bearing fruit, and properly cultivated there might be something worth while in the scheme.

"Tom, do you get me?" demanded the agitated inventor, the first thing.

"Yes, and plainly, too," came the reply that greatly pleased Jack; for up to then they had found no occasion to test the wireless telephone under severe conditions.

If it "made good" with all that noise about them, Jack felt that he ought to call it a success.

"That's right!" he told Tom, exultantly. "I never missed a syllable that time. Oh, boy! it seems as if it's O K, doesn't it?"

"Splendid thing for talking when you're rushing along; and without cracking your voice, either," Tom told him.

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"Did my bomb explode exactly at the same second as the other one?" next asked Jack, more to continue the conversation and thrill with his triumph than for information, because he had already made up his mind on that score.

"Just what it did, Jack. But let up on this now. I've got to keep my whole attention pinned to my work."

That often different minds run in the same channel is proved every day; and in Jack's case it really turned out that while he was testing his crude invention another much more eminent person in far-away America had just succeeded in accomplishing the idea he had in mind, and was almost ready to offer it to the Washington Signal Corps authorities.

After rejoining the squadron of battleplanes the old formation had been resumed. A cordon of fighters moved on either side, one to each bombing unit in the fleet. Just as transports were convoyed across the dread submarine danger-zone of the Atlantic by destroyers and cruisers, so these working planes were protected by those better equipped for holding off intending offenders, and striking with all the strength of Uncle Sam's good right arm.

It would not be for long, Tom believed. Straight as the honey bee heads toward the hive when laden with sweets extracted from blossom and flower, they were now aiming for their main

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objective, the last powerful stronghold of the Hun in that sector, perhaps in all the extended battle front.

Doubtless they would meet with a stubborn resistance. The enemy must, in the nature of things have been forewarned, and would do everything in his power to ward off the impending blow.

There was likely to be a determined battle in the air, with the Germans closing in to make desperate resistance. There was also bound to be a heavy fire from below. Airplanes, perhaps even Zeppelins of the latest and most powerful description, would attack the raiders, and seek to smash their formation into a chaos that must mean disgraceful flight and heavy losses.

But every American heart beat strong with confidence as the fliers winged their way through space, heading for the Hun stronghold that was intended to be a supreme menace to the onrushing tide of Uncle Sam's boys in khaki.

CHAPTER XVII

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FLYING FOR VICTORY

BOTH Tom and Jack could look back to previous experiences in bombing the enemy. They had taken part in excursions that occupied a part of a moonlight night; trips that sometimes had carried them across the border, and to Metz; once they had gone even as far as the Rhine up in the region of Coblenz, where later on Pershing's army was fated to be posted as a guard over the beaten Huns.

But on those occasions their work had been of a different character from that now given to them. They had seen munition plants go up in masses of flames after their bombs struck; watched important bridges being shattered under the same gigantic force; felt a thrill of triumph when a lucky shot exploded some huge munition dump, on which the enemy depended for his reserve store; exhausted their stock of bombs in demolishing an important railway junction, so as to paralyze the transportation of reinforcing bodies of German troops.

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All those things they were familiar with, but from the great secrecy that had been maintained in connection with this enterprise they could understand that it far exceeded them all in importance.

Their speed was such that they would be likely to reach their goal shortly, when all the suspense must be over. Jack wished that time had come. He was already trying to figure out just how Tom would plan so as to seem to become lost on the homeward flight, and thus be left to his own resources for a time.

From this reverie he was aroused by seeing the signal flash from the pivot of the spearhead. It gave him an electrical sensation, though that was only to be expected.

Tom, too, knew the crisis was near at hand. He stared ahead, and believed he could even make out spectral objects moving this way and that, like monstrous, though dimly seen, dragonflies, such as all country boys have watched many a time while on a warm summer day, lying at rest on the bank of the "swimming hole."

From this it was evident that news of their probable coming had been sent on ahead, warning the defenders of the German fortress.

Still was the night as yet, but it would not be for long with those opposing air forces ready for a death grapple. While the ten battleplanes, each piloted by a Yankee ace with a splendid record, engaged the flotilla of enemy aircraft, the bombers must be at their more humble but equally important business.

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All had been arranged so that there might be the least possible friction, and no confusion. Each pilot and observer knew exactly what he was to do, and every possible situation had been taken into consideration.

Then came the initial firing.

It seemed that one ambitious Boche airman, unable to wait until the oncoming Americans reached the formation arranged to resist the onslaught, had flown ahead and was now exhausting his pony reservoir of missiles against the solid phalanx.

The clatter became a roar as several of the raiders turned their guns on the incautious Hun. Immediately his voice was stilled, and the flittering light dropping earthward, after the manner of a falling rocket-stick, told what had happened to him.

Before he landed his machine had burst into flames, as the escaping petrol caught fire. Jack considered that a good omen for their side.

"Fritz seems to be getting a rough deal on this particular night," he told himself. "Already three of his planes have been destroyed, and several others have gone down out of control, with

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never a single loss on the side of the Americans. Bully!"

But now the advance had reached the marked line where the rest of the Huns waited to engage the invaders. If they were dismayed by the tragic fate that had overtaken that rash pilot they did not show it, for they attacked with a viciousness that Tom had never seen equalled in all his experience as a flier.

It was undoubtedly desperation that spurred the Boche on. He knew that these wonderful Americans, who his leaders had ridiculed in the beginning, were foes not to be despised; that they had almost taken the entire Argonne; that they had actually threatened to commence the long-talked-of march on to Berlin.

So they attacked with fury, and the engagement soon became general. Right and left there was continual firing going on, as the giant planes wheeled and circled, shooting out flaming tongues like so many blast furnaces in action.

The formation was not broken even then, each battleplane continuing to cover its individual bombing plane with the shelter of its wings, so to speak, though at the same time fighting off the aggressors.

Of course the bombers were also fitted to ward off attack, each being armed with two machine-guns, one forward, and the other aft where the man who handled the bombs could manipulate it. Slower and much less agile than the fighting planes, they were expected to defend themselves but not to attack.

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The advance had slowed up, but not entirely stopped while the battle was joined. As yet no bomb had been slipped from its leash, for the right moment still held off.

Looking down Jack could see where the searchlights that sent such broadening streamers aloft were stationed. He could also make out a dim pile that must be the German fortress, strengthened particularly to hold up the Americans, even as that at Verdun had held up the Huns.

Let the "Archies" bark below and the shrapnel burst all around them as it pleased, no one in all that vast armada of the air was paying the slightest attention to such things. They all, in their carelessness of danger, seemed to themselves impervious to the storm of flying missiles.

The slower-moving bombing machines bore the brunt of this furious onslaught, and Jack could tell that the wings of their plane were being cut by the bullets.

It was almost a miracle that so far no one aboard any of the ten big planes seemed to have been struck; or if such a thing had happened the injury did not appear to be serious. They continued to move forward as if all the Huns in Northern France, backed by every sort of gun that could hurl shrapnel aloft, would not be sufficient to stay their progress.

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Presently, however, the formation was broken at a signal. To try to maintain it any longer would be little short of suicidal, for the gunners below were getting their range better, and the bursting shells came alarmingly close now.

Tom kept his eyes constantly about him. Each bomber tried to keep at a given altitude in making the evolutions, since in that way they were better able to avoid a collision that would be fatal to both machines.

At last Tom caught his signal and as he headed straight for the spot over the fortress he gave Jack the sign. The bomb slipped from its sheath, and was instantly lost to sight in the smoky atmosphere below.

Already they had had their ears shocked by numerous discharges, as others among the Americans shot their missile earthward. It was terrible to look down at that crisis in the attack. The whole world seemed on fire beneath them, what with the exploding bombs and the myriad flashes coming from the German guns at work.

Jack was disappointed because in this vast inferno he found it utterly impossible to tell where his special messenger struck. He knew, though, that he had been in a fair position for a hit when given the word, and on that account never found any reason to doubt but that it had given a good account of itself.

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After delivering his fire Tom swept off to one side so as not to interfere with another bomber who might occupy a higher level, and be advancing to the attack.

Presently when the turn of the air service boys came again they would be ready to send down the second "bundle of concentrated destructiveness"; and later on there might be a "clean-up call" that would exhaust the stock carried by each plane.

Meanwhile, given a chance to look hastily around at other factors connected with the extensive engagement, Tom discovered that there had been at least one victim besides the initial one.

A plane was dropping swiftly, swinging this way and that, turning over and over, and showing signs that the pilot's hand no longer controlled the levers. He was unable to make out whether it was an enemy plane or one of their own convoy; but the doom of those who happened to be belted to the seats was undoubtedly sealed.

FAVORED BY FORTUNE

THE Huns soon discovered that they were up against an intrepid enemy. When they so boldly attacked the Yankee fleet of raiders, as Jack expressed it in his boyish way, they had "bitten off more than they could chew."

They had dropped back a bit and were trying to annoy the Americans all they could with as little damage to themselves as possible. If their last stronghold was doomed to destruction under that rain of mighty bombs, any self-sacrifice on their part could not ward it off, and so what was the use?

The end seemed to be approaching, for the Boche plainly showed he had had enough of the fighting. One last combined attack all along the line that would likely put the enemy to flight, and then for the signal that would spell "homeward bound," a magical phrase with voyagers of the air just as it is with sailors of the salty seas.

Finally it came. The great battle was over. [155]

The air service boys rejoiced that the victory was won.

The roar of guns from below had ceased, and as the Yankees above could not find any enemy plane against which to pit their strength, they, too, no longer scurried this way and that, each one like an avenging Nemesis.

Looking down Jack was appalled at what he saw. It seemed almost as though the end of the world had come. Huge volumes of acrid smoke slowly swept along on the night air, with here and there a lurid tongue of angry flame, looking like a serpent's tongue, stabbing the gloomy curtain.

He had seen vivid pictures in colors of an eruption of Vesuvius, and to his mind this presented just such an appalling spectacle. There could never be any doubt regarding the awful power of those latest of Yankee bombs. The German stronghold that an hour before had stood in arrogant pride, meant to be a stumbling block in the path of Pershing's victorious army, had been so shattered that it would hardly be noticed in the general advance of the oncoming host of boys in khaki.

But there was the signal to gather once more in formation of twos for the homeward journey. There would always be a chance that the furious Huns might gather a fresh force of aerial fighters to make one last assault on the columns before admitting defeat; and it was to be ready for this that every possible precaution must be taken. [156]

Then the fact became apparent that the return was not to be made with an undiminished force. There were no longer exactly twenty planes to fill out the double column. Some were missing, having fallen in the last desperate attack of the foe, when a perfect whirlwind of fighting had taken place.

Tom noticed this almost immediately. At least one battleplane was absent, if not more, and the companion bomber that had occupied with them the place of honor at the tail of the procession also failed to come to its place. Perhaps the very plane he had watched drop and wondered about was one of these missing ones.

Jack, too, looked down upon that vast smudge of smoke and shooting flames with a new feeling gripping his heart. It no longer represented merely the disappointed hopes of a Hindenburg and a Ludendorff; it was not to be considered only a fortress annihilated by American pluck and ingenuity; there was a sadness in Jack's parting look now, and for a reason. Down there brave American boys had gone to their fate, after battling to their last breath for the right. In that blanket of smoke and amidst scattered stone and timbers they had found their tomb, nor would those loved ones far across the sea ever know where to look for their last resting place. [157]

On the roll they would be marked simply as "lost when on perilous duty", and that brief inscription must ever be their epitaph. None more glorious was ever inscribed on monument of granite in a city's beautiful cemetery; and the Nation would always do honor to their memories.

But the air armada was off once more.

Jack put these thoughts from his mind. They had not expected to carry out their ambitious plans without incurring losses. The price had been paid, and those who came through in safety might congratulate themselves on their good fortune.

Headed for the home camp they left that shambles behind them, for it seemed certain that many Huns must have perished when the fortress was destroyed so completely.

Then all at once Jack remembered something. Tom had almost as much as promised that if half a chance arose while on the way home he meant somehow or other to get "lost" from the main column.

It might not be very hard, seeing that they came at the tail of the procession, and those just ahead would hardly notice the fact if at some time or other they should lag, and vanish from sight. It might be taken for granted that they had simply fallen a little behind, and by putting on a [158]

spurt of speed could at any time easily catch up.

At any rate the expedition would not delay, waiting for those who tarried. In an affair of this kind the rule was "every tub on its own bottom," and if accidents occurred the unfortunate plane must drop out, and take its individual chance of getting through in safety.

Jack was wondering just how his chum would act in order to bring about this separation. Hence he was not greatly surprised when Tom called out aloud, so that he could make his voice heard above the incessant whirr of motors added to the buzz of many propellers that filled the air with noise:

"Jack, something seems to be wrong with our engine."

"You don't say!" ejaculated Jack, accompanying the remark with a wide grin; for he suspected that this was only the ruse he had been anticipating.

"I don't seem to be able to get along as smoothly as I did before," continued the pilot.

"Why, it's a fact that we are letting the others outrun us some, Tom. Wouldn't it be just too bad if they went off and left us in the lurch?"

"No joke about it, Jack. Something is really going wrong, and I imagine I'm getting a poor supply of gas. Take a look at the tank, will you, and see if it's all right!" [159]

At that Jack ceased to chuckle. He realized from what the other said that he meant it seriously. Accordingly Jack bestirred himself to carry out the instructions of the pilot, which he was best able to do from his position aft.

A brief interval of silence followed, save for the constant hum of the machinery and the whirling propellers. Then Jack uttered a loud cry that expressed both astonishment and alarm.

"Tom, you guessed it!" he called. "The blooming tank is empty, and we're feeding on the scant reserve in the smaller tank!"

"Try to find out if a bullet cut a hole in the tank, and let our juice run out!" Tom now ordered.

Jack had already started an examination on his own account, and he almost immediately announced a finding.

"Just what happened, Tom!" came his cry, in a tone of dismay mingled with disgust. "Why, there are two holes, one far above the other! I reckon it came from below, after all. But the tank is empty, and only for that automatic feed change, meant for such an emergency, we'd have been running on hot air before now."

"There's not enough petrol in the small tank to take us home, Jack, I'm afraid," Tom called next. [160]

"Then what?" demanded the other eagerly.

"Only one thing left to us, I'm thinking."

"What's that? You're the skipper of this craft, and I take my orders from you. Whatever you say goes."

"We'll have to pick out a nice even spot and land," said the pilot, in the most natural tone imaginable; for he had by now shut off some of his power, and the noise accordingly diminished.

"And try to get enough gas, some way or other, to see us safely on our way—is that the programme, Tom?" queried the observer.

"There's really no other way. If we keep straight on we're likely to be forced to drop right back of the Hun lines, where we'd be gobbled up as quick as a flash."

"Too bad, isn't it?" cried Jack, in mock tones of chagrin. "And, Tom, wouldn't it be queer now, if after we did drop down we should find that we'd actually landed close to a half ruined chateau that's perched on a hilltop, and occupied by a Hun general as headquarters?"

"That would be a strange coincidence, I should call it, Jack."

"But you say we've just got to land somewhere," urged the other.

"No other way out of the mess. It's either that or else take big risks of being captured just back of the Boche lines. Of the two, our chances are better here than there." [161]

"Well, I bow to your judgment, Tom. You know best. But we'd better drop to a much lower level right away, hadn't we?"

"That goes without saying," replied the pilot, setting about taking a dip, at which he was very expert. "As it is now we can't see much of where we are; and the rest of the gang seem to have cleared out entirely. You can hear the stir of their passage getting fainter and fainter all the while."

"We'll have to go pretty far down if we hope to glimpse anything of the character of the country in this poor light," Jack continued, "and, of course, it'll be necessary for you to pick out a clear place for a landing."

"Unless we can we stand to have a smash that'll just ruin everything," Tom cheerfully assured him.

They had begun to fall rapidly. Tom managed it so that this maneuver was carried out in the best possible way calculated to conserve their very limited stock of petrol.

Gradually they began to get a clearer view of the ground, which until then had only appeared in vague outlines to their eyes. Jack soon announced a discovery.

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"I can begin to make out the trees in patches, Tom. And see there! That must be the river winding along like a snake over yonder. Didn't we decide that the chateau stood within sight of this very stream, Tom?"

"According to what that Lorrainer told me, it did; and on the left bank in the bargain," admitted Tom.

"Good! And unless I've lost my reckoning entirely I should say we're on the left bank of the river right now."

"Just what we are," came the reassuring answer. "I'm going to drop down another peg or two, so we can pick up some landmark and get our bearings settled. No use in groping about as if we were in a fog. I'll shut off most of our speed and just loaf along. We've got to make that gas see us through, you know, Jack."

"I hope it will, I certainly do!"

Presently the air service boys found themselves passing slowly along over the small ridge that seemed to run parallel with the winding Meuse, though at some little distance from it.

CHAPTER XIX

[163]

TOM LEADS THE WAY

"SEE anything yet, Jack?" asked Tom, after the air service boys had been moving along for a brief time, often so close to the top of the ridge that they could make out the character of the trees growing there.

"Not a thing, Tom. I hope now we haven't made a wrong play, and all this while kept running away from the place."

"No danger of that," and Tom's confident way of saying this gave Jack considerable peace of mind. "There's the river, and we can easily see which way it runs, and this is the left bank all right. We ought to strike that break any minute now. The Lorrainer told me it lay just on the other side of the gap."

"And it seems that some small stream comes through the ridge by way of that valley and joins the Meuse there, you said. But if we don't make a rise pretty soon I'm afraid our goose will be cooked. That little amount of petrol left isn't going to last much longer."

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"Hold your horses, and don't cross a bridge before you come to it. Right now I believe I can see something ahead that looks like a dip in the ridge. The chances are it's going to be that gap the man told about."

On hearing this news Jack strained his eyesight more than ever, and soon gave tongue again. No need of using his novel little wireless outfit when the engine was purring so softly and the propellers were revolving just fast enough to keep the plane moving slowly.

"As usual, you're right about that dip. It's there sure enough; and already I more than half believe I can make out something perched on the ridge beyond that's likely to be our chateau."

"Then we've got to be on the lookout for a landing-place," announced the pilot. "It would hardly do to run smack up close to the place. Some of them might happen to be awake, and the sound of our machine would bring them out to investigate. We're taking enough chances as it is, without that."

So he went still lower, just creeping along as it were, and both of them eagerly watched for an open spot.

Tom even circled so as to come down near the low ground at the foot of the ridge. No doubt they would have a far better chance to run across a landing-place there than where the ground was rocky and more precipitous. They had also to bear in mind that it would be necessary to make an ascent later on, if all went well; which must require a certain amount of ground level enough to make the preliminary run.

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After all it was Jack who made the discovery, Tom's attention being in part taken up with the requirements necessary to his function as pilot.

"There, I saw what looked like a decent spot, Tom—we just passed it by on the right. Try to

turn around, and we'll look it over again as we go. Seemed plenty big enough, I thought, though I'd like to have a second peep before we decide to try to land."

This time Tom, too, used his eyes to good advantage, and hardly had they swung past before Jack was asking, in rather subdued tones now:

"How about it, Tom? Think we can make the raffle all right, in this poor light?"

Tom did not hesitate to answer this important question.

"I'm willing to try, Jack. If we're carrying our usual luck we'll land so easy we could hardly break an egg between us. Be ready for your part of the game now."

Jack waited, with his nerves all a-tremble. He knew that everything must depend on Tom's success in effecting a safe landing. Any breakage might upset all their plans, and possibly result in their ultimate capture by the Huns; for when morning came they would have to expose themselves in seeking food, and once they were identified as Americans they would soon be run down. [166]

If ever Tom had reason to exert himself to the utmost in order to make a safe landing, it was then. He came up in the face of what little breeze was stirring, just as a bird invariably alights against the wind, and not with it.

Jack held his breath. Nearer and still nearer they dropped. Now he felt the rubber-tired wheels under the plane strike the ground lightly. They were actually rolling along, jolting more or less, it was true, but nothing so very unusual after all.

With a slight jar the plane came to a sudden stop. Jack, who had freed himself from his safety belt in preparation for this moment, was over like a flash; but although there was a slight slant to the ground the plane displayed no inclination to run backwards.

"Beautifully done," Jack hastened to say.

"Not so loud!" cautioned the other. "We don't know where we are yet, you see. Here's green grass around us, and trees close by. It may be some back dooryard to a house, for all we can tell."

"You just grazed the top of that last tree, Tom—the weeping willowy kind of one over there—but it had to be done to make the landing. Where do we go from here?" [167]

Perhaps that phrase fell naturally from Jack's lips, for he had been singing a song with those identical words earlier on that very evening, with some of his rollicking companions at the Y. M. C. A. hut.

"As soon as we can get our bearings we want to find a road," his chum explained.

"Sure thing. And there ought to be one around, else how would folks get up to that chateau?" Jack demanded. "I suppose we'll have to see after the supply of gas the first thing."

"That was settled beforehand," came the reply. "Now we ought to get our bearings down pat before leaving the old bus here."

"It would be a bad joke on us for a fact, Tom, if we wandered off, and then after picking up a few gallons of petrol—even one, if it came down to that quantity, would serve—and then couldn't for the life of us find where we left the plane. Yes, let's skirmish around, and locate things in our minds."

Accordingly they started to move to the right, gradually widening the circle they made around the plane resting on the open grassy stretch of ground.

"Now we've got to the trees, you notice," said Tom. "Once we pass them by, I think we'll come out on a road which will lead away from here." [168]

Jack clutched his companion by the arm just then, and in an agitated whisper hurriedly said:

"What can those queer white things be over there, Tom? I can see many of them. They're squatting close down to the ground mostly; but there's one or two that stand up higher. Ugh! they look like ghosts to me in this half darkness. Can you make out whether or not they move?"

The other chuckled almost immediately.

"This is certainly a queer stunt for us, Jack," he said. "I've managed to make a landing in a good many outlandish places in times gone by, but this is the first time I ever dropped plump down in a graveyard!"

"What's that? And, say! are those white things gravestones? Well, I believe you're right. I can see now they're perfectly motionless. The joke's on me, I reckon. But I'm glad they are harmless old stones, and not anything to make the creeps go over a fellow."

Tom could hear Jack draw a long breath as he said this, from which he judged that his chum had had something of a shock. Closer inspection proved the truth of Tom's assertion. They were gravestones, mostly of a very modest type, and resting close to the ground. Here and there, however, one more pretentious raised its head some five or six feet high. [169]

Better still, they came upon what seemed to be a road running through the country cemetery

that, if followed, would undoubtedly take them to the one leading up to the chateau perched on the ridge above.

"Must be some sort of old French village around this neighborhood," observed Jack. "Many of these stones are partly covered with moss, as if they were terribly old. But then this may be a private burial place for the family that once lived for years and years in that big castle."

"That's nothing to us just now," Tom reminded him. "What we're interested in is whether this road will lead us up there, and if we can make sure of finding our plane again when we come back. Remember that everything will be just the opposite; what's right to us now will be on the left then."

"Oh, I learned that dodge long ago when I took up the study of woodcraft," Jack announced confidently. "Can't fool me on a little wrinkle like that, if I know it."

"Come along, and we'll make a start," Tom urged.

"Feels to me just as if we were two of those old-time crusaders, starting out to rescue a Christian maiden from the Saracens. Only in our case the girl is a mite of six, with a twin sister just breaking her baby heart over her loss."

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"Stop firing," said Tom, with a vein of authority in his voice; causing the talkative Jack to remember that there were times when silence could be called "golden."

"I'm dumb as a clam, Tom," he announced; and probably really meant it, so far as a limited time went. But if anything at all out of the ordinary happened Jack could no more help whispering than he could give up eating and expect to live.

But even Tom felt that there was considerable truth in that assertion made by his chum. They were engaged in a most peculiar errand, though actuated by motives that did them both credit. And as they stole carefully along the country road heading toward the foot of the ridge upon which the old partly wrecked French chateau stood, both boys realized more than ever what chances they were accepting in making this bold move.

CHAPTER XX

[171]

BORROWED GOODS

AGAIN did Jack pluck at the sleeve of his companion. Remembering his recently given promise, however, he waited to have Tom say the first word before breaking the silence.

"What is it?" asked Tom softly.

"Just made a discovery."

"Let's hear it."

"The old chateau is inhabited, all right," came Jack's assertion. "Tell you how I know. If you take a peep from here, between these trees, you'll notice that one wing is all lighted up."

"It certainly looks that way for a fact, Jack. The general must be having company, I should say."

"Maybe other officers have come back here to consult with Von Berthold about how to hold the Americans tight," chuckled Jack, as if according to his way of thinking they would have all their trouble for their pains, as there was nothing that the Hun army could attempt capable of effecting that end.

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"Just as like as not," his chum assented. "And as it's a serious subject, they're staying late to-night."

"Good reason," chortled the other; "because in three more days old Von will have to be vacating his comfy quarters here, and moving back in the direction of Sedan. Pershing wants this ridge, and means to take it in double-quick time, once we're out of the Argonne Forest. But do you think the fact that there's company around will upset our plans, Tom?"

"I'd rather believe it will help us in one way," replied his chum.

"How?"

"In the first place, it's apt to keep the general busy, and we'll know just where he is. That'll be worth something to us. Then again, we've got to consider how these generals got over here from the fighting front."

"Oh, they happen to have motor cars they can use," said Jack quickly. Any shortage of gasoline doesn't stop German officers from speeding across country, especially when on war business.

"Exactly," Tom said drily. "And it's some of their precious petrol that we're wanting so badly right now, and to get which you're carrying that little bucket."

At that the other chuckled as if highly amused.

"Well, what a gump I was not to think of that myself," he observed. "Why of course we may find a chance to borrow a gallon or two from the reservoir of their car, if only the soldier chauffeur happens to stray away to get a cold snack in the kitchen of the general's headquarters, or something like that. Tom, it's a peach of a scheme, and so simple!"

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"All right, well go ahead then. And close up again, please, unless you hit on another important discovery, when I give you leave to whisper it in my ear."

The advance was resumed. The air service boys now started to climb quite an incline, proving that the road which they had been following latterly must pass close to the chateau.

Now and then they caught fresh glimpses of the building that stood out in bold relief against the heavens. They also noted that the lights still continued to shine in the right wing of the building. This must be the uninjured part, Jack imagined, if indeed the chateau had been partly wrecked by the Germans before the general took it as his headquarters.

In this fashion they gradually cut down the space separating them from the object of their concern. Tom it was this time who made a discovery. He came to a stop, and putting his head close to that of his chum whispered in his ear:

"We're in great luck, Jack. I can make out two cars standing in the road before the chateau. The general must be holding a regular council of war up here, to settle some big matters."

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"He'll settle them, all right, believe me," muttered Jack. "But it'll have to be a scuttle policy. Those Huns are licked, yes, licked good and hard. They're just beginning to know it, too. We're proving too much for their backbone to stand. Well, two cars means we're going to have a double chance to get our little bucket filled with the juice, Tom."

"Seems like it," was all the other allowed to pass his lips, as he once more commenced to advance.

They kept to the side of the road. Here trees were growing, and while the leaves were coming down fast after a frost, at the same time plenty still remained capable of affording shade in the daytime and making shadows at night.

Under the trees they could glide along without much danger of detection in case a sentry had been posted in front of the chateau. Both boys looked sharply again, striving to find out whether either of the military cars had an occupant.

So far as they could see, this did not happen to be the case, although cautious Tom would not wholly believe it until he had looked further. Wearied by the long wait, the drivers might have gone to sleep inside the closed cars.

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Like a couple of creeping ghosts the air service boys now advanced. The cars stood close together, facing the same way, which Jack considered a lucky thing for their designs.

Tom pressed him back as if to bid him wait, pail in hand, while he took upon himself the task of learning what they might expect. Making his way to the nearest car he peeped in. To his satisfaction there was no occupant. Repeating his action he ascertained that the second car also was empty.

So he gave a low chirp. Jack recognized an old signal, often used between them in days past. It meant he could come on without fear of trouble. And Jack, eager, as he was, to secure some of the petrol, did not linger a second longer than was absolutely necessary.

"Let's get busy, Jack," his chum told him, as he came up behind the nearest car. "I'll keep watch, and you try your hand at cribbing some of their gas juice."

While Jack did not claim to be an expert at the business of transferring petrol from one tank to another, or into a gaping vessel, he believed he would be able to manage. They must get what they needed, if not one way, then through other means. Necessity knows no law, and their very lives, certainly their liberty, was placed in peril by this impotence on the part of their plane.

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Jack kept mumbling softly to himself as he worked. He seemed at first to meet with considerable difficulty, judging from the tone of his muttering. In fact, Tom had even turned to offer his assistance when he plainly caught the gurgle of running fluid and immediately sniffed the air strongly impregnated with the odor of petrol.

That told the story. While Jack continued to grumble he was actually acquitting himself with credit. So Tom chose not to interfere, but allowed his comrade to finish the work.

Once he thought he heard a gruff voice from somewhere over the wall of the chateau. He even feared they would be interrupted by the coming of the chauffeurs, who may have received word from their masters that a start was about to be made.

This, however, greatly to Tom's relief, proved to be a false alarm, for no one appeared. But there was Jack muttering again.

"Got every drop of juice this tank holds, Tom, and still not as much as I'd like to carry back. Shall I tackle the other car? I'd like to clean both of 'em out while about it, even if I have to waste

some. Might save us heaps of trouble later on, if they were stalled here."

"Please yourself, but hurry above all things," Tom begged him.

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"Just getting the hang of things now, and the second one will go a lot better than the first," Jack assured him.

Finally the work was accomplished. Jack seemed proud of his ability to purloin the badly needed stock of petrol. He chuckled as he turned to Tom to announce that he was through.

"Oh, me! Oh, my! But won't there be a hopping mad crowd around here when they find out that their gas tanks are both empty? By then I hope we'll be merrily on our way to camp, able to snap our fingers at the raging Boche, and with a little passenger aboard our plane. Back to the graves for us it is, Tom. Time for all spooks to climb into their holes again and disappear."

"Keep quiet, can't you, Jack!" whispered Tom. "You'll queer the whole business yet if you don't watch out. Come on, and don't leave a trail of gasoline to help them follow us."

The air service boys turned their backs on the chateau, but Jack hoped it would be only a temporary absence for them. He was already beginning to worry about something else, and of course could not keep his troubles to himself very long. Consequently when they were about half way back he again broke out.

"Just happened to think of a thing that's going to bother us some, I'm afraid, Tom," he suggested.

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"What now?" demanded the other.

"If we chuck this stuff into our gas tank, why, out she's bound to pour through those two holes the bullet made, and that's a fact, Tom."

"Is that all?" asked the other indifferently. "I've got everything handy to repair those holes in almost two shakes of a lamb's tail. You leave it to me, Jack."

"You better believe I will, and mighty glad of the chance. Why, do you know, just the idea scared me stiff. But I do remember now that you always make it a point to carry along several wooden plugs and some wax calculated to make an air-tight joint. With that outfit you can soon have the tank plugged so it won't leak a drop. Bully for you, Tom!"

"I should have looked after that before we left the plane," admitted Tom. "But the fact was I wanted to take a turn around first; and then when we struck the road it sort of led us on and on. But it's all right, Jack."

CHAPTER XXI

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AT THE OLD CHATEAU

THE air service boys had no difficulty in retracing their steps, especially since Tom, with his usual caution, had been careful to remember the spot where the main road was joined by that coming from the country cemetery.

Once again they made their way past the ghostly looking stones.

"I can see our boomer now, Tom!" Jack cried, as if he had been a little afraid that something had happened while they were absent, and that they would find the airplane missing.

"You want to be mighty careful of that stuff," his chum warned him, as Jack stumbled over some unnoticed object, and only retained his balance by a supreme effort.

"That's a fact," mumbled the other. "Especially as there's no more where this lot came from. I attended to that, all right. But here we are, and now to get the holes plugged up."

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"At last my time to make use of that little outfit has arrived!" Tom exclaimed. "I've carried it for months, thinking I'd need it badly some day or other. Well, that time is on us, and this repays me for all my trouble. Set that pail down, and be ready to lend a hand, Jack."

He fumbled in a pocket of the body of the plane, producing a small roll, which, upon being opened, disclosed several plugs of soft wood, such as might easily swell if moistened. There was also some wax, the kind fruit growers use in grafting new scions on old trees.

Tom carefully examined one of the holes in order to learn its exact dimensions.

"Just as I expected, it's perfectly round in shape, which makes it easier to plug up," he announced, pleased with his discovery.

A minute later he had fitted one of the wooden pegs in tightly. Then he used the wax, which was just hard enough for his purpose.

"That one is finished, and I think it will hold fairly well," he remarked, somewhat to the

surprise, as well as delight, of his companion, who had anticipated that it would take much longer.

"You're a sure-enough wizard, all right, Tom," was his gratified comment. "Why, you're getting things put through in a jiffy. But I hope there isn't any danger of the petrol acting on the wax, and causing a quick leak."

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"I've tested it, and feel certain it will hold for an hour or so, anyhow, Jack. And by then we ought to be back in camp."

"Will, if we have any luck at all," asserted Jack.

"Now I'll get busy on the other hole," continued Tom. "Though that isn't so important, as it's at the top of the reservoir. Still, it might be just as well to close it up in order to avoid waste. Besides, there's always danger of an explosion if your tank sprinkles this deadly stuff around."

Jack took occasion to step aside to where he could look up between the trees and glimpse the dimly seen chateau, knowing now just where to look for it. When he came back he had information to impart that he thought would please Tom.

"Still a blaze up there, Tom, showing that the conference isn't over yet."

Presently Tom straightened up.

"That is all done," he announced, in a satisfied tone. "And done well in the bargain. Now bring along your gas, and be careful how you pour it in. By good luck I've got a funnel that can be used. I'll hold it while you start things going, Jack. Easy now, no hurry; every drop is precious remember!"

The contents of the little pail was presently successfully transferred into the reservoir which Tom had so adroitly mended after its rough treatment at the hands of the Huns who worked the "Archies," or anti-aircraft guns.

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Tom gave a sigh of relief when that part of the proceeding was finished. He had entertained a little fear that Jack, in his haste to get things over with, might spill the precious fluid on which so much depended.

Afterwards Tom examined for himself, and was satisfied.

"Not a sign of a leak yet, and there isn't going to be either," he told his companion, not exultantly, but nevertheless with confidence that a belief in the staying qualities of his own work justified.

"Now we can get going on the second part of our programme," Jack returned, as he once more cast a steady look toward the height on which the chateau stood.

"No need of staying here another minute, Jack. Nobody knows just what's going on over there, or how long those visitors mean to stay."

"All the same," the other air service boy mentioned, as if casually, "General von Berthold is giving his guests a regular jolly time of it. In these days of war I reckon the Huns are missing pretty much all their favorite drinks, and when they do strike a cellar full—and I guess they have it here—it's like drawing teeth to pry them loose. Listen, don't you hear them at it now?"

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Indeed, it would have been impossible for any one with ordinary hearing, when within half a mile of the chateau, not to have heard what Jack referred to. Some one was singing at the top of his voice, and a heavy voice he had in the bargain. He kept time with the rhythm of his song by repeated poundings on a table with what might have been a stein.

"Well, what nerve!" ejaculated Jack. "It's the *Watch on the Rhine* he's troling, as sure as you live!"

"And with the whole bunch joining in the chorus in the bargain," added Tom, as the burst of singing suddenly grew stronger in volume. "They utterly refuse to believe they're whipped flat, even with the Americans ready to step over into Germany and mop 'em up all the way to Berlin."

"Huh!" snorted Jack disdainfully, "we'll soon be the ones keeping watch on the Rhine, see if we'll not. Only sillies with their wits flabbergasted by pride would shut their eyes to the handwriting on the wall. But I'm not sorry, for if they keep on enjoying themselves in that way we'll find it an easy job to roam all over the old shack, looking for Helene."

They were walking briskly along while exchanging these remarks in guarded tones. Greatly to their satisfaction they met no one while on the road. They had both wondered whether General von Berthold did not have a bodyguard camped somewhere near his headquarters, some of whom were likely to be moving about; though, to be sure, the hour was late for that sort of thing.

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When they arrived at the scene of their previous escapade it was to find that one of the military chauffeurs had returned, and was even then taking a look at the engine of his car, for he struck several matches, and was thrusting his head down close to the machinery.

They halted to watch. A minute afterwards he tidied things up again, and Jack, hearing his loud yawn, decided he could not have discovered that some one had been meddling with his petrol supply.

Then the soldier vanished inside his big car, as though to find a comfortable seat, if his masters chose to linger an hour longer in celebrating with General von Berthold.

Tom led the way around, now approaching the building from an angle where they would be screened from the observation of the driver, did he chance to have his eyes open. They also took care to be ready to duck and lie low, in case the other chauffeur came from the back of the chateau.

But nothing happened to endanger them, and presently they were seeking a means of entering the castle. This proved the easiest thing possible, for there were no locks or bars attached to the door they tried. Once this barrier had been passed, they found themselves in a great hall, just such as Jack had always believed, from his reading, must be connected with every such old-time castle. [185]

A light burned low. It was in itself a quaint lamp, and at another time the boys might have found themselves very much interested in it as a relic of times long since past.

Of course there could be no system of modern lighting in use at such an isolated habitation. Besides, electricity would have seemed sadly out of place in connection with so much that belonged to bygone days.

The tall lamp on the newel post at the foot of the broad stairway gave enough light to show one where to walk; and just then the two prowlers asked for nothing more.

Over to the right lay the wing that had not suffered from the work of the Hun despoiler. It was there the German general entertained his associates, discussing business until a late hour; and then giving themselves up to a little social enjoyment, which evidently became so pleasant that it was hard to break away.

The boys decided that since this wing was the only decent part of the building remaining, they were apt to find the object of their search in one of the many rooms it contained. [186]

Having no guide to assist them, they must make a thorough search, neglecting no possible room where the little girl might be sleeping.

Of course their dodging about the corridors would be accompanied by more or less danger of discovery. There must be attendants moving about, for the Hun general would not inhabit this chateau unless he could have subordinates at his beck and call.

Once let any of these see strangers moving about with the air of spies—well, Jack imagined it would be nip and tuck with them as to whether they would be shot down like rats, get away by a close shave, or fall into the hands of the Huns, which last, he felt, would be the very worst fate that could befall them.

"It's upstairs for us, Jack." And with these words Tom led the way, headed for the upper floors of the chateau, even as a door opened and they heard a wild gust of uproarious chorus echo along the corridor leading to the dining hall in the right wing.

CHAPTER XXII

INVADING THE TIGER'S DEN

TOM, just as soon as they had entered the great hall, had fixed his eyes on several old-time figures that stood in niches, each representing some period of the history of early France and showing the type of armor worn by the fighting knights of those days.

"Hide behind that knight there! Quick, Jack!" he now hissed into the ear of his comrade.

Jack understood.

As quick as a flash both of the air service boys shot toward their separate goals. Shuffling footsteps sounded that told of some one coming; but thanks to the swiftness of their movements the boys managed to conceal themselves in time.

Peeping out from behind the coats of chained mail that screened them Jack and Tom fastened their eyes on the advancing figure. Just as they expected, it proved to be a soldier who had the task of serving while the general was celebrating with his friends and fellow officers. [187]

He was carrying a tray on which were several empty bottles, and it could be easily guessed that the soldier had been sent for a further supply of wine from the cellar below.

They could hear him mumbling to himself, as though not very happy, despite his opportunities to tilt the bottles up and drain the last drop left in each. This he was doing now as the boys watched, but continuing to mutter.

Then they saw him draw his sleeve across his face, and when he took it down to the astonishment of the watchers there were streaks of blood marking both cheeks and nose. Evidently General von Berthold was considerable of a bully and tyrant when in his cups, even as

he may have been a severe martinet when on duty.

Jack ground his teeth at seeing this exhibition of pettiness on the part of the general. He had heard more than once that German officers, from sub-lieutenants upward, were terribly severe with their men, treating them brutally, and acting as though they were themselves of a superior class; but this was the first time he had actually come in contact with anything of the kind.

"What fools!" Jack muttered to himself. "Why can't they take a lesson from Russia, where the people have risen and put ever so many of their former officers to death. And Russian commanders were gentle beside these domineering brutes. But they'll get their dose some day before long, that's as sure as fate. And poor little Helene!" Jack's heart was heavy as he thought of his little protégé's sister.

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The man picked up his tray again and went stumbling along the hall, still muttering, then chuckling half hysterically, as though some pleasant thought had flashed across his mind. Jack imagined he must be anticipating a day of reckoning that was coming—a day when old scores would be wiped out and the slate be made clean for a new deal.

More than ever Jack was determined that little Helene should not be left in the charge of such an ill-tempered man. If General von Berthold could show such spleen because his man servant displeased him slightly he was apt to treat a child cruelly.

But the coast being clear, Tom issued forth and beckoned to his companion to come along. They hastened up the broad stairs of the chateau, reaching the second floor without mishap.

Here they found a maze of passages that would have puzzled any one lacking the ability Tom possessed for solving riddles.

"Which way next?" Jack whispered in dismay, as he turned from one to another of the various passageways branching off from the main hall.

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"Always keep to the right," answered his companion. "Remember that wing is the only one saved from the wreck."

He himself was looking at the floor, for there was sufficient light to enable him to see. Jack's eyes followed those of his chum, and he could not keep from uttering a low exclamation of admiration as he comprehended the system Tom was following.

When the vandals had attempted several times to wreck the chateau in a general spirit of destructiveness, the dust had settled heavily over everything. They had noticed it down below, and on the stairs as well, as they came along. It was up here, too, on the floor of the main hall, as well as those in various passages leading into unknown depths of the great building.

Tom was selecting that passage which he could see from the multitude of footprints had been most generally used. It was indeed a clever idea of the air service boy's, and one that promised to be crowned with success.

"We'll go this way, and try it out," he told Jack, commencing to move along as he spoke.

Jack, for a wonder, was silent. Truth to tell, he found himself lost in admiration of the cleverness shown by his chum, and of the plan which he felt certain would never have occurred to him.

When the light became dim Tom was provided with a supply of matches, which fact further surprised and humiliated Jack, because on investigating his own pockets he could produce only two matches.

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They went down several steps, only to mount again to the same level a few minutes later. Jack could easily believe they must have reached the extremity of that extensive right wing. He caught the sound of heavy voices in discussion, coming from exactly below; which told him the dining-hall must be in that quarter.

So far they had fortunately met no one. Jack wondered what would happen if they should come upon a sentry standing guard, perhaps over the apartment where the general slept when he could tear himself away from his pleasures and his work. But his confidence in Tom had mounted to such heights by now that he expected his pilot would be equal to even that occasion.

Then Tom stopped short.

He seemed to be examining something at his feet, for he had struck one more of his matches. Jack, seeing him look at a closed door, fancied that their search was in a fair way of coming to a successful end.

No sooner had the match expired than Tom gently tried the door. He did not seem very much surprised to find it locked. Bending down he next proceeded to examine the lock, for it seemed to be provided with one, though many of the other doors were not, such things not being in general use in the centuries back, when this ancient pile of stone was built.

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He turned to his companion and whispered encouragingly.

"She must be in that room, for many feet have passed in and out. Among the footprints close by here are several small, childish ones. We are surely on the right track, Jack."

"H'm! but the door seems to be fast. And I suppose the key is in von Berthold's pocket right now. How in the wide world are we going to get in there to save Helene?"

"We'll settle that," snapped Tom. "There's always a way to do a thing. On either side there's a door. Let's see if one of those happens to be unfastened."

The very first trial brought success, and Jack began to feel a glow of coming good fortune. If they were not interrupted in their work he believed that nothing could long withstand such a determined spirit as Tom always injected into anything he undertook. It accounted for his successes in school sports, and he carried the same characteristic with him into army service.

They passed into the dark recesses of the room that seemed to adjoin the one of the locked door. Jack could see a window ahead, for a certain amount of light filtered through the small dusty diamond-shaped panes of glass. He even noted a tree without, its branches moving in the breeze that crossed this ridge elevation, though they had not felt it down in the valley. [193]

Tom closed the door after them. Then again he struck a match, eager to survey their surroundings before attacking the problem that now presented itself.

Some old-time furniture could be seen, but in a dilapidated condition, as though vandal hands had used an ax on the rare wood, regardless of its value. Dust lay everywhere, dust that may have come from the frequent explosion of grenades used in the process of demolition.

The match went out, leaving Jack still staring about him. It seemed like a strange dream to him, anything but a reality. But there was Tom shuffling across to the window. Jack began to get a grip on the probable scheme that had appealed to his chum, and also a grip on himself, for he suddenly realized that he had not been doing his part.

Why, of course, the only possible way of reaching that other room would be through means of a connecting link; and this could be furnished through the windows.

Tom was already leaning out, and investigating affairs. It was a precarious moment and the decision to be arrived at was important. But having come this far, and taken such desperate chances, they must keep going until success had crowned their efforts, or it was proved that absolutely nothing could be accomplished. [194]

Tom turned and beckoned to his comrade.

"It can be done, don't you think, Jack? But we must be very careful," came in softest tones. "There's a narrow projecting ledge that will serve us for a footing; but we must make sure of every step, because a tumble would break our necks."

Jack peered out and looked carefully about.

"Yes," he finally announced, "this is our only chance. But as Jeanne and Helene are my especial care I'm going first, Tom. I've already imposed on you and not done my full share since entering the chateau."

With these words Jack crawled out of the window.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ONLY WAY

As Tom leaned out of the window he could just manage to see the figure of his chum flattened against the stone wall of the chateau. Jack was clinging close, like a human fly might have done, clutching some object which allowed him to move his feet along the slender ledge.

"Come on; it's all right!" floated back in a whisper.

Tom was not waiting to be assured on that point. Already he had pushed his body halfway over the window-sill, and his groping feet sought the friendly ledge. Then he, too, started to shuffle along, finding some means for holding himself there.

Of course it was not pleasant to contemplate a fall. The air service boys knew there was a considerable depth lying below, and it might be that hard stones lay there.

They refused, however, to allow themselves to think of such a possibility. Besides, it was only a matter of a dozen feet or so, when the adjoining window would be within their reach. [196]

Why, there was Jack crawling over the sill even as Tom was fairly on the way, proving that the feat was an easy one after all.

Tom, following in Jack's footsteps, had one thrill when his foot slipped and for a brief space of time he actually feared he was about to take the downward plunge. Fortunately he had a desperate hold with the hand just thrust forward, and this kept him in place until he could search out another hand-grip.

It caused him to pant with the extra exertion, and he was breathing like a spent runner when

he too crept into the room. Here Jack's voice was at his ear whispering:

"Some one asleep here, for I can hear soft breathing over yonder, where I think there's a cot." He proceeded to draw Tom after him, though both were down on their knees at the time, with groping hands extended in front of them.

Now Jack knew he was alongside the cot, for the sleeper had stirred restlessly. Then the regular breathing was resumed, though Jack believed he had heard something akin to a sigh well forth.

He put out his hands and gently felt to make sure that it was a child, for any mistake at this stage would prove most serious.

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"Helene!"

Jack uttered the name softly, but the breathing still continued. Again did he speak, this time raising his voice slightly. He knew that he must have succeeded in awakening the little sleeper; doubtless she was lying there wondering whether it might be all a dream. Perhaps she even thought it was her mother calling her from her slumber.

Tom now ventured to approach a little nearer, ready to act on the spur of the moment should the child be frightened and start to scream.

"Helene, we are friends of your sister Jeanne," Jack said. "She is in good hands, and on her way to Paris. We have come to try to take you to her. Do not be frightened, Helene. We are two American boys, and if you will only trust us we promise to carry you away from here. Have courage and tell me that you are not afraid to go with us to Jeanne."

The sympathetic Jack found a little hand, for the child suddenly sat upright. This he continued to pat gently even as he and Tom continued to reassure her. Perhaps his manner of doing this influenced Helene even more than their words, which of course she could hardly understand as yet, after being so suddenly awakened.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come from Jeanne," she finally managed to say, though her childish voice vibrated from the effect of her recent alarm.

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"And will you gladly go away with us, Helene?" asked Jack. "You are not happy here with your uncle, are you?"

"Oh, no, no! He is so unkind," she said with a shudder that Jack could easily detect. "He even whipped me because I cried for my mother and Jeanne. So I will go with you, and do anything you say."

How understandingly she talked for one so young! Jack had marveled that Jeanne should show such remarkable qualities and appear so self-reliant; and apparently Helene was like her. But, alas, war had aged even the babies caught in its snare.

"Listen, Helene," Jack went on to say, "do you think you could dress yourself without having a light?"

"Oh, yes, m'sieu, I am sure I can!"

That caused Tom to chuckle with relief, for he felt pretty certain that neither he nor Jack could have managed that, even if given all the illumination heart might wish. And, moreover, Tom felt that he, at least, did not want to try.

"Then get your clothes on just as fast as you can, Helene," said Tom. "We will be waiting, and trying to figure out what the next move shall be."

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His last words reminded Jack of the fact that they were now faced by another knotty problem. If the door was locked and the key safe in the possession of the gruff old general below, how then could they take the child away?

He knew it would be utterly impossible to get her to the other window by means of that ledge; for the task had been difficult enough when both hands were free.

But evidently resourceful Tom had already conceived a plan for he was busying himself with the cot from which Helene had so recently arisen and now called to Jack.

Close by the child could be heard moving about, as her nimble little fingers secured first one article of apparel and then another, spurred on by the wild hope of once more seeing her dearly beloved sister.

Jack, pushing forward, found his chum had turned the cot over, and seemed to be working swiftly at something.

"What have you found, Tom?" he asked.

"As luck would have it, Jack, this cot has a rope under the mattress in place of the usual spring. And it seems to be a good stout rope in the bargain, I'm glad to tell you."

"Now I get you, Tom! Good! We can slip down that way."

"If the rope turns out to be long enough. I can put Helene in your arms and drop you down."

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Then I can follow. I'd rather go about it some other way, but with this locked door we haven't any choice."

"Why, I think it a cracking good scheme," said Jack.

"Listen!" exclaimed Tom. "Doesn't it strike you that there's talking going on outside now?"

"You're right," agreed the other, almost immediately. "I do believe those Hun officers are making a move at last. Now there's going to be some fun let loose when they find that both cars are shy on gas."

"That may be," muttered Tom. "But I wish they'd chosen to hang on for just another half hour. I'd ask nothing better. Helene, how are you getting on, child?"

"I am almost ready, m'sieu," came back in a childish voice that quite thrilled Jack's heart. "I have only to slip my shoes on now and then I shall be ready."

Jack followed his chum over to the window, for by this time the entire rope had been secured from the cot. Tom tested its strength as well as he was able, and found reason to believe it was staunch enough to bear a double burden if necessary.

Loud talking now came from in front of the chateau. Evidently the general had gone out to see his guests off. The chauffeurs could be heard cranking their cars desperately, sounds which gave Jack considerable delight. Apparently their ill success had already begun to arouse suspicions in the minds of the two drivers that something was amiss, for the cranking suddenly ceased, and the watchers from the upper window of the chateau could see feeble lights moving about. [201]

These they knew were matches held by the soldiers while they looked over the motors of their cars. After darkness had come again loud cries arose to tell that the alarming discovery had been made that tanks which the chauffeurs swore had contained a fair amount of petrol at the time they drew up before the chateau, were now most mysteriously empty!

The officers chimed in with expletives that came splutteringly from their lips, so that altogether it was a scene of confusion and excitement which was taking place in front of the old building. One particularly rasping voice Jack fancied must belong to the general himself. He pitied those two wretched chauffeurs, who would be apt to feel the displeasure of their superiors in some way altogether unpleasant.

What the outcome of the affair might be Jack had no idea, nor did he care a particle. All he asked was to be given a chance to make off with Helene while the row was in progress. Once they reached the waiting plane, he felt they could snap their fingers at not only General von Berthold but the entire Hun army as well. [202]

Jack wondered whether this sudden outbreak, and the change in conditions in front of the chateau, would make any difference with Tom. Fortunately that tree afforded partial shelter, and besides, those on the road had but meagre means for striking a light, so it seemed reasonably safe for them to proceed.

"Be brave, Helene," Jack said in her ear, as Tom passed the rope out of the window, having meanwhile fastened one end to an anchorage inside the room. "It is for Jeanne's sake, remember. Do not be afraid that I will let you fall. And above all things keep from crying out, or he will hear you and hold you with him always. Will you let me take you in my arms, Helene?"

"Oh, yes, yes! I am not afraid. See, m'sieu, I can put my arms about your neck this way, and clasp you tight. For Jeanne I would do anything! You will not hear me say one word, no matter what happens, m'sieu!"

CHAPTER XXIV

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TOM KEEPS HIS WORD

THE air service boys did not hesitate.

Tom had mapped out the course, to which Jack had agreed, and they were ready to undertake the task set before them.

Tom hastened to help lift the little girl, so that his chum might get a firm clasp with one arm around her. He also knew that Helene's instinctive action in clinging to Jack's neck would greatly assist matters.

Now Jack was sliding down. Tom's heart seemed to be in his throat with suspense. Would the rope hold? He hoped age had not weakened the strands, so that a sudden extra strain might cause it to part. Still he had tested as best he could. It would hold—it must hold.

The seconds slipped by, though if Tom's feelings had been consulted they might be said to drag; for it seemed an age before he knew that Jack had safely landed by the sudden slackening of the rope. [204]

How eagerly did Tom clamber over the window-sill and start downward! It was a mere nothing to him, accustomed to all sorts of athletic action. He quickly found himself alongside the crouching figure of Jack, who still held the child in his arm as if to reassure her.

Louder than ever came the babel of voices from the road. The officers had, it seemed, finally come to believe what the chauffeurs were saying. Some unknown prowler had stolen their petrol while they waited for the coming of their officers. The thought was demoralizing. The loud, sharp whistle that now came to the ears of the air service boys must mean a general alarm. There must be a body of troops in camp somewhere back of the chateau. These would be quickly on the scene, ready to scour the whole neighborhood, in the hope of ferreting out the spy who had been trying to discover the subject of the consultation, or council of war.

Tom now took the lead. The sooner they made off the better for their chances of ultimate escape. Delay now might lose them the game, for it was to be expected that with the alarm once given all avenues of escape would be closed, and a cordon of troops thrown around the chateau, in hope of enmeshing the prowler.

This getting away required some clever work, because if they were discovered it would be next to impossible to slip through, with Helene to be carried, for of course the child could not run fast enough. Jack clasped the child in his arms and followed close on Tom's heels. Dodging, and taking advantage of such cover as presented itself they succeeded in passing beyond what seemed to be the danger point. If equally successful in eluding any soldiers who might be running toward the chateau in response to the imperative summons of the general, they could call themselves lucky indeed.

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"Somebody coming ahead there, Tom!" gasped Jack suddenly, as he caught the hasty patter of footsteps.

"Into these bushes, and get down on all fours!" Tom ordered, setting the action himself.

Hardly had they succeeded in leaving the road and concealing themselves in this way than several bounding figures came into sight. They were German soldiers without doubt, their spiked helmets could be seen and also the glitter of guns in their hands could be caught.

Once they had rushed past, Tom again took to the road. The danger from such sudden encounters was great, but there was no other way for them to proceed. And in order to escape it was necessary that they reach the cemetery where the big bombing plane awaited their coming.

Once again did they have a thrill. This was when a figure crashed out of a thicket without warning, and came face to face with them. He, too, was a soldier, who had possibly taken a short cut through the thickets in order to reach the road the sooner.

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He uttered a startled exclamation. With the shrill sound of the alarm whistle still echoing through the valley below, of course his suspicions would be aroused by seeing two figures clad in the garments of aviators, and bearing away with them the child he, in common with his fellows, may have noticed playing near the chateau on sunshiny days.

His actions were so hostile that Tom, acting instantaneously, gave him a blow with the weighty club he had picked up a moment before.

It must have been a well-aimed blow, for the soldier fell in a heap, and his helmet rolled on the ground.

Jack, unable to resist the temptation to gather in the spoils as a souvenir of the event, snatched this metal headgear up. Then he rushed headlong after Tom, who was making off down the slope at full speed.

Just as Jack, still carrying Helene, but making good time, overtook his chum, he heard a fearful shouting back of him. Jack ground his teeth with rage, for he could easily guess what it all meant. The soldier who had been attacked must have recovered quickly. He was now running in the direction of the chateau and shouting in German.

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While, of course, Jack was not able to tell exactly what it was he yelled, he could give a guess that it meant:

"Here they are! This way everybody. The French dogs are here!"

Of course that would mean immediate pursuit. It complicated the situation, too, because even though they were fortunate enough to gain the country cemetery before the searching party came up, they might be prevented from getting away.

It was down-grade, and that helped a little, if Jack could only hold out. The little girl was no light weight, and carrying such a burden was apt to delay even a good runner like Jack, who was already getting short of breath. But Tom could get the airplane ready to make a quick start as soon as Jack and his burden should reach the cemetery.

The sounds continued to break out in their rear.

They had now reached the bottom of the ridge, Tom well in advance. The level valley lay before them. But it seemed to Tom, on glancing back, that his chum was staggering under the strain, so he called out:

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"Here, what's the matter with my spelling you, Jack. It isn't fair to make you the burden-bearer, when I'm so willing to help. Give me the child, and let me carry her awhile. We'll make better time if you do."

There was more or less force in the suggestion advanced; so Jack thrust little Helene into Tom's waiting arms. She did not hesitate to clasp his neck, even as she had done Jack's, an action which endeared her to Tom, less prompt than Jack to answer to the appeal of childhood.

After this they seemed to make better time, and Jack also had a chance to recover his wind. There could be no doubt about their being pursued, for they could hear loud shouts bursting forth every half minute.

Presumably General von Berthold had by this time realized that his plan with regard to realizing a fortune some day through little Helene and the rich iron deposits on the property that would come to her, were in danger of going astray. Doubtless, also, he had offered an incentive to the soldiers in the shape of a money bonus, in case they recovered the child. Jack imagined he could hear the harsh voice of the commander raised above the tumult from time to time, which would indicate that he himself led the pursuit.

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But here at last they were at the place where the smaller road left the main one, and entered the country burial grounds.

How fortunate that they had made all their arrangements beforehand! What if the mending of the leaking reservoir had been left until their return with Helene! Small chance they would have in that case of effecting their escape with the aroused Hun soldiers scouring the country in search of them.

Just then another thing came to pass that caused Jack's heart to feel as though a cold hand had been pressed down on it. From above came a familiar sound, especially to the ear of an aviator. It was the unmistakable buzz of an airplane motor. The sound was growing constantly louder, as though the machine were heading directly toward the chateau.

Of course it was next to impossible for it to be an allied plane; and so Jack must conclude that it bore some courier sent from Hindenburg's headquarters, wherever they might be, with a message of vast importance meant for the general commanding the sector opposing the American advance. Tom and Jack exchanged looks. It seemed as though they were now between the upper and the nether millstones. If they lingered where they were the soldiers were almost certain to come upon them; and should they choose to start their motor and make a successful start into the upper air currents the hostile plane would be ready to challenge them to deadly combat.

[210]

But Tom was already beginning to fasten little Helene in a seat alongside his own position. From this Jack understood that his chum's mind was made up, and that half a dozen waiting planes might not daunt him. They would have to take chances one way or another; and by going aloft they might at least be in a position to hold their own.

Jack hoped with all his heart they could get away without an upset. The ground was far from being all that might be wished; but then he had known even worse in his experience, and had never yet come a cropper. Besides, Tom would be at the helm, and that stood for a great deal. Jack hastened to get aboard.

None too soon did the pilot get his machine to going. The Huns were already howling close by, and must have turned in at the cemetery entrance as though suspecting the truth.

With a whirr and a clatter the plane was off. Guns had commenced to bark and red splashes of fire to stab the opaque mist that had now fallen on the lower ground with the deepening night. Jack felt like laughing at all these vain efforts to stop their departure.

Bumping along, Tom increased the speed, with Jack waiting in more or less suspense to ascertain what the outcome would be. Ahead of them rose the barrier of trees. If they struck that all was lost. But Tom was on the alert, and just in good time he changed his lifting lever that caused the nose of the plane to incline upward.

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With a rush and a roar they cleared the treetops, though there did not seem to be a yard to spare. That danger past, Jack felt that they were better able to cope with the next peril. Down below the disappointed general continued to shout and the soldiers to shoot, but one was just as harmless as the other.

"He's coming for us, Tom! That Boche pilot!" shouted Jack. "Swing around so as to give me a chance to pepper him good and hard!"

Tom did so, and Jack speedily found an opportunity to handle his machine-gun, which he did with all his old-time vigor.

There was a feeble response from the Hun, who, however, seemed hardly to understand what it was all about, or just why he should be chasing after an unknown plane that had come from the region of Von Berthold's headquarters.

Two minutes passed, and they were no longer followed by the Hun machine. Jack never knew whether he had done any damage or not, though convinced that he had seldom made better use of his gun. It was enough for the air service boys to realize that the field was clear ahead, and

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with reasonable luck they ought to be able to make their goal without further mishap.

Some little time later there was a bit of a sensation created among the American aviators when a big bombing plane that had been listed as "missing and supposed to be lost" came settling down like a huge bat.

Harry Leroy was the first to rush alongside to learn if his two chums were safe and sound. When he saw Tom unstrapping a little girl, Harry believed, on the spur of the moment, it must be Jeanne Anstey.

And it can be easily believed that both Tom and Jack felt they had had the most energetic night in all their experience, one that would not soon be forgotten; while Helene, clasped in Jack's sheltering arms, contented herself with a repetition of just one word—"Jeanne."

CHAPTER XXV

[213]

PEACE IN SIGHT—CONCLUSION

It seemed as though there was to be little sleep for either of the air service boys on that remarkable night. Helene must be given into the charge of some one who could look after her temporarily; and Tom understood just whom Jack had in mind when he followed the other to the quarter where the Y. M. C. A. shelter stood.

They managed to communicate with Bessie after a bit, and then she came out to them. Great was her astonishment upon learning where they had been, and that this exact counterpart of little Jeanne, whom she had seen once when directed by Nellie to the house further back of the lines, was her twin sister, Helene.

Of course she and her mother could manage to take the child in. Their quarters were extremely crowded, and there was an absence of many of the comforts of life, but those warm-hearted women and girls who worked for the happiness of the boys in khaki would find some way to crowd a little closer for once. Even if Bessie herself had to sit up the rest of the night Helene should have a cot to lie upon.

[214]

"We'll see you in the morning, and tell you all about it," Jack said, anxious not to detain the tired worker longer than necessary.

"And as I'm going over to the hospital," Tom remarked, with somewhat studied carelessness, "I'll be only too glad to see Helene safely there. I suppose you'll want Nellie to start her along the same road for Paris that Jeanne took."

"We'll both go," said Jack, with the air of a general, at least. "And if Bessie can get off for a couple of hours, she might accompany us."

When morning came the boys found it easy to get permission to take a half-day off. They had been doing great work recently, and deserved this small favor. Besides, the commander to whom the request was made found himself greatly interested in the brief account Tom gave of the strange happenings that had been the portion of the air service boys after they discovered their petrol was exhausted, and realized the necessity for landing in order to procure a new supply in order to get home.

There was no reprimand coming to the boys for having attempted the rescue of Jeanne's twin sister. On the contrary the officer complimented Sergeants Raymond and Parmly on their exceedingly clever method of making the Boche supply them with the lacking fuel necessary to their safe home-coming.

[215]

Great was the astonishment of Nellie when they walked in on her. She stared at Helene for half a minute before something of the truth dawned upon her mind; and then it was the smiling faces of the other three that betrayed the fact.

"And so you've been at it again, have you, Jack?" she asked.

"Tom and I found a chance to drop in on Jeanne's wicked old uncle when in desperate need of petrol," he hastened to explain. "We happened to alight far back of the Hun lines, and discovered that we were close to the chateau where he has his headquarters. And so, to kill two birds with one stone, we concluded to take Helene along with us. Here she is."

"Not a very comprehensive story, it must be confessed," laughed Nellie. But then she knew she could coax all the details from Tom at various times in the future. So she just bent down and opened her arms.

"Come here, Helene, and love me," she told the little girl. "I've held your sister Jeanne in my arms, and I want to hug you too, my dear."

"Go to it, Helene," urged Tom, looking as though he thought the child a very fortunate youngster.

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As Nellie had a very charming way about her, and Helene was gifted, as many children are,

with a faculty for discerning a heart filled with true affection, they immediately became fast friends. It did Jack good to see the child so happy, with only one cloud to cause an occasional sigh, and that the memory of her mother's recent death.

But Jack and Tom both meant to see that the orphans were taken care of, and their interests safeguarded. In case the war soon came to an end he was determined that the scheming uncle, General von Berthold, should not profit as much as a single franc in connection with those hills in Lorraine, where the undeveloped iron deposits lay awaiting the magical touch of modern mining methods to bring a fortune to the Anstey children.

The air service boys and the two girls were having a very happy visit when who should come down upon them but Harry, also off on leave for the half-day, and naturally desirous of seeing his sister. So they had a really delightful time of it, and the three young air pilots found it most difficult to break away when the last minute of their leave had expired.

It was two days later when the thrilling news sped along the whole line that at several places the Americans were through the Argonne, with the beaten enemy retiring sullenly to newly arranged defenses. The rejoicing was general, for no matter how furiously the enemy might try to hold them in check from that time on, the fighting Yankees knew they had the Germans on the run. [217]

More days of fighting followed, with the advance being continually and visibly quickened. Sedan was in sight one afternoon, and beyond that lay Belgium, with Germany almost unprotected further on quite up to the fortresses along the Rhine.

Enthusiasm in the army was rife. The worst was over, and never again would those gallant sons of Uncle Sam have to attempt such a frightful task as the clearing up of the vast Argonne Forest had proved to be.

The complete destruction of that last German stronghold during the big bombing raid, seemed to have utterly discouraged the Huns. Their morale went lower as the days crept past; so that they no longer fought with anything of their former ferocity.

"In fact," Jack declared, "they are badly whipped, and have just found it out."

Never would the air service boys forget the day when the news came to hold their present position at Sedan, because an armistice that would undoubtedly mean the ending of the war had just been signed. It was hard to believe that the last shot had been fired, and that now must begin the mighty task piled on Germany's back of paying for all the mischief caused by her invading armies during those four years and more of fighting. [218]

In the Yankee camps the soldiers went fairly wild over the glorious news, and already those so far removed from home began to picture their triumphant return, with the warm welcome that must await them.

They could not foresee at that hour what duties still awaited them when ordered forward to occupy the bridgehead at Coblenz on the Rhine, there to stay for weary months while the Allied Council at Versailles debated over the peace terms that Germany would have to accept.

There on the Rhine we must take our leave of Tom Raymond and Jack Parmly, as well as of Harry Leroy, satisfied that as they had on many an occasion proved their valor and skill as Uncle Sam's air pilots, they would continue to serve their country faithfully to the end, even through another war if necessary.

THE END

Transcriber's Notes:

Obvious punctuation errors have been corrected.

This text uses both tonight and to-night, halfway and half-way, chateau and château.

The remaining corrections made are indicated by dotted lines under the corrections. Scroll the mouse over the word and the original text will appear.

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