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Title: The Dispatch-Riders: The Adventures of Two British Motor-cyclists in the Great War

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Illustrator: Frank Gillett

Release date: June 23, 2011 [EBook #36500]
Most recently updated: January 7, 2021

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Al Haines

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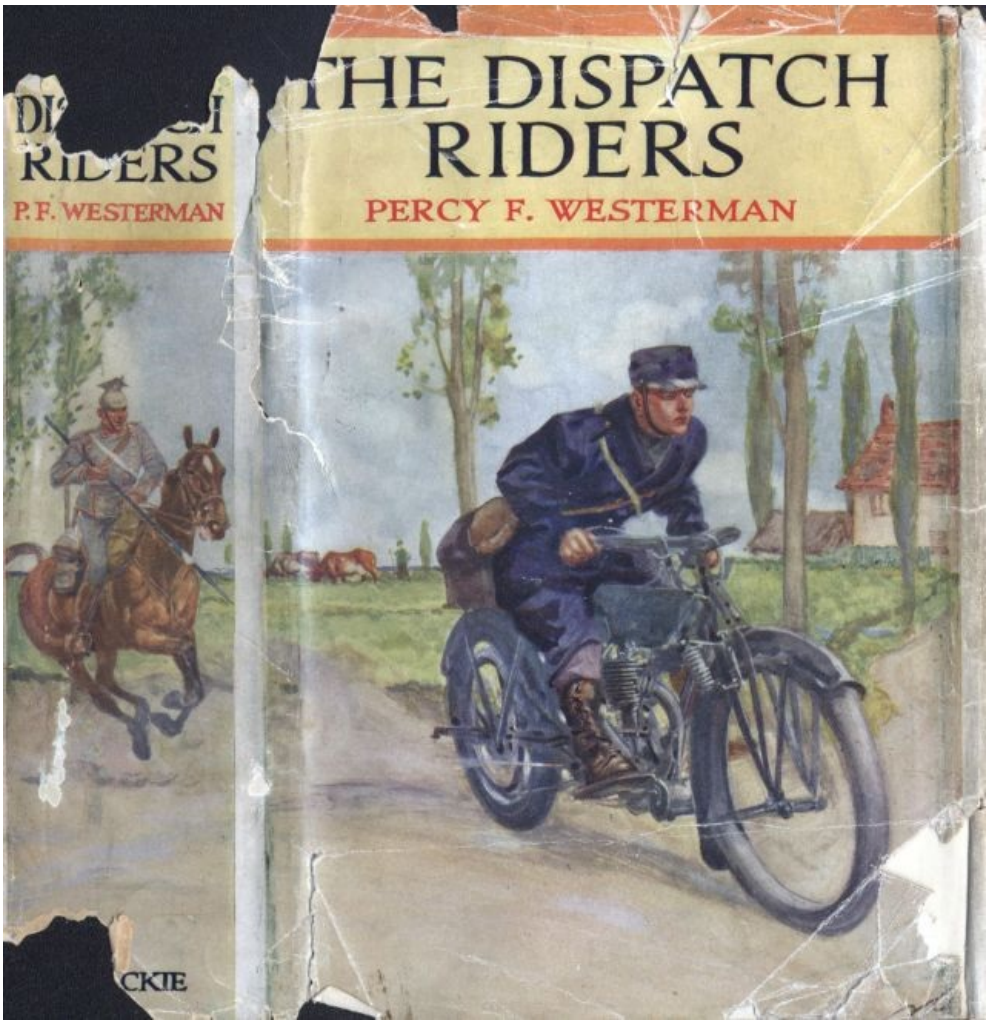

THE DISPATCH RIDERS

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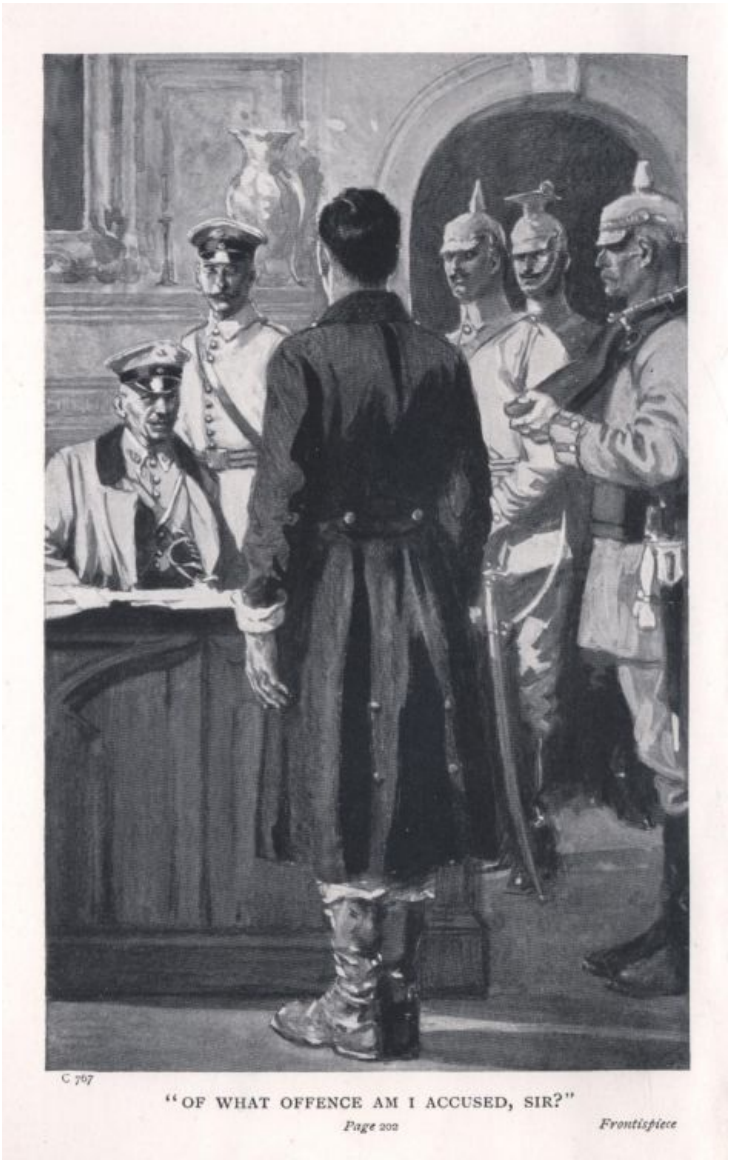

"OF WHAT OFFENCE AM I ACCUSED, SIR?" ***Page* 202. *Frontispiece***

The Dispatch-Riders

The Adventures of Two British Motor-cyclists in the Great War

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

Author of "Rivals of the Reef"
"The Sea-girt Fortress" &c. &c.

Illustrated by F. Gillett

BLACKIE & SON LIMITED
LONDON AND GLASGOW
1915

By Percy F. Westerman

The Red Pirate.
The Call of the Sea.
Standish of the Air Police.
Sleuths of the Air.
The Black Hawk.
Andy All-Alone.
The Westow Talisman.
The White Arab.
The Buccaneers of Boya.
Rounding up the Raider.
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All Hands to the Boats.
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On the Wings of the Wind.
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Chums of the "Golden Vanity".
Clipped Wings.
Rocks Ahead!
King for a Month.
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A Lively Bit of the Front.
The Good Ship "Golden Effort".
East in the "Golden Gain".
The Quest of the "Golden Hope".
Sea Scouts Abroad.
Sea Scouts Up-Channel.
The Wireless Officer.
A Lad of Grit.
The Submarine Hunters.
Sea Scouts All.
The Thick of the Fray at Zeebrugge.
A Sub and a Submarine.
Under the White Ensign.
With Beatty off Jutland.
The Dispatch Riders.

Printed in Great Britain by Blackie & Son, Ltd., Glasgow

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THE DISPATCH-RIDERS

CHAPTER I

The Coming Storm

"Let's make for Liége," exclaimed Kenneth Everest.

"What's that?" asked his chum, Rollo Harrington. "Liége? What on earth possesses you to suggest Liége? A crowded manufacturing town, with narrow streets and horrible *pavé*. I thought we decided to fight shy of heavy traffic?"

The two speakers were seated at an open window of the Hôtel Doré, in the picturesque town of Dinant. In front of them flowed the Meuse; its placid water rippled with craft of varying sizes. Huge barges, towed by snorting tugs, were laboriously passing along the busy international waterway that serves an empire, a kingdom, and a republic. On the remote bank, and to the right of a bridge, were the quaint red-tiled houses of the town, above which rose the fantastic, pinnacled tower of the thirteenth-century church of Notre Dame, in turn overshadowed by the frowning limestone crag on which stands the citadel.

Kenneth was a well-set-up English youth of seventeen. He was tall for his age, and withal broad-shouldered and well-knit. His features were dark, his skin burnt a deep tan by reason of more than a nodding acquaintance with an open-air life. In character and action he was impulsive. He had the happy knack of making up his mind on the spur of the moment, and yet at the same time forming a fairly sound judgment. He was quick, too, with his fingers, having been gifted with a keen, mechanical turn of mind.

Rollo Barrington, who was his companion's junior by the space of three days, was rather the reverse of his versatile friend. He was shorter in height by a good four inches; he was slightly built, although he possessed an unlooked-for reserve of physical strength and endurance. He was fresh-complexioned, with blue eyes and wavy chestnut hair.

If Kenneth acted upon impulse, Rollo went by rule of thumb. He was cool and calculating when occasion served; but when in the company of his chum he was generally content to allow his will to be dominated by the impetuous Everest.

Both lads were at St. Cyprian's—a public school of note in the Home Counties. The vacation started about the middle of July, and it was the custom for the senior members to put in a fortnight's camp with the Officers' Training Corps during the latter part of that month.

At the time this story opens—the first day of August, 1914—the two chums were on a motor-cycling tour through Northern France and Belgium. The parents of neither had offered any objection when their respective sons announced their intention of wandering through the high-roads and by-roads of that part of the Continent.

Kenneth had sprung the suggestion upon his father like the proverbial bombshell; and Mr. Everest, who was largely responsible for his son's impetuosity, merely acquiesced by observing: "You lucky young dog! I didn't have the chance when I was your age. Well, I hope you'll have a good time."

On his part Rollo had broached the subject with his customary deliberation, and Colonel Barrington had not only given his consent, but had gone to the extreme toil of producing maps and a Baedeker, and had mapped out a route—to which neither of the lads had adhered. The Colonel also realized that there was a considerable amount of self-education to be derived from the tour. There was nothing like travel, he declared, to expand the mind; following up this statement by the practical action of "forking out", thereby relieving his son of any fear of pecuniary embarrassment.

Both lads rode identically similar motor-cycles—tourist models, of 3-½ horse-power, fitted with three-speed hubs. But again the difference in character manifested itself in the care of their respective steeds.

Rollo had been a motor-cyclist ever since he was fourteen—as soon as he was qualified in point of age to obtain a driver's licence. The close attention he bestowed upon his motor-bike never varied; he kept it as clean as he did in the first few days after taking over his new purchase. He had thoroughly mastered its peculiarities, and studied both the theory and practice of its mechanism.

Kenneth Everest had first bestrode the saddle of a motor-cycle a week before their Continental tour began. No doubt his experience as a "push-cyclist" helped him considerably; he quickly mastered the use of the various controls, without troubling to find out "how it worked". With his companion's knowledge at his back he felt quite at ease, since, in the event of any mechanical break-down, Rollo would point out the fault, and Kenneth's ready fingers would either do or undo the rest.

But so far, with the exception of a few tyre troubles, both motor-cyclists had done remarkably well. Landing at Havre, they had pushed on, following the route taken by the English army that had won Agincourt. This, by the by, was Rollo's suggestion. From the site of the historic battle-field they had sped eastward, through Arras, St. Quentin, and Mézières. Here, finding themselves in the valley of the Meuse, they had turned northward, and passing through the French frontier

fortress of Givet, entered Belgium, spending the first night on Belgian soil in picturesque Dinant.

Hitherto they had overcome the initial difficulty that confronts British road users in France—the fact that all traffic keeps, or is supposed to keep, to the right. They had endured the horrible and seemingly never-ending cobbles or *pavé*. The language presented little difficulty, for Kenneth, prior to having joined St. Cyprian's, had been educated in Paris; and although his Parisian accent differed somewhat from the patois of the Ardennes, he had very little trouble in making himself understood. Rollo, too, was a fairly proficient French linguist, since, in view of his future military career, he had applied himself with his usual diligence to the study of the language.

"I say, what's this wheeze about Liége?" persisted Harrington. "There's something in the wind, old chap."

"It's not exactly Liége I want to see," replied Kenneth, "although it's a fine, interesting old place, with a history. Fact is, my sister Thelma is at a boarding-school at Visé—that's only a few miles farther on—and we might just as well look her up."

"By Jove! I ought to have remembered. I knew she was somewhere in Belgium. Let me see, she's your youngest sister?"

"Twelve months my junior," replied Kenneth, "and a jolly good pal she is, too. It's rather rough luck on her. The pater's just off on that Mediterranean trip, so she hasn't been able to go home for the holidays. We'll just cheer her up a bit."

Rollo gave a final glance at the map before folding it and placing it in his pocket. In response to a summons, the garçon produced the bill and gratefully accepted the modest tip that Everest bestowed upon him with becoming public schoolboy dignity.

This done, the two lads took their travelling cases and made their way to the hotel garage, where their motor-cycles had been placed under lock and key, out of the reach of sundry inquisitive and mischievous Belgian gamins.

"Hello! What's the excitement?" asked Kenneth, pointing to a crowd of gesticulating townsfolk gathered round a notice that had just been pasted to a wall.

"Ask me another," rejoined his companion. "A circus or something of the sort about to turn up, I suppose. If you're curious I'll hang on here while you go and find out."

Kenneth was off like a shot. Half-way across the bridge that here spans the Meuse he nearly collided with the proprietor of the Hôtel Doré. The man's face was red with excitement.

"Quel dommage!" he exclaimed, in reply to the lad's unspoken question. "The Government has ordered the army to mobilize. What inconsideration! Jules, Michel, Georges, and Étienne—all will have to go. I shall be left without a single garçon. And the busy season approaches also."

"Why is the army to be mobilized, then?"

"Ciel! I know not. We Belgians do not require soldiers. We are men of peace. Has not our neutrality been guaranteed by our neighbours? And, notwithstanding, the Government must have men to vie with the French *piou-piou*, give them rifles, and put them in uniforms at the expense of the community. It is inconceivable!"

The proprietor, unable to contain his feelings, rushed back to the hotel, while Kenneth, still wishing to satisfy his curiosity by ocular demonstration, made his way to the edge of the semicircular crowd of excited townsfolk.

The proclamation, dated the 31st day of July, was an order for partial mobilization, calling up the First Division of the Reserves. No reason was given, and the lack of it, rather than the fact that the order had to be obeyed, was the subject of general comment. From the nature of the conversation the lad gathered that military service was not regarded by the Belgians in anything approaching a tolerant spirit.

"Nothing much; only a mobilization," announced Everest in reply to his companion's enquiry. "Let's make a move. We may see something of the Belgian troops. It would be rather interesting to see how they take to playing at soldiering."

"Why playing?" asked Rollo as he proceeded to secure his valise to the carrier.

"What else would you expect from Belgians?" rejoined Kenneth. "Even old Gallipot—or whatever the hotel proprietor's name is—was grumbling about the uselessness of the business, and most of those johnnies over there are of the same opinion. No, Rollo, take my word for it, the Belgians are not a fighting race. Let me see—didn't they skedaddle at Waterloo and almost let our fellows down?"

"They may have done," remarked Rollo. "But that's nearly a century old. Ready?"

With half-closed throttles, and tyres sufficiently soft to absorb most of the shocks, the young

tourists bumped over the *pavé*, swung round, and soon settled down to a modest fifteen miles an hour along the Namur road.

For the best part of the journey the Meuse, with its limestone crags and dense foliage, was within a few yards on their right, while trees on either side of the road afforded a pleasant shade from the fierce rays of the sun. The dust, too, rose in dense clouds whenever, as frequently happened, a motor-car tore past, or a flock of frightened sheep scampered madly all across the road. At Namur their wishes regarding the Belgian troops were gratified. The narrow street swarmed with soldiers and civil guards. There were men with head-dresses resembling the busbies of the British guardsmen, leading teams of dogs harnessed to light quick-firing "Berthier" guns; infantry who, in spite of the broiling heat, wore heavy greatcoats; cavalry whose mounts were powerful enough to evoke the admiration of the critical Kenneth.

"I wonder what all this fuss is about," he exclaimed.

Before Rollo could furnish any remark a little Belgian officer accosted them.

"You gentlemen are English, without doubt?"

"We are."

"It then is well," continued the officer, speaking in English with considerable fluency. "You have not heard, eh? The news—the grave news?"

"No, monsieur."

"Germany has declared war upon the Russians."

CHAPTER II

A Break-down

"Is that so?" asked Kenneth. "Then I hope to goodness the Russians will give the Germans a thundering good licking. But why are your troops mobilizing?"

The Belgian officer replied by producing a newspaper and pointing to a heavy-leaded column.

"You understand our language?" he asked.

The report, though a piece of journalistic conjecture, afterwards proved to be very near to the mark. It was to the effect that Germany had declared war against Russia and also France, and that her troops were already pouring over the respective frontiers. To take all necessary precautions the King of the Belgians had ordered a mobilization, and had appealed to King George to assist him in preserving the integrity of his small kingdom.

"You'll notice it says that it is reported," observed the cautious Rollo. "By Jove, if it is true, the Kaiser will have a handful. But, monsieur, surely Belgium will be out of it? Her integrity is protected by treaties."

The Belgian officer shrugged his shoulders.

"Let us hope so," he remarked. "We Belgians have little faith in the honour of a German. Therefore, we arm. Where do you propose to go?"

"To Liége, monsieur."

"Then do not go. It is not advisable. If you take my advice you return to England as soon as possible. Perhaps, soon, you come back again with a brave English army."

"Whatever is the fellow aiming at?" asked Kenneth, after the officer was out of ear-shot. "It's all so very mysterious about nothing."

"Do you call war between Germany and France and Russia nothing, old fellow?"

"I wasn't referring to that," replied Kenneth. "Of course it is. The Russians will simply walk over Prussia while the Germans are trying to batter the French frontier forts. No; what I meant is, why should we be balked in going to Liége? We'll go, and risk it—though I don't believe there is any risk. If there is, so much the better for us."

"Perhaps that Belgian officer knows more than he told us."

"Or else less. I'll tell you what, Rollo. We'll see what's doing at Liége; then, if there's time,

we'll run back almost to the French frontier and see what the excitement is like there. Let's make another start."

The suggestion was quickly put into practice, but progress was tedious and slow. The highway between Namur and Liége was crowded with traffic. Military wagons, both motor-driven and drawn by horses and mules, seemed an unending stream. The rattling of the huge motor-lorries prevented the chauffeurs from hearing any sounds beyond the pulsations of their engines. In vain the two English lads sounded their horns. It was invariably a case of throwing out the clutch and waiting for a favourable moment to dash past, often with a bare yard between the off-side wheel of the powerful lorries and the deep ditch by the side of the road.

There were thousands of troops, too, with their supply-carts; swarms of peasants driving cattle into the fortresses; motor-cars, motor-cycles, and ordinary cycles galore, till Rollo remarked, during one of the enforced halts, that it was ten times worse than Barnet Hill on fair night.

At length, after taking two hours to traverse fifteen miles, the lads came in sight of the town of Huy. Here the traffic lessened slightly, and Kenneth called for an increased speed.

Suddenly Rollo saw his companion's cycle slip from under him. It was all he could do to avoid coming into collision with the prostrate mount. When he pulled up and dismounted, Kenneth was regaining his feet.

"Hurt?" asked Barrington laconically, yet with considerable anxiety.

"Not a bit," replied Kenneth cheerfully. "Only barked my knuckles. Get up, you brute!"

The last remark was addressed to the motor-cycle, which was lying on its side across a rounded stone embedded in the ground on the edge of the footpath. Kenneth found, for the first time, that it required a fair amount of physical energy to restore a fallen motorcycle to its normal position.

Thrice he tried a running start, but without success. The motor refused to fire.

"Jack it up on its stand," suggested Rollo. "Inject a little petrol into the compression tap and have another shot."

Kenneth promptly acted upon this advice, but still without satisfactory result. By this time Rollo had placed his cycle on its stand and was ready to give assistance.

"There's no spark," he announced after testing the plug. "I hope it isn't the magneto."

With the usual perversity of things in general and motor-cycles in particular, it was the magneto that was out of action. The round stone on which the cycle had fallen had given the delicate mechanism a nasty blow.

"This job's beyond me," declared Rollo. "We must see what can be done in the next town. Thank goodness it isn't far. Off with the belt and push her; I won't risk towing you with this traffic about."

Already the disabled motor-cycle was surrounded by a crowd of peasants and soldiers, all of whom offered advice; but, as the majority of the onlookers were Walloons, their Flemish tongue was not understood by the two English lads.

At length Kenneth managed to get into conversation with a French-speaking corporal, and from him learnt that there was an efficient motor-repairer in Huy, whose place of business faced the market square.

It was exhausting work pushing the two motor-bicycles along the undulating, rough cobbled road in the fierce glare of the August sun. The crowd followed.

About a quarter of a mile farther along the road a chasseur passed. Reining in his horse he addressed the corporal.

"What, then, has happened, Pierre?"

The Belgian non-com. shrugged his shoulders.

"Only two German tourists, Gaston," he replied. "They have had an accident."

"German!" exclaimed Kenneth indignantly. "You are wrong. We are English."

"Can Monsieur produce proof?" asked the corporal.

Fortunately both lads possessed *permits de circulation*—documents issued to foreign tourists on entering French territory, and which they had not given up at the *douane* at Givet. On each document was pasted a photograph of the bearer and particulars of his name, nationality, occupation, and place of abode.

In less than a minute the indifferent demeanour of the crowd underwent a complete change. Amid shouts of "Vivent les Anglais!" several of the Belgians took possession of the two motor-cycles, and, in spite of frequent wobblings, pushed them right into the town.

Here another set-back greeted the tourists. The repairer gravely informed them that a new magneto was absolutely necessary, and since he had not one in stock he would be obliged to send to Brussels for it.

Under the circumstances an enforced stay would have to be made at Huy, so the lads booked a room at a modest but cheerful-looking hotel. The town and environs seemed delightfully picturesque, and, although Kenneth chafed under the delay, both lads eventually admitted they might have been hung up in many a worse place than Huy.

The next day, Sunday, they were awakened early by a clamour in the street, and found that newsvendors were doing a roaring trade. The papers were full of sensational reports, and although definite news was not forthcoming, it was quite evident that the war clouds were rapidly gathering.

Rollo, the cautious, suggested the abandonment of the Liége trip and a hasty return home, but Kenneth set his face against any such proposal.

"Look here," he said, "if there's any truth in this report, and England does chip in, we will do no good by returning home. The powers that be have decided that we are not yet of an age to take up a commission, although I flatter myself that we are both better men than Tompkins, late of the Upper Sixth, who was gazetted to a line regiment a week before the holidays, you'll remember. If there is a dust-up we'll try our luck with the French. They don't object to fellows of sixteen, so long as they are keen. Take the case of Lord Kitchener, for instance. He served as a cadet in the war of '70 and '71."

"Don't be in such a violent hurry, old man. Stick to our original programme and go to Liége, if you will. It may be necessary for us to look after your sister, you know."

"I don't think so; I firmly believe that Belgium will be left out of the business. This scare will be over in a few days. The pen is mightier than the sword, you know, so Germany will respect her plighted word to preserve the neutrality of both Holland and Belgium."

It was nearly noon on Monday morning when the lads wended their way to the motor-repairer's. Outside the burgomaster's house a huge crowd had gathered. The chief magistrate was making ready to read a document. It was a copy of the momentous ultimatum from the bully of Europe to one of the smallest of her neighbours: a peremptory demand that the Belgian Government should allow the legions of the Kaiser to pass through Belgium in order to attack the least-defended frontier of France, and threatening to make war upon the little buffer State should she refuse.

A dead silence greeted the burgomaster's announcement. The news, though not unexpected, was astounding.

Again he spoke:

"Fellow-townsmen! I can assure you that the spirit of independence lives amongst us. We will resist to the death this outrageous demand. Nor are we without powerful friends. Listen to the words of an appeal of our heroic Sovereign to the King of England: 'Remembering the numerous proofs of your Majesty's friendship and that of your predecessors, and the friendly attitude of England in 1870, and the proof of friendship you have just given us again, I make a supreme appeal to the diplomatic intervention of your Majesty's Government to safeguard the integrity of Belgium."

"And what is the reply of the King of England?" shouted a voice.

"If it has been received it has not up to the present been communicated to me," replied the chief magistrate pompously. "Rest assured that I, your burgomaster, will not be tardy in keeping the worthy burgesses fully posted with the latest news from the capital. If any of you still have faith in German promises, let me inform you it is definitely established that the German troops have already invaded the independent Grand Duchy of Luxemburg."

The burgomaster withdrew, leaving the townsfolk to shout "Down with Germany!" "Long live England!" and cheer madly for their young king, who was yet to display proof of his personal courage.

"It's getting serious," admitted Kenneth as the chums resumed their way. "I don't mind owning I was wrong in my opinion of German honesty. If they don't draw the line at Luxemburg they evidently won't at Belgium. Rollo, my boy, it's a mortal cert that Great Britain will be scrapping with Germany in less than a week."

CHAPTER III

Major Résimont

"I vote we get off this main road with its wretched *pavé*," exclaimed Rollo prior to resuming their ride on the following day. "There's a road shown on the map which ought to be a jolly sight better. At any rate we'll miss most of the heavy traffic."

"Right-o," assented Kenneth; "anything so long as we can have a speed-burst. I'm tired of crawling along at ten miles an hour."

The road, which turned out to be little better than a cart-track, led a considerable distance from the left bank of the Meuse, and with the exception of an occasional farm wagon laden with hay, very little traffic was met with.

At the end of an hour's steady riding, the lads found themselves at the junction of two forked roads, where, contrary to the usual custom, there was no signpost to indicate the direction. On either side was a steep bank.

"Now, which way?" asked Rollo. "Neither of the roads looks particularly inviting."

"It's one of the sunken roads of Belgium, I suppose," said Kenneth. "We'll climb up this bank. Perhaps we shall be able to see where we are. It will be awkward for our bikes if a motor-car comes tearing along."

The incline was nearly fifteen feet in height and fairly steep. When the lads reached the summit they found, to their surprise, that they were on a slightly undulating grass field liberally guarded with barbed wire. About four hundred yards off was a rounded hillock. Even as the two looked they saw a huge cylindrical turret, from which projected the muzzle of a large gun, rise from the ground. For a few seconds the giant weapon moved horizontally and vertically, as if seeking a target, then as swiftly as it had appeared it disappeared into the ground.

"I say, we've stumbled across one of the frontier forts," exclaimed Kenneth. "Let's go a bit closer and have a look. I'd like to find out how they work."

"Thanks, I'm not having any," objected Rollo. "There's too much barbed wire knocking about. Besides, there are our bikes."

"We needn't wriggle under the wire, this road on our right evidently leads to the fort. We'll get a bit closer; but hold on a minute, we'll see if that gun pops up again."

They waited for at least five minutes, but without the expected result. As they turned to retrace their steps, they were confronted by a tall Belgian soldier wearing the blue uniform of the artillery.

"C'est défendu: marchez!" he ordered sternly.

"All right, monsieur," replied Kenneth. "We've lost our way. Which is the Liége road?"

"You are foreigners," exclaimed the soldier, bringing his bayonet to the "ready".

"Yes, English."

"You must come with me."

"We have motor-bicycles."

"No matter. They will be attended to. Forward!"

Realizing the uselessness of attempting to argue the point the lads obeyed, the soldier following three paces in the rear with his rifle and bayonet at the slope.

After covering a distance of about a hundred yards between the edge of the barbed-wire entanglements and the dip formed by the sunken road, the arrested lads found themselves in the presence of a corporal and a file of men.

"You must be taken before the major. I am sorry, but these are my orders," declared the corporal civilly, after ascertaining that the two chums were English. "No doubt you will be permitted to go with but little delay."

"Will our motor-bicycles be all right?" asked Rollo anxiously. "We left them a little way down the lane."

"I will send a man to look after them," was the reply. "We must take you into Fort Loncine, and you must be blindfolded. These are my orders whenever we find strangers in the vicinity of the defences."

"Very well," replied Kenneth with as good a grace as he could command, at the same time producing his handkerchief.

Guided by soldiers, the two blindfolded youths were led into the fort. Kenneth kept count of the number of paces before crossing the drawbridge; they totalled four hundred and eighty-five, which, allowing thirty inches for his long stride, meant that the glacis, or level grassy ground surrounding the fort, was a little over four hundred yards in breadth.

When the handkerchiefs were removed from their eyes the lads found themselves in a large vaulted room lighted by electricity. On three sides were several low-arched doorways, on the fourth a fairly broad gateway through which they had been brought. Although it was impossible to see straight into the open air, a distant glimpse of diffused daylight showed that this entrance communicated either with the glacis or else an enclosed portion of the fort that was exposed to the rays of the sun.

Seated on benches or lolling against the walls were quite a hundred soldiers, yet the place was by no means crowded. Beyond looking with evident curiosity at the two lads under arrest, they took no further interest in them.

Presently a sergeant approached and questioned the guards concerning their prisoners.

"English? Perhaps they are sent ... but, no; they are but youths. Bring them along. I will inform Major Résimont."

The sergeant knocked at one of the doors, and in reply to a muffled "Entrez!" he passed through. The lads noticed that the door was of steel, and required considerable effort on the part of the non-commissioned officer to open it.

"Englishmen found in the vicinity of the fort, mon major," announced the sergeant, saluting and standing stiffly at attention.

"Let them enter. Ah, my young friends, this, then, is the manner in which you come to Liége?"

The two chums could well express astonishment, for their questioner was none other than the officer who in Namur had advised them to abandon their proposed visit to the Birmingham of Belgium.

"Well, what have you to say?" proceeded the major.

"We lost our way and scrambled on to the bank to see where we were. We happened to catch sight of one of the guns, with disappearing mountings, and we were curious to see what happened," replied Kenneth.

"Your curiosity might lead you into trouble," said the Belgian officer gravely. "How am I to know that you are not German spies?"

Kenneth bridled indignantly.

"We give you our word that we are not."

"Your word will hardly do, monsieur, at a time like this. Can you produce proofs? Have you anyone in the district who can identify you?"

The lads produced their permits.

"This will hardly do," continued the major as he scanned Kenneth's document. "These are only too easy to obtain. Ha! Your name is Barrington?" he asked, turning to the owner of that patronymic.

"Yes, sir," replied Rollo. "My father is a retired colonel in the British army."

"His Christian name?"

Rollo told him.

"Then I know your father; not intimately, perhaps, yet I am acquainted with him. I met him at your great manoeuvres at Aldershot, to which I was sent as attaché in 1904. But, tell me, why are you both so anxious to go to Liége?"

"My sister is at a boarding-school near Visé," replied Kenneth. "I want to see her, as she is not returning home for the holidays."

"She is at the institution of Madame de la Barre?"

"Yes, sir; how did you know that?" asked Kenneth eagerly.

"I have the pleasure of Mademoiselle Everest's acquaintance," replied the major with a deep bow. "In fact, she is a great friend of my daughter, Yvonne. You are free to depart, messieurs, but perhaps you will do me a favour. Convey my compliments to Madame de la Barre, and say that it

is advisable that she should remove her school from Visé as soon as possible. Should you find it inconvenient to take your sister to England, please inform her that she may find a temporary home with Yvonne at my house in the Rue de la Tribune in Brussels."

"That we will gladly do, and let you know the result."

Major Résimont smiled.

"My duty prevents me from being my own messenger," he said. "I was on the point of sending one of my men with a letter, but you will, according to your English proverb, kill two birds with one stone. To-night, if you wish to see me, I hope to be at the Café Royal, in the Rue Breidel at Liége, from eight till eleven. Will you, before you depart, honour me by taking a glass of wine?"

"What do you think of the situation, sir?" asked Rollo.

Major Résimont shook his head.

"Serious," he said solemnly. "At any moment these pigs of Prussians may cross the frontier. Only one thing will hold them back: the fear of your English fleet. You are fortunate, you English, in having the sea around your country, yet I think you do not give sufficient thought towards the significance of the fact."

"But Great Britain has not declared war on Germany."

"No, not yet, but perhaps soon. Your country would do incalculable service to France and Belgium simply by holding the sea; yet in addition she has generously pledged herself to send almost the whole of her army to Belgium if the Germans attack us. Then the rest will be a question of time. We in Liége will do our utmost to keep the invaders at bay until your brave army arrives. Then, with the French, to say nothing of the Russians on the east, Germany will be assailed and conquered, and the vile spectre of Teutonic militarism will be for ever laid low."

The Belgian major spoke with conviction. His earnestness in the hope of British aid was intense.

"And we are ready," continued the major. "Already the bridges across the Meuse are mined; our armoured forts will defy the heaviest of the German artillery. We will keep the Germans at bay for a month if need be. Meanwhile you two messieurs journey through Belgium as calmly as if you were on an English country road. You English are brave, but you are enigmas. But take this and show it if you are challenged," and he wrote out a pass on an official form.

The major accompanied his involuntary guests as far as the edge of the glacis. This time they were not blindfolded; yet there was very little to be seen, except to the practised eye of a trained man. There were mountings for quick-firing guns, and just discernible above the turf the rounded tops of the steel cupolas. Beyond that the fort looked nothing more than an earthworked enclosure.

Somewhat to the lads' astonishment they found their motor-cycles placed on a trolley. The Belgian soldiers, not understanding the action of the exhaust lever, had been unable to wheel the heavy mounts; and since their orders had to be obeyed, they had first resorted to the toilsome task of carrying the mounts. This, owing to the heat of the day and the thickness of their clothing, was eventually abandoned, and a trolley procured.

"You have a clear road," announced Major Résimont. "When you re-enter the lane, keep to the left; that will bring you speedily upon the highway. Au revoir, messieurs!"

Somewhat to the wonderment of the Belgian soldiers, who could not understand how the unwieldy machines could be moved by manual power, the lads took a running start. Both engines fired easily, and soon the tourists were speeding along through the outskirts of the city of Liége.

CHAPTER IV

Enlisted

"Madame de la Barre presents her compliments, but regrets that the regulations of her establishment do not permit her pupils to receive visits except during certain hours," announced a stern-faced Flemish woman in broken French.

Kenneth glanced at his companion,

"What's to be done now?" he asked.

"Give her Major Résimont's message. Say it's very urgent," advised Rollo.

The lads, curbing their impatience, waited for another ten minutes outside the lofty blank wall surrounding the boarding-school. The air was sultry, and the glare from the whitewashed walls was almost blinding. The *pavé* seemed to throw out a stifling heat. The village street was practically deserted, but in the neighbouring fields a row of peasant women were bending over their monotonous task of pulling vegetables. Farther away some cows were lying down under the scant shade afforded by a few gaunt trees. Otherwise the landscape was devoid of life.

Presently a woman passed, leading a little girl by the hand. She was a buxom, comely peasant, the child bright-faced and apparently well-cared-for. They were laughing and chattering. Then a man on a dog-drawn cart came down the street. The animals, their tongues protruding and their sides heaving with the heat, were moving at a leisurely pace. The man made no attempt to hurry them. He was smiling contentedly, and called out a cheery greeting in Flemish to the patient audience before the gate of Madame de la Barre. A little way down the street he halted his team and entered a cottage. He was lame, hence he had not been called up on mobilization.

Presently the maid-servant reappeared.

"Madame thanks Monsieur the Major, but at present sees no reason for taking his advice. Should war be declared she will take necessary steps to safeguard her pupils. If Mademoiselle Résimont is to be sent to her home at Brussels, no doubt Monsieur the Major will communicate in writing with Madame. If Monsieur Everest desires to see his sister he can do so in the presence of Madame at eleven o'clock to-morrow."

Having delivered this ultimatum, the maid shut the door and shot the massive bolts.

"Done this time!" ejaculated Kenneth. "Let's get back to Liége. There'll be plenty to see."

The lads set off at a rapid pace in spite of the heat. They were on foot, having placed their motor-cycles in the village of Argenteau.

By the time they regained Argenteau a change had come over the little hamlet. A detachment of engineers was in possession. The men, discarding their heavy greatcoats, were busily engaged in throwing up earthworks, while almost within arm's-length their rifles were piled, each weapon with its bayonet fixed.

"Halte-là!" The tip of a bayonet presented within a couple of inches of Rollo's chest brought both lads to a sudden stop. "Qui v'là?"

The production of the pass with which Major Résimont had provided them was sufficient, and without further hindrance the two friends gained the inn.

As they passed under the archway they found that their beloved motor-cycles had vanished.

"Pardon, messieurs!" exclaimed the landlord on catching sight of the two lads. "It was not my fault, I assure you. It is the order of the Government. They have taken away all the horses, all the carts——"

"And our motor-cycles?"

"Hélas, messieurs, it is a fact. Nevertheless, the Government will pay——"

"Where are they taken to?" asked Kenneth.

"They were placed in a transport wagon, monsieur. It left in the direction of Liége not fifteen minutes ago."

"Let's hurry and catch it up," suggested Rollo. "It's daylight robbery. I believe that rascally innkeeper has played a trick on us."

Alternately running and walking, the English lads kept up a rapid pace along the road that followed the right bank of the Meuse between Argenteau and Liége. Mile after mile they went, without a sign of a transport wagon. Troops there were in plenty, all carrying entrenching tools in addition to arms. Yet, in spite of these warlike movements, the women were toiling unconcernedly in the fields, either indifferent to the danger that threatened them, or else basking in the confidence of the ability of the Belgian troops and their allies to thrust back the approaching tide of invasion.

At the village of Wandre Rollo gave vent to a shout of delight. Standing outside an inn was an army wagon, and under its tilt, in company with a medley of other articles, were their motor-cycles.

"Now, what's to be done?" asked Rollo.

"I vote we take them and make off as hard as we can," suggested Kenneth. "The soldiers in charge are evidently after more official loot."

"Won't do," replied the cautious Rollo. "Ten to one we would hopelessly damage the bikes getting them off the wagon. The best we can do is to tackle the fellow in charge."

"The fellow in charge" turned out to be a phlegmatic Walloon corporal. When appealed to he replied that he was acting under the orders of his lieutenant, and that he must account for all the articles on his list upon his return to Liége. The production of Major Résimont's pass did not save the situation, although the Belgian's demeanour thawed considerably.

"Nevertheless, if messieurs are English, perhaps they would like to ride on the wagon. At Liége, no doubt, all will be set right," he added.

It was, fortunately, the last of that particular corporal's work, and he was at liberty to return without delay. A sapper drove, the corporal sitting beside him on the box seat. On the tail-board, with their backs against their precious motor-cycles, sat the two lads, another sapper keeping them company.

As the cart jolted through the village of Jupille there came a dull rumbling, like that of distant thunder.

"Guns!" exclaimed Rollo.

"Thunder, I think," declared his chum.

The Belgian soldier, when questioned, merely remarked in matter-of-fact tones:

"We are blowing up the bridges, monsieur."

The work of demolition had already begun. The Belgian troops, with commendable forethought, had destroyed four bridges across the Meuse in order to delay the momentarily expected German advance. Yet, on either side of the sluggish river, peasants were unconcernedly toiling in the fields.

As the wagon passed the loftily-situated and obsolete fort of La Chatreuse a round of cheering could be heard from the city of Liége. Presently the strains of "La Brabançonne"—the Belgian National Anthem—could be distinguished above the din.

The sapper began to grow excited.

"All is well, messieurs," he exclaimed. "We are now ready for these Prussians. Our Third Division has arrived."

Presently the head of the column of blue-greatcoated troops swung blithely along the road to take up positions in the newly-constructed trenches between Fort de Barchon and Fort de Fléron. The men marched well, although covered with dust from head to foot; for during the previous forty-eight hours they had, by forced marches, covered more than eighty miles from Diest to their allotted positions at Liége. Yet, for some unaccountable reason, these troops went into what was soon to be the firing-line in blue tunics with white facings, which would offer a conspicuous target to their foes.

It was late in the afternoon when the cart drew up in a large open space by the side of the Church of St. Jacques. The square was crowded with all kinds of military transport and commissariat wagons. Officers were shouting orders, men were rushing hither and thither, motors were popping, horses neighing.

The corporal in charge of the wagon descended and stood rigidly at attention. For quite a quarter of an hour he remained in this attitude, without any of the officers approaching to give him further directions. The crowd of wagons became more congested, till Kenneth and Rollo realized that, should they regain possession of their mounts, there would be great difficulty in wheeling them out of the press.

Suddenly Kenneth gripped his friend's shoulder and pointed in the direction of a group of officers.

"There's Major Résimont!" he exclaimed. "He'll get us out of the fix."

"Ah! You have got yourselves in a difficulty again, that I can see," declared the genial Major. "What, then, is the trouble?"

Briefly Kenneth described the commandeering of their motor-cycles.

"I am indeed most busy," said Major Résimont, and the perspiration on his face did not belie this statement. "Nevertheless, come with me, and we will find the Quartermaster of the Commissariat."

He led the lads at a rapid pace through several crowded thoroughfares. At one point the press was so great as to impede their progress. The Liégeois were shouting and cheering, cries of "Vive la Belgique!" and "Vive l'Angleterre!" predominating. Outside a large building a Union Jack and the Belgian tricolour had been hoisted side by side. A telegraphic communication had just

been received that Great Britain had declared war on Germany.

"Ah! I thought it," chuckled the Major. "Now the Prussians will get the right-about. My friends, the Germans are also now your enemies," and he shook Kenneth and Rollo by the hand. "What will you do? Return to England and join the army?"

"We are not old enough for commissions, sir," replied Kenneth; then on the spur of the moment he added: "Couldn't we be attached to the Belgian army as dispatch-riders?"

Rollo almost gasped at his chum's impetuosity, but loyalty to his chum and a desire to do something against the oppressor of Europe checked his inclination to counsel caution.

"We will see," said the Major gravely. "It is good to see such a spirit amongst Englishmen to come to the aid of our brave Belgians. You are resolute?"

"Rather!" declared Kenneth stoutly; and Rollo likewise signified his willingness.

The Quartermaster having been found at his office, Major Résimont soon obtained the requisite order for the release of the Englishmen's motor-cycles.

"Now, this way!" he exclaimed.

Five minutes' brisk walk brought them to the door of a large building at which were stationed two soldiers in the uniform of the Grenadiers. These stood stiffly at attention as the Major entered, drawing themselves up with an alertness that was almost entirely lacking in most of the men of the line regiments.

Giving his name to a staff officer, the Major had to wait in an ante-room, with at least a dozen other officers, mostly of brevet rank. At length his turn came, for business was being carried out with dispatch.

"Monsieur le Major Résimont, mon Général," announced a junior officer, as he opened the door and motioned for the Belgian Major and his two companions to enter.

Seated at a table was a man in the undress uniform of the Belgian staff. He was sparely built, although from his attitude it was impossible to judge his height. His features were sallow, one might almost say cadaverous, with a bright tinge of red upon his prominent cheek-bones. Heavily-bushed eyebrows overhung a pair of deep-set eyes that seemed hawk-like in their intensity. His closely-cropped hair was iron-grey. A slightly drooping moustache hid a resolute mouth.

The two English lads were in the presence of a man whose name, hitherto practically unknown outside his own country, was soon to be on the lips of everyone who was likely to hear of the gallant stand of Liége—General Albert Leman.

A quick vertical motion of the General's right hand—he was a man of few words—was the signal for Major Résimont to make known his business.

"I have here two Englishmen, mon Général," began the Major. "They are desirous of entering our army as motor-cyclist dispatch-riders."

Without a moment's delay the General asked: "Can they read a map?"

Kenneth and Rollo both replied that they could.

"Good!" exclaimed General Leman; then, turning to his secretary, he added: "Make out an order for these gentlemen to be attached to the 9th regiment of the line—your company, Major?"

"If you please, sir."

"Here, then, is the order," continued the General after a brief instant, during which the secretary had been writing as hard as he possibly could. "They can be sworn in as soon as an opportunity occurs. I wish you good day."

That was all. The whole business was over in less than five minutes. Not a word of thanks or encouragement to the two British volunteers. A chill had descended upon their ardour.

"The General—he is magnificent," said their companion as they gained the street. "Down to the humblest private we swear by him. One has to earn praise from the General before it is bestowed: it is our General's way. He is a man of few words, but his heart is in the right place. Now go and demand your motor-cycles and proceed to Fort de Barchon. I will meet you there and see you are attested."

With that the Major hurried off, and the two lads hastened to take possession of their own property.

"Fancy Great Britain being at war with Germany at last!" exclaimed Kenneth. "We can hardly realize it, although most people have been talking about it for years. Perhaps even now our fleet is giving the Germans a good hiding. The rotten part about our job is that we may not be able to

get news of how things are going on at home."

Therein Kenneth was right. The news they received was mostly rumour. In fact, the statement they had just heard, that Great Britain had declared war, was premature. An ultimatum had been sent to Berlin stating that, unless Belgian neutrality were respected, hostilities would commence at midnight. The Liégeois had anticipated the hour, and so had the Germans, for already their mine-layers were at work in the North Sea.

An hour later, just as the sun was sinking behind the smoke-enshrouded city of Liége, Kenneth Everest and Rollo Barrington were enlisted as volunteer dispatch-riders in the 9th regiment of the line of the Belgian army.

CHAPTER V

A Baptism of Fire

At eight o'clock on the following morning the motorcyclist section—nine in number—was paraded in front of the orderly-room of Fort de Barchon. Already the bulk of the regiments had marched out to take up a position in the trenches between the fortifications and the right bank of the Meuse.

The two English lads had been served out with a dark-blue uniform, with heavy boots and brown gaiters, and had been armed with a Belgian service revolver—a .45-bore, made by the famous firm of Cockerill of Seraing.

Already they had been instructed in its use, and had—thanks to their cadet training—met with the approval of their musketry instructor. Their motor-cycles had also been subjected to a critical inspection. The officer—who in civil life had been in the motor industry at Liége—had to report, in spite of slight professional jealousy, that the English motor-cycles were fit for service, and almost equal to those owned by the other members of the dispatch-riding section.

One by one the men were called into the orderly-room, where they received instructions and dispatches, till only Kenneth and Rollo remained.

"Private Ever-r-rest and Private Bar-r-rington," shouted the orderly-room sergeant, sounding his r's like the roll of a drum.

Within they found Major Résimont, and, as befitting their relative rank, the lads saluted and stood at attention.

"Deliver this to Captain Leboeuf at Visé," ordered the Major. "In view of the German advance, he is to cross the river and impede the enemy as much as possible, retiring upon Fort de Pontisse if in danger of being outflanked." Then dropping the official voice, he added in English, "Since Madame de la Barre would pay no heed to my request, it is necessary for strategic reasons to occupy her house. You may now have an opportunity of seeing your sister, Monsieur Everest. There are, I believe, only our pupils there during the holidays. Captain Leboeuf will arrange for them to be sent into Maastricht by train, or by a carriage if railway communication is interrupted. They can then proceed to Brussels in the ordinary way. You might give this to Mademoiselle Yvonne for incidental expenses for herself and her friend, your sister," and the Major handed Kenneth a packet containing a sheaf of notes.

"Be cautious," he added. "The Germans have already advanced upon Lembourg."

The lads saluted and withdrew. A minute later they were dashing over the drawbridge, bound on their first duty as dispatch-riders in the Belgian army, though with a semi-official motive.

Away on their right came the rapid booming of light artillery fire. Beyond the woods of Verviers a thick cloud of black smoke rose sullenly in the heavy air.

Their route lay along a fairly level road bounded on each side by tall trees. In the centre was a strip of *pavé*, but between it and the ditch on either hand was a dusty path which afforded good going. The cyclists were soon touching thirty miles an hour, the rapid beats of their engines drowning the noise of the distant cannonade.

Once they had to slow down in order to allow a cart to draw up on one side. The floor of the cart was covered with straw, and on the straw lay some strange objects. The lads did not realize what these burdens were. They were new to the game of war, but not for long.

Presently they noticed a group of soldiers approaching. Thrice the lads sounded their horns without effect. Again they had to slow down.

"Good heavens! Look!" ejaculated Kenneth.

The men were limping painfully. One had his arm thrown around a comrade's neck, and his head falling limply upon the other's shoulder. Another, his head bound by a blood-stained scarf, was using the butt of his rifle as a crutch.

"There's been an action already," said Rollo.

"Yes, and on the Visé road," added his companion. "Let's push on. I hope we are not too late."

During the slowing-down process the thunder of the guns became horribly distinct. There was terrific firing in the direction of Argenteau. More, there were heavy Belgian losses, for the men they had just passed were but the van of a ghastly procession of wounded.

At Argenteau a body of reserves was in possession of the village. Barricades had been hastily constructed, walls of buildings loopholed, and barbed-wire entanglements placed across the road.

"Halte-là!"

Rollo came to a standstill with the point of a Belgian bayonet within a couple of inches of his chest. Kenneth, who was twenty yards in the rear, almost as promptly alighted.

"Qui v'là?" demanded the sentry.

"Dispatches for Captain Leboeuf," replied Kenneth.

The man recovered his arms.

"May you have the good fortune to find him!" said he. "Our troops have been compelled to fall back in the face of superior numbers. Turn to the right, then take the first road to the left. It will bring you back to the Visé road."

Following the sentry's direction the lads found that the route was still open, although soldiers and peasants were standing ready to barricade that exit.

A couple of miles farther on the motor-cyclists reached the firing-line—a comparatively weak detachment of infantry holding a hastily-constructed trench.

Overhead the shrapnel was flying, the iron hail for the most part bursting harmlessly in the rear. On the left the great guns of Fort de Pontisse were shelling the dense masses of German troops as they vainly sought to cross the Meuse.

A shell, happily without exploding, struck the pave five yards from the spot where Kenneth dismounted, burying itself in a hole at least two feet in depth.

"Into the ditch with the bikes," shouted Kenneth; and having assisted Rollo to place his steed in a place of comparative safety, he returned, and, helped by his companion, managed to shelter his own cycle.

"What's to be done now?" asked Rollo.

"See if the Captain is with these men. We must hasten: it will be a jolly sight safer in the trench."

Abandoning their motor-cycles, the two lads made their way along the ditch, which fortunately ran with considerable obliquity to the direction of the fire of the German artillery.

At length they reached the trench where the Belgian infantry, taking admirable cover, were replying steadily to the hail of ill-directed rifle bullets. The only unwounded officer was a slim young lieutenant—a mere boy.

"We have dispatches for Captain Leboeuf, sir," announced Kenneth. "He was in charge of an outpost at Visé."

"Visé is all aflame," replied the officer. "No doubt the Captain has crossed the Meuse. But we are about to retire, so look to yourselves. The enemy is threatening our right flank, otherwise we might hold this trench for another twenty-four hours."

"Any orders, sir, before we return to Fort de Barchon?"

"Yes; ride as quickly as you can to Saint André. The rest of our company is there. Tell the officer in command that I am retiring, and that unless he falls back he is in danger of being cut off. You understand? Good, now——"

The lieutenant's instructions ended in a faint shriek. His hands flew to his chest, and he pitched forward on his face.

A grizzled colour-sergeant instantly took command.

"Retire by sections!" he shouted. "Steady, men, no hurry. Keep them back as long as you can."

The caution was in vain. While the untried troops were lining the trench and replying to the German fire, all went well; but at the order to retire, men broke and ran for their lives. Heedless of the cover afforded by the ditch, they swarmed along the road in the direction of Argenteau, shrapnel and bullet accounting for half their numbers. Only the sergeant, two corporals, and the British dispatch-riders remained.

The Germans, advancing in close formation, were now eight hundred yards off.

Without a word the Belgian sergeant crawled along the trench, picking up the rifles and caps of the slain and placing them at intervals along the top of the mound; while the rest, including Kenneth and Rollo, who had taken possession of a couple of abandoned rifles, maintained a rapid magazine fire at the approaching troops.

"Each for himself, mes enfants," said the veteran at length. "One at a time and trust to luck."

With that a corporal cast aside his greatcoat and heavy knapsack. He was about to make a plunge through the zone of hissing bullets when Kenneth stopped him.

"There's a ditch farther along," he announced. "We came that way."

The man hesitated, then, communicated the news to his sergeant.

"Come then, mes braves," exclaimed the veteran.

One by one, crawling along the ditch the five made their way, till they gained the comparative shelter afforded by the walls of a ruined cottage. Proof against bullets, the house had been practically demolished by shell-fire.

"We must go back and get our bikes," declared Kenneth. "It's fairly safe. Those fellows are apparently directing their fire against those caps and rifles showing above the trench."

They found their steeds uninjured. In record time they were in the saddle and tearing along the avenue, which here and there was dotted with dead Belgians. The wounded had evidently been carried off by their comrades.

As they passed the ruined cottage where they had parted from the three soldiers the latter were no longer to be seen, but a hoarse cry of "A moi, camarades!" caused Rollo to turn. He alone caught the appeal, for Kenneth had secured a slight start and the noise of his engine had drowned the shout for aid.

"Hold on!" shouted Rollo; but Kenneth, unaware of the call, was out of ear-shot, and doing a good thirty or forty miles an hour.

Leaving his engine still running, Rollo dismounted and made his way towards the building. Shots were whistling overhead. He crouched as he hastened, for he had not yet acquired the contempt for the screech of a bullet that the old soldier has, knowing that with the whizzing of the missile that particular danger has passed.

Lying against the bullet-spattered wall was the old sergeant. A fragment of shrapnel, rebounding from the masonry, had fractured his left ankle.

There was no time for first-aid. The Germans were now within three hundred yards of the abandoned trench. Throwing his arms round the sergeant's body, Rollo lifted him from the ground, then kneeling, he managed to transfer him across his back. Fortunately the wounded man was not very heavy, and the lad, staggering under his burden, carried him to the place where he had left his motor-cycle.

Just then came the rapid pop-pop of another motor-bike. Kenneth, having discovered that his chum was no longer in his company, had returned.

"Give me a push off, old man," panted Rollo, as he set his burden across the carrier and stood astride his steed.

In went the clutch; Kenneth, running by the side of the cycle for a few yards, steadied the wounded sergeant, who was clinging desperately to the young dispatch-rider.

"All right, let go!" shouted Rollo.

The bike wobbled dangerously under the unusual burden. The sergeant's grip wellnigh destroyed the lad's power of command on the steering. The *zipp* of a bullet did much to add to the difficulty, and momentarily Rollo thought that nothing could save him from toppling into the ditch.

"Let go my arms and catch hold of my waist," he shouted desperately. The sergeant fortunately understood and obeyed; the motor-cycle began to recover its balance, and as Rollo

opened the throttle and increased speed it settled down to its normal condition.

On either side the trees seemed to slip past like the spokes of a wheel; the pace was terrific, and although the wounded man must have been suffering agonies, not a groan came from his lips.

Presently Kenneth rode up alongside, for they were out of range and the road was no longer encumbered with the fallen. Five minutes later the two lads dismounted at the barricade of Argenteau.

Here ready arms relieved Rollo of his burden; soldiers assisted in lifting the cycles over the barrier. As they did so one of them pointed to one of the tool-bag panniers on Rollo's cycle. It was pierced by a bullet.

"Where are you going to?" demanded a major.

"To Saint André, to warn a half-company of the 9th regiment to retire, sir."

"It is unnecessary. The men have already rejoined. Return to Fort de Barchon and say that if need be we can still hold the enemy in check, but that we are losing heavily."

Soon they were back again at Argenteau, with instructions for the remains of the badly-mauled regiment to fall back upon the lines of defence prepared between the two forts in the north-eastern side of the circle surrounding Liége.

The invaders had been delayed sufficiently to allow General Leman to complete his dispositions. They were yet to learn that even the much-vaunted German infantry could not afford to despise the gallant Belgians.

"It's a jolly sight better than Rugby, anyway," declared Kenneth, as at the end of their first day on active service they returned to their quarters at Fort de Barchon.

But Rollo did not reply. He was thinking of the bullet hole in the pannier of his cycle. It had been a narrow squeak.

CHAPTER VI

A Vain Assault

"I say, how about your sister, old man?" asked Rollo.

"She's all right," replied Kenneth optimistically. "These Germans don't make war on women and girls. Besides, Madame de la Barre doubtless dropped a little of her standoffishness directly she heard the sound of firing. I'm pretty sure they are now either safe in Dutch territory or else on their way to Brussels."

"If I had a sister I would be a jolly sight more anxious about her than you are," persisted Rollo.

"Now, how can I help it? Besides, you don't know Thelma. She wouldn't, under the circumstances, wait for Madame to give her permission to clear out, and, since Yvonne is her special friend, she'll look after the Major's daughter as well. I'm sorry we haven't come across Major Résimont since our return."

"He must feel a bit anxious," remarked Rollo.

"About the money he entrusted us with?" laughed Kenneth. "Well, I admit that it was a bit of a risk, for we might have been bowled over by one of those German shells. Ah! there's another!"

The two dispatch-riders were under cover at Fort de Barchon, enjoying a hasty meal after their return from their fruitless errand. It was late in the day, and many hours had elapsed since they had had anything to eat. It was a kind of preliminary to the period of short rations through which they were to pass.

The German artillery was furtively shelling the Liége forts as a prelude to the general bombardment that was to take place as soon as the shades of night began to fall.

General von Emmich had brought up a force of 88,000 men against the 23,000 Belgian troops manning the Liége defences; but, owing to the difficulty of transporting his heavy guns, the German commander decided to open a furious cannonade with his light field artillery, and to follow up with an assault by means of dense masses of troops.

Soon the cannonade became general, the heaviest of the hostile fire being directed upon Forts d'Évegnée and de Fléron, while Fort de Barchon came in for a hot bombardment.

It was by no means a one-sided encounter. The Belgian infantry, lying snugly sheltered either in the trenches or in the bomb-proof galleries of the forts, were for the time being inactive. The Belgian gunners, however, worked their guns in the armoured cupolas with skill, bravery, and precision, and at the end of two hours' bombardment the forts were practically intact.

Kenneth and Rollo, in the galleries of Fort de Barchon, could feel the concussion of the revolving guns and the detonations of the exploding German shells, although they were, like the rest of the infantry, in ignorance of what was taking place. The inaction was far more nerve-racking than actual exposure with the chance of getting in a shot.

Suddenly above the roar of the artillery came a bugle-call, followed by excited shouts of "Aux armes!" Instantly there was a wild rush to man the parapets on the inner face of the glacis.

"Come along, old man!" exclaimed Kenneth. "We may as well have a look in."

Snatching up a rifle and making sure that the magazine was charged, he dashed out of the gallery, Rollo following hard on his heels.

A weird sight met their eyes. The blackness of the night was pierced by the dazzling rays of powerful searchlights and punctuated by the rapid flashes from the heavy ordnance. The thunder of the guns was ear-splitting, the crash of the exploding projectiles appalling, yet the attention of the two lads was directed towards the scene that lay before them.

All along the parapet, protected by sandbags, were the Belgian infantry, ready, with their rifles sighted to 800 yards, to open fire at the word of command. Beyond the turf of the glacis, where almost every blade of grass stood up under the sweeping rays of the searchlights as if made of gleaming silver, were dense masses of grey-coated, spike-helmeted Germans.

On they came as steadily as if on parade, while between the rapid crashes of the artillery could be distinguished the harsh voices of the men as they sang "Deutschland über Alles" and the "Wacht am Rhein". The only relief to those grey-clad battalions was the glitter of the forest of bayonets.

If numbers could annihilate, the fate of the comparative handful of Belgians was sealed; but von Emmich had, like many another man, underrated the courage of the plucky little Belgians.

The Germans were now within the danger-zone of shell-fire. Shrapnel tore ghastly lanes through their serried ranks, but other men were instantly forthcoming to fill up the gaps. On and on they came till they reached the outer edge of the glacis. Here the huge fortress-guns in the armoured cupolas could not be sufficiently depressed to do them harm.

The crackle of the Belgian musketry added to the din. The men, firing steadily, swept away hundreds of their Teutonic foes, but the ant-like swarm of ferocious humanity still swept onwards.

Kenneth and Rollo were firing away as hard as they could thrust home the bolts of the rifles and press trigger. The hostile gun-fire had now ceased, lest German should fall by German shell. The infantry, firing with the butts of their rifles at the hip, let loose a terrific volley. The air was torn by the *zipp* of the bullets, but for the most part the hail of missiles either flew high or harmlessly expended itself in the soft earth. Now, in spite of the withering fire, the foremost of the German stormers were almost up to the parapet of the outer defences. Victory seemed within their grasp. Their shouts redoubled. Drunk with the apparent success of their suicidal tactics, they rushed to overwhelm the slender line of Belgian riflemen.

Through the rapidly-drifting clouds of smoke—for there was a strong wind blowing athwart the line of attack—the two British lads could clearly see the features of the exultant foes, as they recklessly plunged straight into the dazzling rays of the searchlight.

Mechanically Kenneth began to wonder what would happen next, for it seemed imminent that bayonet would cross bayonet, and that the handful of Belgian infantry would be cut off to the last man.

Then, even as he faced the enemy, the dense masses of Germans seemed to melt away. They fell, not in sixes and sevens, but in scores and hundreds, till a barricade of dead prevented the massacre of the living. The Belgians had machine-guns in readiness to take up the work that the heavier weapons had been obliged to suspend.

The commandant of the 9th regiment of the line saw his chance. The rattle of the Berthier machine-guns ceased as if by magic, and the shout was heard "A la baïonnette!"

Instantly the active Belgians swarmed over the glacis and threw themselves upon the demoralized foe. The repulse of the Germans became a rout.

Carried away by the enthusiasm of the charge, the British dispatch-riders tore along with

their Belgian comrades, Kenneth with rifle and bayonet, while Rollo was brandishing his Mauser and using the butt-end like an exaggerated hockey-stick.

Just in front of them was a little Belgian officer who, on the point of cutting down a burly German major, had arrested the fatal stroke upon the latter crying out for quarter. The German, who had been beaten to the ground, tendered his sword, and the Belgian, casting it aside, rushed on to continue the counter-charge.

Before he had taken two strides he fell, hit in the ankle, and Kenneth, who was following, promptly tripped across his body.

The sight of his chum pitching on his face caused Rollo's heart to jump into his mouth. He stopped, and to his great relief Kenneth regained his feet. The Belgian also attempted to rise, but could only raise himself to the extent of his outstretched arms.

Rollo was on the point of going to assist his chum, who was directing his attention to the wounded Belgian officer, when he saw the German major stealthily produce his revolver and take aim at the man who had spared his life.

Perhaps it was well for the ungrateful major that Rollo was a keen footballer. Forgetting that he held a clubbed rifle in his hand the lad took a flying kick; his boot caught the German major on the wrist, and the revolver, exploding harmlessly, went spinning a dozen paces away.

Standing over the recreant officer Rollo swung the butt of his rifle. The German howled for mercy.

"Hold hard, old man!" shouted Kenneth, grasping his chum by the shoulder. He could scarcely credit his senses, seeing the usually deliberate and self-possessed Rollo about to kill a defenceless German officer.

"That brute was about to shoot down a fellow who had given him quarter," hissed Rollo: "that captain over there, the one sitting up with a wounded leg."

"We'll collar the cad in any case," declared Kenneth, for the Belgian troops were now being recalled. The attack had been repulsed, but the defenders were too wary to risk being caught out in the open.

Drawing his revolver Rollo ordered the German to rise. The Major apparently did not understand French, for he only cried the more.

"Get up instantly," exclaimed Rollo in English.

The German looked at his captor in surprise. His appeals for mercy ceased. He stood up.

"I surrender," he said in the same language.

With one of the British lads on either side the prisoner was urged onwards at a rapid pace, surrounded by swarms of exultant Belgians, many of whom were limping or nursing their wounded arms. Others were supporting or carrying those of their comrades who were more seriously hurt, yet all were uplifted by their enthusiasm at the thought of having vanquished von Emmich's hordes.

Upon gaining the shelter of Fort de Barchon the British lads handed their prisoner over to the charge of a corporal and a file of men. It was well for the German that his captors refrained from giving the Belgian soldiers an account of the circumstances under which he had been made prisoner.

The German major seemed dazed. He could not understand how he had been captured by Englishmen; for it had been given out to the troops of von Emmich's division that Great Britain had decided to remain neutral. Her attitude had been gained by a promise on the part of the German Government that only the French and Belgian colonies should be annexed, and that no permanent occupation of these two countries was contemplated. And now he had been informed that Great Britain and her vast empire beyond the seas had fallen into line to aid right against might. The news troubled him beyond measure—far more than the probability of what the result of his treacherous act would be; for he was a Teuton imbued with the belief that all is fair in war, and that treaties and conventions are alike mere matters of form.

"Ah! you have been in the fight," exclaimed Major Résimont. "That should not be. Dispatch-riders are required for other things."

Kenneth and Rollo saluted.

"Couldn't help it," explained Kenneth. "When the men charged we simply had to go. It was splendid."

"You think so? So do we," said the Major proudly. "We have taught the Bosches a lesson; we have shown them that Belgians can fight. We must hold them in front of the Liége forts for a few days, and then the French and the English armies will be here. A matter of three days, perhaps,

and then, *pouf!* they blow the Kaiser and his armies upon the bayonets of the Russians. It is good to think that the English are so close."

CHAPTER VII

Disabling a Taube

"Here is the money and the letter you entrusted us with, sir," said Kenneth. "We couldn't get within five miles of Visé."

"The place is burned to the ground, I hear," announced Major Résimont. "Those Prussians are like devils, they spare neither man, woman, nor child. Liége is filled with terrible stories brought by the peasants who escaped. I could, alas! gather no definite tidings of my daughter or of her friend your sister, Monsieur Everest. One thing is certain. They left before the German shells began to fall in Visé, but whither, I know not. Let us hope they went to Maastricht."

It was now early morning. The bombardment, which had ceased during the futile assault, was now being renewed, although the fire lacked the fierceness that characterized the beginning of the siege of Liége.

The Belgian reply, too, had almost ceased, for so rapidly had the big guns been served that they had become overheated. Moreover—a further proof of German methods—the ordnance supplied by Krupp's to the Belgian Government before the war was obviously inferior in workmanship and material, and in consequence had rapidly deteriorated.

The two British dispatch-riders had run across Major Résimont in one of the vaulted galleries. He looked tired and worried: tired owing to the fact that he had been for seventeen hours on duty in the trenches or in the fort; worried by reason of anxiety for his daughter. Yet he was willing and anxious to face the Germans at any time they should take it into their heads to attempt another assault.

"If I were you I would take the chance to get a few hours' sleep," he advised as he bade the lads au revoir. "Remember what I said the next time there is an attack: a dispatch-rider's duty is not in the firing-line. His work lies in another sphere, equally hazardous and equally important."

"Jolly good advice about getting some sleep, at all events," remarked Kenneth, after the Major had gone. "I vote we turn in. I had no idea I was so horribly sleepy until just now."

"Guns or no guns, I think I can do my share of sleep," agreed Rollo. "Let us put the scheme into practice."

Just then the heavy armoured door of the gallery was thrown open, and an authoritative voice shouted:

"Dispatch-riders! Are there any dispatch-riders here?"

"Here, sir," replied the lads promptly.

"Ah! The English motor-cyclists," exclaimed the Belgian—a staff officer. "Do you know the headquarters offices in the Palace of Justice in Liége?"

"Yes, sir," was again the reply.

"Good! Take this paper—you!" (pointing to Kenneth)—"and deliver it into the hands of Commandant Fleurus at all costs, and await his commands. Your comrade will accompany you, so that should you meet with any mishap he is to take the paper from you and proceed. You understand? Good! Now, away!"

"A good spin will be almost as refreshing as a few hours' sleep, Rollo," said Kenneth, as the two chums made their way to the place where their motor-cycles were stored, protected by three feet of concrete and six feet of earth from hostile shells.

"With plenty of excitement thrown in," added Rollo. "We'll have a difficulty to dodge those shells as we get clear of the fort, I'm thinking."

"Rush it and trust to luck. We'll do it all right," declared Kenneth optimistically, as he hurriedly overhauled his cycle and proceeded to warm up the engine.

It was a tricky business getting out of the fort, for the sunken lane that wound through the extensive glacis was littered with debris of exploded shells. There were deep holes in several places, while at various points the effect of the German projectiles was evident by the fact that

the approach to the fort was choked by landslides. Thrice the lads had to dismount and push their cycles over obstacles, to the accompaniment of the dull crash of the shells, some of which burst unpleasantly near.

All the while, although not a defender was visible, the armoured cupolas were appearing and disappearing with the regularity of clockwork, sending out their iron hail upon the pontoons which the German engineers were constructing to replace the broken bridges at Visé and Argenteau.

"All out!" exclaimed Rollo as they reached the open road.

With throttle well open and spark advanced, both motor-cycles bounded forward. The pace was terrific. At times the riders were almost jerked from the saddles as their steeds leapt across the irregularities on the surface of the *pavé*. The lads could no longer hear the thunder of the guns: it was drowned by the roar of their exhausts. The wind shrieked past their ears, grit flew in showers, a cloud of dust followed in their wake. Suddenly they saw a large silvery-grey object swoop down about a quarter of a mile ahead, close to the outskirts of the village of Jupille, which had been abandoned by the terrified inhabitants. The riders recognized it as one of the German Taubes that had been aggressively active during the operations by locating the position of the Belgian trenches.

The monoplane was in difficulties. It took all the skill of the pilot to prevent it from making a nose-end dive to earth. With superb presence of mind he managed to restore the disturbed equilibrium and to bring the Taube to rest without much damage.

Bringing his motor-cycle to a halt, Kenneth dismounted and placed his mount on its stand. Rollo did likewise.

"What's the game?" he asked as his companion unfastened the flap of his holster.

"We'll collar those fellows," declared Kenneth resolutely "They must not get away."

"But the dispatch?"

"This is more important, I guess. See, those fellows are already setting things to rights. Before any of the Belgian vedettes can come up they will be off again."

Kenneth was right in his surmise. There were no troops within a mile of the place. The two men who formed the crew of the monoplane were feverishly tackling the work of making good the damage. One of the wires actuating the elevating gear had been cut through by a chance Belgian bullet—one amongst a thousand more that had been fired at the troublesome Taube.

"Surrender!" shouted Kenneth, advancing to within fifty feet of the aviators and levelling his revolver. Rollo, cooler than his companion, steadied the barrel of his heavy pistol in the crook of his arm.

The pilot had been so engrossed in his work that he had not noticed the arrival of the lads. At the sound of Kenneth's voice he had just completed the joining up of the severed wire. He made a rush to the propeller and began to swing it in order to start the engine.

This was more than Kenneth had bargained for. It seemed too much like shooting down a man in cold blood. He need not have been so chivalrous, for the next instant a bullet tore through his hair and sent his cap a couple of yards away. The observer of the Taube had, at the first alarm, flung himself upon the ground and had fired at the lad with a rifle.

Before the man could thrust home a fresh cartridge Kenneth was snug behind a rise in the ground. Rollo, twenty paces to the right, had likewise taken cover.

The powerful motor was now working. The propeller blades glittered like a circle of light as they revolved with a terrific buzz. The draught of the propeller threw up a cloud of dust as high as a three-storied house. Through the haze thus caused the lads could distinguish the forms of the aviators as they scrambled into their seats.

Both dispatch-riders emptied the contents of their revolvers, perhaps a little wildly, but the result was none the less disastrous to the Taube. There was a blinding flash, a report, and a rush of air that drove the dust-cloud in all directions. One of the bullets had pierced the petrol-tank, and a spark had done the rest.

In an instant the Taube was enveloped in flame. The pilot, his hands held to his face, was stumbling blindly away from the inferno, his clothes burning furiously. The observer ran for nearly twenty yards, spun round thrice, and collapsed.

Rollo was the one in this instance to take the initiative. He ran to the pilot, tripped him up, and began to heap handfuls of dust upon his burning clothing. By Kenneth's aid the flames were extinguished, but by this time the unfortunate German was unconscious.

As for the observer, he was found severely wounded, one of the heavy revolver bullets having passed completely through his shoulder.

"Now, what's to be done?" asked Rollo, as the lads ejected the expended ammunition and reloaded their revolvers.

"Carry on with the dispatch, of course," replied Kenneth. "We can do no more here. Hello! Here are the Belgian cavalry."

Up rode a patrol of lancers. Dismounting, and leaving their horses in charge of one-third of their number, the men advanced. The officer in charge took in the situation at a glance, for the twelve empty revolver cartridges on the ground told their own tale.

"You had better proceed; enough time has already been wasted," he said, when he learnt the mission of the dispatch-riders. "We will attend to these."

"That's a nasty knock," observed Rollo ruefully, as they hurried back to their motor-cycles.

"H'm, yes," admitted his companion reluctantly. "Perhaps the chap was a bit nettled because his men didn't bag the Taube."

But as they rode past the scene of their exploit the Captain called his men to attention—a tribute to the resource and daring of the British lads. Already the Belgian cavalrymen had shown signs of their humanity, for by means of their lances two stretchers had been improvised, and the wounded aviators were on the way to one of the hospitals in the beleaguered city.

CHAPTER VIII

In British Uniforms

Shells were intermittently dropping upon the houses and in the streets as Kenneth and Rollo entered the apparently deserted city of Liége. The majority of the inhabitants, their numbers augmented by hundreds of terrified refugees from the surrounding villages, had taken refuge in cellars, while crowds, under the mistaken belief in the immunity of the churches from shell-fire, had sought doubtful shelter in the sacred edifices. Others, again, fearful at the threat of von Emmich to begin a general bombardment upon the city unless the forts surrendered—a threat that the gallant General Leman treated with contempt—were boarding the last trains to leave Liége.

The day was excessively hot and close. The wind that had blown strongly during the preceding night had dropped. Several of the houses had taken fire, and the pungent smell of smoke filled the air. Frequently, before the dispatch-riders reached their destination, they were compelled to slacken pace, owing to the clouds of smoke that drifted slowly across the almost deserted streets.

They found the commandant, with several of his staff, calmly engaged in his work, and heedless of the fact that several shells had already burst in front of the Palace of Justice in which he had taken up his quarters.

Commandant Fleurus was a short, stocky man of about fifty, and rather inclined to corpulence. His head was as bald as an egg, with the exception of a ring of jet-black hair like a monkish tonsure. His eyes were small, resembling black beads, and rapid in their movements.

He was writing when Kenneth was shown in. Without moving his head, which was slightly inclined, he fixed the dispatch-rider with his piercing stare.

"Message, sir, from Major le Tourneur."

The commandant took the letter and, with a swift movement, tore open the flap of the envelope.

"This is marked 7.15 a.m.!" he exclaimed. "It's now a quarter to nine. Why this delay?"

"We—that is, my comrade—crippled a Taube, sir."

"Crippled a Taube? What, pray, has a dispatch-rider to do with Taubes?" demanded Commandante Fleurus sternly. "Do you know that it is your duty to deliver messages at all costs, and in the least possible time, regardless of Taubes, Zeppelins, and the German Emperor himself?"

Kenneth did not reply. The fiery nature of the little Belgian literally consumed him. He had, however, the good sense to see that the rebuke was merited.

"Well, sir, what have you to say?"

"It was an error of judgment, sir, which I regret," said Kenneth. "We crippled the Taube as it was on the point of rising. Otherwise——"

"Were there no troops available?"

"Some lancers arrived while the Taube was burning."

The commandant turned and took hold of a telephone that stood on the table at his side.

"Send Captain Planchenoît to me," he ordered; then, leaning back in his chair, he again fixed the British lad with his beady eyes.

It was quite two minutes before the captain appeared, and the time seemed like two hours to the crestfallen Kenneth. He had yet to learn the lesson that cast-iron discipline demands, and it seemed galling that his part in crippling one of the aerial spies should be practically ignored by the man who ought to have gone into ecstasies over the news.

Presently Captain Planchenoît entered, clicked his heels and saluted, then waited his superior officer's pleasure. The captain was a smart-looking man of more than average height, with a pleasant, open countenance. He was on the intelligence staff, attached to the brigade that had been hurriedly brought up from Diest.

"Any information respecting the destruction of one of the enemy's aeroplanes?" demanded the commandant.

"Yes, mon commandant. It descended near the village of Jupille. Before our lancers could approach it took fire. Our men found both pilot and observer wounded and brought them back. The captain of the troop reported that the Taube was set on fire by the pistol-shots of two dispatch-riders."

"At any risk to themselves?"

"I know not, sir."

"At any risk?" repeated Commandant Fleurus, shifting his glance from Captain Planchenoît to Kenneth.

In reply the lad removed his Belgian military cap and pointed to the double hole made by the German observer's bullet.

To Kenneth's surprise the commandant leant back in his chair and gave vent to a hearty laugh. Then he stood up and grasped the hand of the astonished youth.

"Go, bring in your compatriot," he exclaimed.

"What's the game, old man?" asked Rollo, who was cooling his heels in the corridor.

"Goodness knows! I can't make the little commandant out. He's an enigma. I've had a gruelling. Come along."

Kenneth jerked out his sentences awkwardly, then, catching hold of his chum's arm, led him into the commandant's presence.

"Captain Planchenoît," said the latter, after returning Rollo's salute. "You applied for two additional dispatch-riders, I believe?"

"That is so, mon commandant," replied the captain.

"Good! Now listen to this, you brave Englishmen. This is the dispatch you brought. It is from Major Résimont: 'In reply to your request for dispatch-riders I send you two English motor-cyclists, MM. Kenneth Everest and Rollo Barrington. From what I already know of them they are courageous and resolute, and their services are likely to be of more use in the operations before Brussels than within the fortress of Barchon. More so in view of the possible early appearance of the English forces who are to co-operate with the Belgian armies in the field.'"

"It is very good of Major Résimont to speak so well of us," said Kenneth. "Of course we must go where we are ordered, and that willingly; but we should be sorry to part from Major Résimont and the 9th Regiment of the Line."

"It does not necessarily mean severing your connection with your old regiment—if old I might term it," declared the commandant. "In strict confidence I may tell you—I know that English gentlemen are always honourable—that perhaps before to-morrow we must abandon the city to the invaders. Our numbers are insufficient to hold the trenches linking the chain of forts. We must concentrate our armies to the west of Liége, leaving the forts to hold out until the English and French armies arrive. It is a sad thing to have to abandon such a city as this to the ruthless Germans, but sacrifices must be made for the honour of our country. Captain Planchenoît will give you instruction where to proceed."

Just at that moment an orderly-sergeant entered the room, his face purple with excitement.

"Sir," he announced, "four English officers are without. They have arrived from Ostend by motor-car and desire to see the General Leman."

Commandant Fleurus took the pieces of pasteboard the sergeant held in his hand, and passed them on first to Kenneth and then to Rollo.

"See if you know any of these gentlemen," he said.

"Yes," replied Rollo. "I know Major Athol Duncan-Dean of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. Hello! What's the meaning of this?" he added in his native tongue.

"Jolly rummy, anyhow," commented Kenneth, for in the word "Cornwall's" the apostrophe was after the "s".

"And Major Duncan-Dean is too mighty particular to pass a mistake on his visiting-card like that," added Rollo.

"Perhaps he lost his own and had them printed in Belgium, and didn't notice the mistake until it was too late."

"I'll mention it to the commandant. It's fishy."

"Since you know the officer, Monsieur Barrington," said the commandant, when Kenneth had explained the nature of the error, "perhaps you will go with this sergeant. Present my compliments, and say that the General Leman is at Fort de Loncin, and that I, Commandant Fleurus, will be pleased to receive the English officers in his absence. But, listen; if by any chance the Major Duncan-Dean is not the one you know, say that the General will receive presently, ask them to wait, and return immediately to me."

Escorted by the sergeant, Rollo was taken to a room where four officers, correctly dressed in British field-service uniform, were seated. One glance was sufficient. None of them bore any resemblance to the Major Duncan-Dean whom the lad knew well. There was only one major of that name in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, and he was a fairly frequent visitor at Colonel Barrington's house, especially during the shooting season.

Rollo delivered the commandant's message in English, explaining that he was British but attached to the Belgian army, and that he was a son of Colonel Barrington of Holmfrith, near Truro.

There was no sign of recognition on the part of the supposed Major Duncan-Dean; instead, an awkward silence prevailed. None of the four officers seemed at all anxious to reply. They all looked disappointed and embarrassed.

"Our message is of great importance and for only the ears of General Leman," said one of them at last. "We will not trouble the commandant except to give us permits to enter Fort Loncin and to telephone to the General that we are about to arrive."

Suddenly a hand grasped Rollo's shoulder in a vice-like grip, and the muzzle of a revolver was clapped against his temple.

"One sound and you are dead!" exclaimed a stern voice.

The lad was already convinced that the so-called British army officers were Germans in disguise. Not only was he sure that the pseudo Major Duncan-Dean was an impostor; the peculiar phraseology of the man who had replied to the commandant's message confirmed his conclusions. To crown everything, there was the conviction carried by the muzzle of that revolver.

Rollo spent a nasty minute. His mind was working furiously, weighing up the factors of the situation. To raise the alarm meant death to himself; to fail to do so might result in the cold-blooded massacre of Commandant Fleurus and several of the staff; while, with the head-quarters telephone at their disposal, the four Germans might play havoc with the plans of the Belgian Commander-in-Chief.

The Germans were talking rapidly in a low tone. The one who held Rollo prisoner still kept the revolver against the lad's temple; the rest had each drawn an automatic pistol, and were evidently about to force their way into the presence of the commandant.

"I'll wait till those fellows go out into the corridor," thought the lad, "then I'll try the effect of a sudden blow in this gentleman's wind. It may do the trick; if not, my number's up. Anyway, it's better than being snuffed out without making an attempt to fight for it."

Although he kept as quiet as he possibly could, Rollo could feel his heart thumping violently, while his temples throbbed until the muzzle of the German's revolver seemed to be beating a tattoo.

"Keep steady!" hissed his captor. "This pistol has hair-trigger. Might go off if you shake."

It was on the tip of Rollo's tongue to reply that he was not shaking by reason of fear; but realizing that such a statement might put the German additionally upon his guard, the lad kept silent.

Presently one of the conspirators replaced his revolver, and with his free hand grasped the handle of the door. The other two stood behind, ready to sally forth on their murderous and treacherous work.

Rollo mentally pulled himself together. Another ten or twenty seconds would decide the fate of his plan—and of himself.

Suddenly the subdued daylight of the room was pierced by a dozen simultaneous flashes. The rattle of musketry sounded like the discharge of a twenty-one-inch howitzer. The place was filled with the haze of smokeless powder.

Instinctively the lad ducked. There was a tremendous crash above his head. A thousand lights danced before his eyes, and he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER IX

A Midnight Retirement

When Rollo opened his eyes he found himself lying in the open air. He was in one of the courtyards of the Palace of Justice. The thunder of the bombardment still roared. The noise of the guns recalled his scattered thoughts to the event that had almost cost him his life.

A Belgian army doctor was kneeling by his side, while Kenneth supported his head. Around him stood a number of soldiers, some of whom had paused in the act of cleaning their rifles in order to watch their English comrade's return to consciousness.

"Hello, Kenneth!" exclaimed Rollo, somewhat vacantly. "What has happened? Ah, I know—those Germans!"

"They won't trouble us again, old man," replied Kenneth. "You're in luck again. It was your suspicions that put the commandant on his guard. But I'll tell you more about it later on."

"You must not unduly excite your friend," cautioned the doctor. "He has no bodily injury, but his nerves are stricken. He must rest until to-morrow. I will have him taken into a safe cellar, where he need fear nothing from those German shells."

"Won't you come with me, Kenneth?" asked Rollo.

"Sorry, old man, but I'm warned for duty at five o'clock—seventeen hours, they call it. All being well, I'll look you up in the morning."

"See that my bike is all right."

"Rather!" replied Kenneth cheerily. "Don't worry about it. I'll look after it."

Later on in the evening Rollo heard of the circumstances under which the supposed British officers were shot down.

The room in which they had been asked to wait was, years ago, used as a place of observation for prisoners awaiting trial. The carved oak panelling terminated about six inches from the heavily-raftered ceiling. At one end was a space between two parallel massive beams, through which, from a gallery without, it was possible to observe all that was taking place, although the watchers were themselves unseen.

Upon his attention being called to the error on the pseudo British major's visiting-card, the commandant's suspicions were aroused. As soon as Rollo was dispatched with his message, a file of skilled riflemen ascended the observation gallery. Noiselessly they took up their positions, and having witnessed the holding up of their British comrade, they delivered a volley that instantly exterminated the treacherous Germans.

Rollo had, indeed, a narrow escape, for his captor in falling had convulsively pressed the trigger of his revolver. The bullet missed the lad's head by a couple of inches, but the blast from the muzzle had scorched his temple.

Barrington was in the midst of a deep slumber, in spite of the thunder of the guns, when he

was awakened by someone shaking him by the shoulder.

"What's up?" he asked sleepily, for at the moment he fancied himself back at St. Cyprian's. By the feeble glimmer of a candle-lantern he saw his chum.

"Sorry to disturb you, old man," said Kenneth apologetically, "but if you don't want to find yourself a prisoner in the hands of the Germans you must make a move. The bulk of the Belgian infantry is evacuating the town. The mayor is going to surrender Liége at noon, I believe."

"The forts haven't fallen?" asked Rollo, springing out of bed, only to discover how shaky he felt.

"Not a bit of it," replied Kenneth confidently. "They'll hold out for months, I expect. No, it is only on account of the damage to the public buildings and private property that Liége is to be given up. I don't think it will be of much use to the Germans. They'll have considerable difficulty to pass between the forts. They say the Germans have had another nasty reverse, and that they asked for an armistice in order to bury their dead. Our fellows have refused; they are beginning to sum up the cultured Teuton at his true price. But how do you feel?"

"Pretty fit, though a bit rocky," admitted Rollo. "Where are the bikes?"

"We'll have to wheel them. I've taken off the belts. Orders have been given for the troops intended for the field to withdraw as quietly as possible, you know. Come along."

Rollo had now thrown on his clothes, his chum assisting him to buckle on the belt to which was attached his revolver holster. Together they left the vaulted cellar and gained the street. It was a perfectly dark night. The stars were obscured, the air was misty and hot. Away to the north, south, and east the sky was illuminated by the lightning-like glare of the heavy guns as the forts exchanged a hot fire with the German field artillery.

"Can you manage it?" asked Kenneth anxiously, as Rollo wheeled his deliberately crippled motor into the street.

"Rather," replied his companion with forced determination. "I'm not keen on leaving my jigger for a rascally Prussian to smash. I'm jolly glad we are still attached to the 9th Regiment of the Line. We may see more of Major Résimont. He's quite a decent sort."

"And Captain Planchenoît is a brick," added Kenneth. "I've been talking to some of the men in his company. They swear by him; but he's awfully keen on discipline, they say, and gets plenty of work out of his men."

The dispatch-riders found the regiment drawn up in column of fours in a narrow street behind the Church of St. Jacques. In this dense formation the men would have suffered severely had a shell fallen in their ranks; but owing to the fact that the Germans were hoping to take early possession of the city, their gunners no longer dropped projectiles into Liége, devoting their attention to the stubborn forts that had already thrown the imperial time-table into confusion.

Although the Belgian troops were no longer elated, they were far from being downcast. They realized that strategic reasons necessitated the evacuation of the city. They hoped that the forts could hold out. Already they had proved themselves equal man for man to the vaunted soldiers of the Kaiser. Their object was now to contest every yard of the way to Brussels, their determination being strengthened by the widespread belief that the pick of the English army would speedily be fighting by their side.

Several of the men of the 9th Regiment bore evidences of the hard part they had taken in the repulse of the initial German attacks. Many had bandages round their heads; others had their hands swathed in linen, while a few limped badly; yet one and all showed resolute courage that augured ill for any Prussian regiment which should happen to cross steel with the valiant defenders of the cockpit of Europe.

Presently the Colonel gave an order. The men unfixed bayonets and sloped arms. In the centre of the column the lads could see the cased colours round which a fierce struggle had taken place during the preceding day. Then, at the word of command, the regiment swung briskly along the narrow street.

Kenneth and Rollo found themselves with two other dispatch-riders at the rear of the column. The other motor-cyclists had gone on a journey that knows no return. There was also a detachment of twenty cyclists belonging to the regiment, but most of these silent scouts were far afield, making certain that the line of retreat was in no danger of being ambushed by the wily Uhlans.

The route lay between Forts de Hollogne and de Flémalle, through tortuous by-lanes. Over and over again the column was obliged to halt owing to the congestion of the roads, for twenty thousand Belgian troops—field artillery, cavalry, and infantry—were evacuating the doomed city that night.

Before they were clear of the environs of Liége, Rollo began to feel the effects of his

adventure with the German officers. The sweat poured from him as he gamely pushed his unwieldy motor-cycle. Anxiously Kenneth watched him, unable to give assistance save by a few words of encouragement. Every time there was a halt Rollo leant across the saddle, welcoming the rest, yet dreading the exertion required to resume the tortuous march. To lag behind was to risk capture, for small parties of Uhlans were known to have penetrated into the villages of Hollogne and Montegnée, which lay between the as yet unconquered forts and the city of Liége; otherwise he would have fallen out, waited till dawn, and then cycled to overtake the regiment.

During one of these short, unavoidable, halts a voice came through the darkness.

"Monsieur Everest—is Monsieur Everest there?"

"Here I am, sir," replied Kenneth, recognizing the voice as that of Captain Planchenoît.

"Ah, good! I wish to enquire after your English comrade."

"He is here, sir."

"Ah, again good! I thought he would be unfit to move."

"He's not very much up to the mark, sir."

The captain flashed an electric torch upon the motor-cyclists.

"Ciel! you are indeed right, Monsieur Everest. I will see to matters. Private Roulaix," he added, addressing a Belgian who was walking his "push-bike", "place your bicycle in the first wagon that passes. Say that I, Captain Planchenoît, orders it. Then relieve your English comrade of his motor-cycle. Monsieur Barrington, as soon as Private Roulaix returns I will take you to one of the wagons. You are not, at present, fit to walk, still less to push that motor-cycle."

For the rest of that night Kenneth was without the company of his chum. As the grey dawn began to break, he too felt that he was nearly done up, but still the steady retreat continued.

It was not until six o'clock in the morning that the 9th Regiment of the Line was ordered to bivouac outside the village of Omal. Here trenches were dug, barbed-wire entanglements set up, barns and cottages loopholed and placed in a state of defence in order to keep in check the German hordes until the expected aid was forthcoming.

For the next twenty-four hours the 9th Regiment was inactive, as far as actual fighting was concerned. With the rest of the mobile Belgian forces, the men were enjoying a well-earned respite and improving their position.

Although Rollo still remained off duty, Kenneth, with the rest of the motor dispatch-riders, had plenty to do. Frequently the lad had to ride off at full speed to carry orders to bands of armed civilians to cease firing upon Belgian airmen; for these plucky air-scouts were so harried by the fire of their undisciplined fellow-countrymen that it is not to be wondered at that after a time they declined to fly at all.

Kenneth had just returned from one of these errands when the Colonel of the regiment sent for him.

"You know the way to Tongres?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied the lad promptly, for although he had never been there, a close study of the map had enabled him to fix its position in his mind.

"Then bear a verbal message to General Féchard. Say that in view of an impending strong attack upon our position reinforcements are urgently requested to hold the village of Omal. Mitrailleuses are particularly desirable. Is that clear? Then repeat the message."

Kenneth did so satisfactorily. The Colonel nodded approval.

"Now go," said he. "As quickly as you can, for the situation is critical."

CHAPTER X

The Uhlan Patrol

Rollo was standing by his chum's motor-cycle when Kenneth left the Colonel's quarters—a cottage standing well apart from the rest of the village.

"Thought you'd be off somewhere when the Colonel sent for you, old man," he said. "Well, I

could go with you, but I feel absolutely rotten. Look here," and Barrington opened his coat and displayed the tops of two soda-water bottles, "I managed to get hold of these. Take one."

"No, thanks," replied Kenneth. "You want them a jolly sight more than I do."

"But you must," persisted Rollo. "It's fearfully hot to-day. Besides, I think I can get hold of some more."

"All right," agreed his chum reluctantly, and taking one of the bottles he placed it in the outside breast-pocket of his coat, resolving to restore it intact upon his return.

The request of the Colonel of the 9th Regiment was most essential. To the north of Omal was a gap of nearly two miles in the Belgian line, as a portion of one of the brigades had failed to take up its allotted position. Omal was a salient angle in the defenders' formation, and should the village be carried by the Germans the Belgian army would be split asunder by the wedge-like advance of their far more numerous foes.

Although the country was fairly open Kenneth rode cautiously. It was a nerve-racking ordeal, since every bush or tree might be affording concealment to the Uhlans, who were known to have already penetrated far into the country. Almost as dangerous were the Belgian guerrillas, who often fired indiscriminately upon any man in a uniform that they failed to recognize.

But beyond being twice stopped by Belgian patrols and made to produce his military pass, Kenneth reached his destination without being molested. He delivered his message, receiving a reply that a machine-gun detachment would be sent off as quickly as possible, and set off on his return journey.

Perhaps the fact that he had but recently passed along the same road without difficulty made him slightly reckless. He increased his speed till the motor-cycle was travelling at nearly forty miles an hour.

Soon he came to a straight, narrow road lined with gaunt trees—one of the avenues that are a common feature in the eastern part of Belgium. Suddenly he gave a gasp of surprise. A horseman had just appeared at the farthermost end of the avenue. At first the lad took him to be one of the Belgian lancers, whose similarity to the German Uhlans was somewhat pronounced, but a rapidly nearing view assured him that the man was one of the enemy.

Another Uhlan joined the first. They both lowered their lances and waited.

Kenneth slipped out his clutch and applied both brakes. The motor-cycle came quickly to a stop, the engine running furiously, while the open "cut-out" emitted a rapid succession of sharp reports like the detonations of a Maxim-gun.

There was yet time to turn his cycle, remount, and escape by the way he had come, he reasoned; but, even as he was in the act of facing about, he made the additionally disconcerting discovery that his retreat was cut off. Five or six Uhlans had evidently been in ambush, and, having allowed the solitary dispatch-rider to pass them, were waiting to assist in his capture. The ditch and the trees formed an impassable barrier for the heavy motor-cycle; while without it flight was almost out of the question, when it was the case of a man on foot pursued by the fleet Uhlan horses.

For one brief instant the thought of surrendering tamely flashed through the lad's mind. He bore no written dispatch; his capture would result in no important information being gained by the enemy. It seemed the easiest solution to the problem.

"I'm dashed if I do," ejaculated Kenneth, banishing the temptation almost as soon as it suggested itself. "Here goes; it's neck or nothing."

He was back in the saddle in double-quick time. With the clutch in and the engine barking furiously he tore towards the two Uhlans, who were sitting on their horses at a distance of about fifty yards from each other.

Kenneth drew his revolver. With his right hand thus occupied, throttle and air lever had to take care of themselves. At thirty miles an hour he tore towards the nearmost of his antagonists.

The Uhlan lowered his lance-point. He was trembling to such an extent that the glittering point was describing erratic curves in the sunlight. His resolution had vanished at the sight of the rapidly-approaching motor-cycle. His horse began to rear, alarmed by the loud and rapid pulsations of the engine.

Kenneth's hopes rose. He saw the possibility of being able to slip past the plunging, terrified animal, and in order to improve his chances he let fly a couple of shots, both of which missed their mark.

No longer was the long lance a menace. The Uhlan's whole efforts were centred in trying to keep his seat, while the now maddened animal snorted and plunged in a most frantic manner.

Still grasping his revolver, although he made no further attempt to use it, the young dispatch-

rider placed his wrist upon the right handle-grip in order to steady the steering. He shut his jaw tightly. The critical moment was nigh.

Suddenly the horse backed, barring the narrow path to safety. Kenneth saw in the fraction of a second that a collision was inevitable. He had a momentary glimpse of the Uhlan's panic-stricken face, his staring eyes and wide-open mouth—then crash!

KENNETH HAD A MOMENTARY GLIMPSE OF THE UHLAN'S PANIC-STRICKEN FACE . . . THEN CRASH!

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KENNETH HAD A MOMENTARY GLIMPSE OF THE UHLAN'S PANIC-STRICKEN FACE ... THEN CRASH!

Hardly knowing whether he was injured or not, Kenneth scrambled to his feet. His motor-cycle was on its side within a yard of the prostrate and still kicking horse. His revolver had vanished. In his fall it had flown from his grasp into the ditch. The Uhlan lay upon the ground motionless—whether killed or merely stunned the lad knew not; nor had he an opportunity to ascertain, for in front of him was another German, and four hundred yards behind him the five or six who had cut off his retreat.

The man in front had succeeded in regaining control over his less startled horse and, lance in rest, bore down upon the defenceless motor-cyclist.

Hardly knowing how he did it, Kenneth cleared the ditch and sought a temporary refuge behind a tree. He realized that the respite would be but a brief one, for on the approach of the rest of the patrol his "number would be up". Infuriated by the mishap to their comrade, the savage Uhlans, whose chief mission it was to strike terror into the inhabitants of a conquered district, would not be likely to give quarter.

Suddenly Kenneth's hand came in contact with the soda-water bottle that Rollo had pressed upon him. He drew it from his pocket, and as the Uhlan rode up to the edge of the ditch he dashed it to the ground at the feet of the restless horse.

The result exceeded the lad's wildest expectations, for the bottle broke with a report almost equal to that of a small shell. Fragments of glass flew in all directions. The horse reared, maddened by the slight wounds caused by the sharp pieces of the broken bottle. Its rider, quite as terrified, formed but one conclusion, that the desperate Belgian (as he took Kenneth to be) was armed with bombs. Spurring his horse he rode for dear life towards his comrades, who,

rendered cautious at the sight of two of their number being worsted, hesitated to advance.

Kenneth, too, was on the horns of a dilemma. To all appearances his cycle was hopelessly damaged, and although the road was clear he stood little chance of escaping from the rest of the Uhlans. To remain where he was was equally hazardous. With his revolver in his possession he would readily have made a brave stand, but the weapon was lying in five feet of mud and water.

Suddenly came the tap, tap, tap of a machine-gun. The rest of the Uhlan patrol broke and fled across the fields, leaving two of their number writhing on the ground. Another had his horse shot under him, but, quite callous to their comrades' fate, the three remaining fugitives never slackened rein, their sole thoughts being for their own safety.

Kenneth recrossed the ditch—far less agilely than he had a few moments before, for his thigh was aching dully. He could see no signs of his rescuers. The fire had evidently been a long-range one.

He made his way to his motor-cycle. With considerable effort he raised it and placed it on its stand. Upon examination he found that the damage done was not so great as he fully expected. The actual collision had smashed the lamp and bent the stem of the handle-bars, but, thanks to the powerful springs, the front forks had stood the severe strain of the impact. The controls were intact, while the only other damage was that the left foot-rest was bent. In falling sideways the weight of the cycle had been thrown upon this exposed part, which had, to a great extent, saved the machine.

At the second attempt the motor fired. The hind wheel revolved without showing any signs of wobbling. The lad gave a whoop of delight; his precious mount was still serviceable.

He next directed his attention towards the Uhlan whom, in naval parlance, he had "rammed". The fellow had been stunned by the fall from his horse, but was on the point of regaining consciousness.

"You look a tough customer, my friend," soliloquized the lad as he looked upon the coarse, brutal features of his vanquished assailant. "I think you will be quite capable of looking after yourself, without requiring any attention from me. I'll take your helmet as a souvenir, though; and, while I am about it, I think I'll stop you from doing further mischief."

With this Kenneth removed the Uhlan's sword, lance, and carbine. The lance, being made of light steel, he broke into three pieces; the other weapons and the German's ammunition he threw into the ditch to keep company with his own revolver.

While thus engaged the motor-cyclist perceived the approach of a body of men accompanied by dogs. They were the Belgian machine-gun battery whose fire had effectually routed the Uhlan patrol.

"They'll be at Omal before me," thought Kenneth. "I suppose it would be best to stop and explain matters; for if I made off they might take it into their heads to pot me."

"So you have settled with one of this scum," exclaimed the Belgian major in charge of the detachment as he returned Kenneth's salute. "Ma foi! I am of a mind to shoot him."

"But he is a prisoner of war," expostulated the lad.

The Belgian shrugged his shoulders.

"You have but to go to that burning cottage"—he pointed to a building about a mile and a half away—"to see what these wretches have been doing. A whole family of inoffensive peasants shot—men, women, and children. Yes, children," he added, noting the incredulous look on the British lad's face.

"However, we Belgians must set an example to those savages," continued the officer. "We will at least take him with us, and put him on a fair trial. But you are unarmed: how did you vanquish this fellow?"

Kenneth told him. The Belgian major and those of his men who were within ear-shot simply roared with laughter.

"Charged his horse with your motor-cycle, and frightened away another Uhlan with a soda-water bottle!" exclaimed the officer when he recovered himself. "Excellent! It shows that these Germans are not a quarter as formidable as they would have us believe. Were you hurt?"

"Only bruised a little, sir. But, with your permission, I will go, or your men will be with my regiment before I am."

The lad ran his cycle and vaulted into the saddle. The motor ran as well as before, and, beyond a slight difficulty in the steering, it was none the worse for its rough handling. The damage to the lamp mattered but little, as, by night, riding lights were forbidden, since they might betray the rider to the enemy.

Having reported the success of his mission and the approach of the dog-drawn machine-gun detachment, Kenneth went to find his chum.

Rollo was sitting, in company with others of the dispatch-rider section, in a shelter made of branches of trees and rough thatch.

"Hullo, old man!" he exclaimed. "What have you there—a Uhlan helmet? And what's the matter with your bike?"

Kenneth explained, and afterwards had to repeat his story in French for the benefit of the others.

"I will help you to straighten the handle-bars," volunteered one of the Belgian cyclists, who was a motor-repairer by trade. "Meanwhile, if you are desirous of sending that helmet to your friends in England, you will do well to pack it up at once. There is a dispatch leaving for Brussels within half an hour."

"I wonder what the governor will say to this," observed Kenneth as he directed the bulky package. "My first trophy! Goodness only knows when we shall hear from home."

The lads had already written to their respective parents informing them of the drastic step they had taken, but, owing to the dislocation of the postal service, no reply had been forthcoming, and they had hardly expected one.

It took two hours' hard work in the blazing sunshine for Kenneth and his Belgian friend to set the motorcycle to rights.

"If I hadn't been so inconsiderate as to throw that bottle of soda-water away we might have had a decent drink," observed Kenneth as he fanned his perspiring brow.

"Never mind," rejoined Rollo. "You might have drunk it as soon as I gave you the bottle; in which case I don't suppose you would have felt the benefit of it now."

"I don't suppose I would," agreed Kenneth grimly.

CHAPTER XI

The Raid on Tongres

During the next few days events moved rapidly, the Belgians having to retire before vastly superior forces in point of numbers.

It so happened that on the Sunday, the 9th of August, Kenneth and Rollo were sent to Tongres with a message to the burgomaster, giving him instructions as to the removal of the town treasury to a place of greater safety.

The place had little appearance of being in the war area when the two lads rode into it. The Belgian troops had evacuated it on the previous day, and since there were no signs of the invaders, the remaining inhabitants were almost at their ease. Many of them, dressed in their best, were on their way to church.

Alighting outside the town hall, the two dispatch-riders enquired for the chief magistrate, only to be informed that he was in another part of the town on official business, but was expected back within an hour.

"Is there no way of sending for him?" asked Rollo of the member of the Civil Guard who had answered their summons.

The man shook his head doubtfully.

"It is just possible," he replied. "I will see my sergeant, and he will doubtless give the necessary orders. Meanwhile messieurs might like to rest at the inn? Immediately upon the burgomaster's return I will see that you are informed."

"Not a bad idea that," was Kenneth's comment. "We'll put up the bikes and order a decent meal. Roughing it on active service is all very fine, but there are times when one likes to have a slightly more civilized table than that of mother earth. I wonder if we could get a bath?"

Everest's hopes were not to be realized, for, with many apologies, the landlord informed the British lads that he had nothing in the way of *déjeuner*. Bacon and eggs? No; he was without either. He might see if his friend, Monsieur Jambonne, could oblige; but, in the meanwhile, would

messieurs care to sit in the *salle à manger*? *Café au lait*? Yes; that would be ready in a few minutes.

Selecting two comfortable chairs in front of the wide-open window, the chums awaited the return of the burgomaster. There was plenty to be seen, for the townsfolk were still streaming along the broad thoroughfare, discoursing mainly upon the all-absorbing topic of the war.

All at once the people stopped. Some of them turned and fled; others backed against the walls of the houses, or else took refuge in the hastily-opened doors.

"What's up now, I wonder?" asked Rollo, leaning out of the window only to retire hastily.

Trotting along the road was a squadron of German cavalry. The enemy had made a totally unexpected raid upon the town of Tongres.

"It won't do for us to be seen," exclaimed Kenneth, "especially in uniform. And those fellows are particularly certain to make a bee-line for the various inns as soon as they break ranks. Let's clear out."

Just then up ran the landlord, who had taken the precaution of closing and barring his doors, an example which many of his neighbours hastened to follow.

"Do not remain here, messieurs, I implore you," he began in rapid sentences punctuated with excited gestures. "If the Bosches find men in uniform in my house they will be furious with me."

"All right," said Kenneth reassuringly. "If we can get our cycles out by the back way we'll clear off and give the alarm. Two regiments ought to be sufficient to trap these fellows."

"It is impossible to escape, messieurs. The Germans are holding all the approaches to the town."

"Then what do you suggest?" asked Rollo calmly.

"The roof, monsieur; thence you can make your way along by the parapets of many houses, till you reach the roof of the *chapelle*. There you ought to be safe, unless these rascals take it into their heads to burn the town."

"Very well; show us the way," agreed Rollo. "Only see if you can manage to hide our motor-cycles."

Having shown the lads the exit on to the roof, their host left them to their own devices. It was a comparatively easy matter to creep along the gutters, for they were hidden from observation by the parapets of the various adjacent buildings. The only difficult part of the journey was crossing the gap between the end house and the roof of the *chapelle*—a distance of about five feet in width. Sixty feet below there was a narrow alley, through which several terrified townsfolk were hurrying, all too intent to gaze skywards as the lads made their daring leap.

"Now we're safe for the present," exclaimed Kenneth. "We can even look over the parapet and see what's going on."

"Right-o! only take your cap off. It might attract attention," cautioned Rollo. "If we keep close to this pinnacle it ought to be as safe as anything, unless some fool of a civilian starts taking pot-shots at those fellows."

From their lofty refuge the lads were enabled to observe the methods adopted by the Germans in "holding-up" the town. With the cavalry were four armoured motor-cars in which were mounted quick-firing guns. These were stationed in the square so as to command the principal approaches. Meanwhile most of the horsemen had dismounted, and had set off on various prearranged missions. Some proceeded to the post-office, where they destroyed the telephone and telegraph instruments and, as was afterwards ascertained, seized the sum of 10,000 francs from the safe. Others tore up the railway lines at the junction, thus interrupting communications with both Hasselt and St. Trond. This work of destruction they took care to achieve without the use of explosives, in order to avoid giving the alarm to the nearest Belgian troops.

Presently the lads saw a dignified man, whom they rightly concluded was the burgomaster, being led to the town hall. Outside the building floated the Belgian tricolour, and this his captors ordered him to haul down. He refused; they threatened, but their threats failed to move the stanch patriot. In the end, one of the Germans had to perform the task; but the invaders made a counter-stroke by compelling the burgomaster to hand over the keys of the town treasury.

This done, the Germans ordered a meal to be provided, and this they paid for out of the money they had taken from the authorities. Then, having loaded their booty on a couple of commandeered wagons, they prepared to evacuate the town.

"Well, up to the present those fellows haven't done anything that any combatant force wouldn't do," declared Rollo. "I suppose it is because the townsfolk kept their heads and didn't start firing at them from the houses."

"Yes; but they're off. See, their vedettes are returning. I say, the coast is clear; let's make a dash for it."

"Easier said than done, old man," objected Rollo. "Jumping across a five-foot gap is fairly easy when the landing-place is lower than the kick-off spot. Returning is quite another matter."

"There must be some way down from these leads," persisted Kenneth. "Let's have a look round."

Investigation showed that there was a means of communication between the roof and the interior of the *chapelle* by a small door in one of the angle-turrets. The disconcerting part of the discovery lay in the fact that the door was heavily bolted on the inside.

"Why not try climbing down by means of the lightning-conductor?" suggested Kenneth. "It's bound to be fairly strong, and we have our motor-gloves to protect our hands."

"Thanks, I'd rather try the jump," declared his companion. "But I'd much rather try an easier method."

"I'll tackle it, and then I can get into this building, ascend the turret, and let you out."

"No you don't," objected Rollo firmly. "If we cannot find a better way, here we stop till the Germans are gone, and then we can shout for assistance."

But the restless Kenneth was far from remaining inactive. He continued his investigations on the sides of the edifice away from the view of the invaders.

"I have it!" he exclaimed. "See that spout? It runs close to that open window, you'll notice. If you can give me a hand I can lower myself sufficiently to clear the bulging top of the spout, and the rest will be easy."

The scheme looked feasible, and Rollo made no further objection. It was risky, of course, but with ordinary caution Kenneth could reach the window after he had descended about ten feet of piping—which was infinitely better than climbing down sixty feet or so of copper tape.

Having secured a firm hold upon the spouting, Kenneth began to descend hand-over-hand fashion, although he took care to let his weight act as perpendicularly as possible, lest any outward thrust with his feet might wrench the securing nails of the pipe from the cement.

Without mishap he descended until he was almost on a level with the open window, the iron casement frame of which swung outward. Then, to his consternation, Kenneth found that he had miscalculated the distance, and that the upper edge of the casement was six inches beyond his reach. At the same moment he became aware of the effect of his collision with the Uhlan. His limbs began to feel stiff and cramped.

Frantically he began to clamber back to the parapet, but the effort was too great. With a sickening shudder he felt the pipe working loose from the wall. For the first time in his attempt he gave a downward glance that wellnigh proved fatal. The pavement, fifty feet below, exercised a horrible fascination.

"What's wrong?" enquired Rollo anxiously, for he could see by his chum's ashen-grey face that something was amiss.

"Can't reach the window," gasped Kenneth. "I believe I've strained a muscle, too. I must have a shot at climbing all the way down."

"Hold hard a moment," exclaimed Rollo. "I'll half-close the window and you might reach it."

"Be quick, then," gasped his unfortunate comrade. "I can't hold on much longer."

At that moment he failed to see how Rollo could reach the casement, although his chum's confident assertion cheered him. He knew by experience that Rollo rarely suggested a plan without being able to carry it through.

Already Rollo was at work. Producing a length of stout string from his pocket, he removed his boot.

To this he attached the string, which was about four yards in length. Leaning over the parapet he lowered his boot until it dangled an inch or so before the iron rod that held the window open. A rapid upward jerk and the casement was free to swing; a little skilful manoeuvring and the weighted string drew the hitherto unattainable window frame within Kenneth's reach.

Perhaps the climber was over-anxious, and in consequence neglected to observe the precautions he had hitherto taken, but as he swung off from the pipe he gave a heavy jerk. With a loud crash about ten feet of the spouting fell into the narrow lane.

Fortunately the casement held, and white and well-nigh breathless, Kenneth slipped through

the open window just as three or four Germans, alarmed by the clatter, rushed up to ascertain the cause of the uproar.

"Steady!" cautioned Rollo as his chum opened the door of the turret. "There are some Germans on the prowl. They seem a bit suspicious owing to that iron-work falling."

"They didn't spot you?"

"No, I took good care of that."

"Then we'll descend. This building is full of people; they think they are safe, being in a place of worship. Poor creatures! they don't know the Germans."

"But the Germans haven't molested them."

"There is no saying that they won't. Fortunately the people haven't tried to shoot any of their unwelcome visitors. Come, we'll descend."

As Kenneth had announced, the *chapelle* was packed with terrified townsfolk. Unnoticed, the lads made their way behind the altar, and gained the vestry. Here a small door communicated with the alley. The Germans, having discovered what had created the commotion, were content; they had not troubled to find out the cause but had rejoined their comrades in the market-place. The last of the pickets were already back, and the raiders were on the point of retiring.

Gaining the courtyard of the inn, the lads made sure that the German cavalrymen had, no doubt reluctantly, ceased to pester the troubled host with their attentions.

"Your motor-cycles are safe, messieurs," announced the innkeeper. "Ciel! Once those Bosches get wedded to the bottle——" and he threw up his hands and raised his eyebrows with a gesture of utter dismay.

Refusing any payment for his services, and charging only for the coffee, the landlord escorted the two British dispatch-riders to yet another door, opening into a deserted street.

"Take the third turning to the right, messieurs," he directed; "it will bring you on the high road. Yet I accept no responsibility; so take care. The Uhlans—le diable les importe!—may be prowling about."

Having walked their cycles till they felt fairly certain that the noise of the engines would not reach the ears of the German raiders, the dispatch-riders set off at a furious pace towards the position occupied by their regiment.

Suddenly Kenneth raised his hand, at the same time stopping his motor. Rollo likewise dismounted.

"Uhlans!" whispered Kenneth.

A mile or so ahead were hundreds of cavalry, the men standing easy, while the horses were picketed in lines. Apparently the enemy had thrown a strong wedge far into the position held a few hours previously by Belgian troops.

"If those fellows are acting as supports to the crowd that entered Tongres, we are nicely trapped, by Jove!" remarked Kenneth. "The best thing we can do is to risk cutting across the fields, although, frankly, I don't relish the idea of making towards that wooded district. It is too jolly favourable for an ambush."

"Half a minute," rejoined Rollo, unstrapping the case of his binoculars. "Let's make sure. Kenneth, old man, it's all right. These chaps are Belgian lancers."

In his excitement Kenneth almost snatched the glasses from his chum.

"You're right!" he exclaimed joyously, after a hasty view. "Let's push on and tell them the position of affairs. They might be able to get a little of their own back."

Three minutes later the two dispatch-riders were making a brief yet concise report to the Colonel commanding the Belgian cavalry. As soon as they had finished, a bugle call, equivalent to the British "boot and saddle", rang out, and the lancers were soon cantering along the highway, followed by a mounted machine-gun section.

"We may as well see the fun, considering what we've done in the matter," said Kenneth, to which proposal Rollo raised no objections. Following at a discreet distance, they waited until the lancers halted; then, leaving their cycles by the side of a haystack, they overtook the Belgian troops.

Thanks to his intimate knowledge of the locality, the Colonel made his dispositions skilfully. At this spot the road from Tongres to Liége entered a shallow defile through which the returning Germans were practically certain to pass. At a distance of two hundred yards on either side of the road were clumps of trees and patches of thick undergrowth, affording admirable cover for a

considerable number of troops.

The machine-gun detachment was split up, an equal number of mitrailleuses, screened with torn-up undergrowth, being placed on the rising ground on each side of the road, their line of fire sweeping the approach to the defile. With the guns were posted strong bodies of dismounted lancers, armed with carbines. In a steep dip in the road, the hollow of which was invisible beyond a distance of a hundred yards, shallow trenches, sufficient to wreck the armoured motor-cars, were dug, the excavated earth being carefully removed so as not to betray the presence of these obstructions.

The bulk of the lancers, posted out of sight, were ready at the word of command to swoop down upon the rear of the German column and complete the work of destruction that the quick-firers and the rifles might leave undone.

Hardly were these preparations made when the Belgian vedettes reported the approach of the raiders from Tongres, and that the column was preceded by four men forming an advance-guard.

The Belgian Colonel gave vent to an exclamation of annoyance. He had reckoned upon the Germans making use of their armoured motor-cars for that purpose. Bagging these would be a material loss to the enemy, whereas the capture of a few scouts would be of very little value, and the main body would be warned.

He immediately detached a dozen dismounted men, ordering them to lie in ambush close to the road, and if possible to capture the scouts without having recourse to the use of fire-arms. The men quickly took up their positions in a ditch lined with tall grass, and so closely did they lie concealed that they were invisible even to their comrades on the rising ground behind them.

Presently the German advance-guard entered the defile. They had dined not wisely but too well, and, jubilant over the result of their successful raid, were sadly lax in the exercise of their military duties. Two of them had removed their helmets, which were dangling from their saddles. All of them, almost overcome with wine and the heat of the day, were drowsy.

Suddenly the Belgian ambush sprang to their feet. The startled Germans were confronted by a row of rifles, levelled from a distance that would make a miss almost an impossibility.

The lances fell from the nerveless hands of the astounded Teutons, and with machine-like precision they raised their hands above their heads. In quick time they were disarmed, secured, and led away to the rear of the Belgian machine-guns.

Barely was this done when two more troopers—the link between the advance-guard and the main body—rode up, only to be captured and secured as their predecessors had been.

But, however lax the military discipline of the scouts, the commander of the German troops was not to be caught napping so easily. Having failed to receive a signal from the advance-guard that all was well, he halted his men.

The Belgian Colonel shrugged his shoulders. His keen insight told him that the enemy was suspicious; yet, knowing that the German officers were equipped with powerful field-glasses, he dared not order two of his men to give the supposed signal to advance.

"At what range is the head of yonder column?" he asked, addressing the captain in charge of the mitrailleuse section.

"Five hundred and fifty metres, Monsieur le Major."

Thinking it better to open fire upon the Germans, who were as yet in close formation, rather than wait for them to extend and take cover, the Belgian commander was about to give the necessary order when the four armoured motor-cars were observed to dash forward.

They advanced in pairs, ten yards separating the first two, with an interval of about a hundred yards between the second and third. The third and last were the same distance apart as were the first and second.

To give the Belgians their due, although they had good cause to think that their position had been divulged, they maintained perfect discipline and kept admirable cover.

Into the silent defile tore the first pair of cars, the gunners training their quick-firers in readiness to greet a possible but as yet unseen foe. Down into the hollow plunged the first car. Its front wheels dropped into the pitfall, and the next instant it toppled completely over. The second car tried in vain to pull up. The driver tugged at the steering-wheel; the heavy vehicle swerved, crashed into the wreckage of the first, and instantly burst into flame.

The remaining cars, their occupants alarmed by the crash, halted. The road was too narrow to turn; to back at any rate of speed was impossible.

The valley now echoed and re-echoed to the rattle of the mitrailleuses and the sharp crackle of musketry. The armoured cars were swept by a hail of bullets that killed or wounded every

member of their crew, while the German horsemen were greeted with a devastating fire that threw them into disorder. Some attempted to advance against the unseen foe, others threw themselves from their horses and, taking cover, replied with a feeble and futile rifle-fire. The majority turned and fled in spite of the threats and efforts of the officers.

Taking advantage of the confusion of their foes, the Belgian mounted lancers were ordered to charge. In grand style they cleared the intervening ground, and, although several saddles were emptied, rode dashingly through the broken ranks of the invaders. In ten minutes they were in possession of the field, with the bulk of the money captured at Tongres.

"Ha!" exclaimed Captain Planchenoît when, an hour later, the two British dispatch-riders reported themselves. "What is the adventure this time? Have you delivered the message to the Burgomaster of Tongres?"

"No, sir," replied Kenneth. "We had no chance to do so. The Germans have raided the town."

"Peste!" exclaimed the Captain. "Have they burned the place? Did they seize the treasury?"

"They did little damage, sir. They took the money with them, but our lancers ambushed them and recovered it."

"Just like our intrepid cavalry," remarked the Captain complacently. "Well, you may go, messieurs. I do not think you will be required any more at present."

But before the day was done both lads were required. An account of their part in the successful counter-operations had been sent to the Colonel of the 9th Regiment of the Line by the officer commanding the Belgian lancers, and in front of their comrades Kenneth Everest and Rollo Barrington were promoted to the rank of corporal.

CHAPTER XII

The Mail Escort

During the next few days the Belgian field army had no respite. Landen was occupied by the Germans on the 10th of August, and strong cavalry screens of the enemy advanced along the Dutch border to within a few miles of the capital. Other large bodies of cavalry threatened the Belgian right wing, and in consequence a retirement of the small yet determined army was necessary.

Two days later the Belgians gained a brilliant success at Haelen, where the Germans, incautiously attempting to force a passage of the River Gethe, were driven back in disorder and with great loss.

Of this action Kenneth Everest and his companion saw nothing, having been sent on duty to the Belgian capital.

In Brussels the lads remained two days, having to await a reply to the dispatch they had brought. During their brief periods of leisure they hastened to call at the house of Major Résimont in the Rue de la Tribune, but the place was in charge of servants. No news was to be obtained of Mademoiselle Yvonne Résimont or of Kenneth's sister. Beyond the unauthenticated report that the two girls had left the school at Visé a few hours before the commencement of the German bombardment, all traces of them were lost.

"Perhaps," suggested Rollo, "your sister went back to England and took Yvonne with her. They say that numbers of refugees have passed through Rotterdam on their way across the North Sea."

"Possibly," agreed Kenneth. "In which case we are completely in the dark until we are lucky enough to get letters from home."

The inhabitants of Brussels were strangely calm. The fact that the German invaders had gained a firm footing in their country did not drive them into a panic. Possibly events of past history had taught them to regard the overrunning of Belgium as a foregone conclusion when the neighbouring Great Powers were at war. Above all, they continued steadfastly to rely upon the prompt arrival of the British Expeditionary Force, which, in conjunction with their own army and that of the French nation, would quickly send the barbarous Teutons fleeing for their lives across the Rhine.

"Hark!" exclaimed Rollo. "The papers are out. Something important has happened."

The chums had retired early to bed in their modest lodgings of the Rue Pontus, as they had

been warned for duty at five on the following morning. Their stock of money, although augmented by their scanty army pay, was visibly dwindling; but after more than a week in bivouacs they were grateful to sleep under a roof, undisturbed by the nerve-shattering roar of hostile guns.

"It can wait till to-morrow," said Kenneth with a prodigious yawn. "I feel too jolly tired——"

The next moment he was out of bed and making for the window, for above the cheering on the Grands Boulevards came the oft-repeated cries of: "The English Army in Belgium".

Hastily scrambling into their clothes, the two excited lads made their way into the street and through the swarm of wildly exuberant citizens. After a struggle they succeeded, at the cost of a franc, in obtaining a copy of one of the local papers, and bore it back to their room in triumph.

In huge letters were the words: "LES ANGLAIS SUR LE CONTINENT", the report being taken from the French paper, *Le Journal*, dated Thursday, the 13th August:—

"By our Special Correspondent.—For several days the valiant British troops, who are to co-operate with our soldiers to repel the German aggression in Belgium, have been crossing the Straits. Kept back at first by the risks of a naval combat which the English fleet was waiting to offer, in the North Sea, to the principal units of the enemy marine, the disembarkation has now taken place in perfect order and with surprising regularity. Up to the present the contingents sent forward in the direction of Namur are considerable.

"Under the favour of darkness and in great mystery the transports were organized. During Saturday night, by small detachments all along the Belgian coast from Ostend to Zeebrugge, the steamers chartered by the British Admiralty disembarked at first a small army, which moved before dawn to the position allotted to it. Farther south, that same night, semaphores signalled the arrival of mysterious ships, which, after a brief stay, returned towards English shores. On the following day, too, at the same hour, similar operations and disembarkations took place with such rapidity and such silence that the inhabitants saw nothing."

"Sounds promising," remarked Rollo thoughtfully. "But this is Friday. Do you think it likely that our troops have been on Belgian soil for nearly a week and this is the first we've heard of it?"

"The Press Censor perhaps——"

"Cannot gag the mouths of a million, old chap. However, I hope it's true. Of course I know an army cannot be expected to land and proceed straight to the front, but if they are to do anything they'll have to jolly well hurry up."

"Don't put a damper on the good news, old man."

"All right, I won't, Kenneth; but, until I see a khaki regiment on Belgian soil, I'm hanged if I will believe. Take me for a doubting Thomas if you will. Anyway, I'm going to turn in again; we've to be up early, you know."

In spite of the deafening clamour without, the chums slept soundly until the concièrge knocked loudly at the door to announce that it was a quarter to five, and that the breakfast of messieurs les Anglais was ready to be served as ordered.

Upon arriving at the place indicated in their order, the two dispatch-riders found that they were to be temporarily attached to the mail escort. Letters and parcels for the troops in the field had accumulated during the last three days to enormous proportions. Five large motor-cars had been requisitioned to take this mass of correspondence from the capital, the convoy being accompanied by a patrol of lancers, cyclists, and motor-cyclists.

"Wonder if there's anything for us in that lot?" hazarded Kenneth, as four large wicker hampers addressed to the 9th Regiment of the Line were unceremoniously dumped into a car. The correspondence had already been passed by a Belgian censor, and the baskets had been secured by an imposing wax seal.

"Perhaps," replied Rollo. "At all events we'll keep a special eye on the car. One never knows where to expect the unwelcome attentions of those ubiquitous Uhlans, and it will never do to let them pry into the family secrets of our comrades of the 9th."

Through the flag-bedecked streets of Brussels the mail convoy made its way. The route, as supplied to the officer in command, was a circuitous one. Proceeding in an almost southerly direction, past the villages of Waterloo, Genappe, and Quatre Bras, the mails for Namur and the left flank of the Belgian field army were to be detached at the village of Sombreffe. The remainder of the convoy was then to proceed through Gembloux to Tirlemont, dropping the crates addressed to various regiments at the nearest points to their ultimate destinations.

The motor-cars set out at a rapid pace, so much so that by the time they were clear of the Forest of Soignies, less than ten miles from the capital, the horses and the cyclists were almost "done up". Either speed or the force at the disposal of the convoy had to be sacrificed, and after a hasty consultation with his subordinates, the officer in charge decided upon the latter alternative.

Accordingly the lancers were sent back, while a dozen of the cyclists were ordered to leave their machines at a wayside inn and to ride on the cars. From information received from various sources, there was every reason to believe that that part of the country was free from the attentions of the invaders, and no cause to doubt that the mail would be delivered in safety and with celerity. Again the convoy was set in motion, Kenneth and Rollo riding at a distance of about two hundred yards ahead, for their wish to keep an eye on one particular car had been abruptly nipped in the bud.

"We've seen the field of Waterloo at all events," shouted Rollo, in order to make himself heard above the noise of the motors. "But it's under different circumstances from those we expected."

They had had but a distant and momentary glimpse of the famous pyramid of earth surmounted by the Lion of Belgium. The ground that, less than a century before, was drenched with the blood of men of half a dozen nationalities was again being prepared for a similar object on a vaster scale. Belgian troops and peasants were busily engaged in digging trenches; for here, according to the expectations of military experts, was to be fought the decisive battle that was to save Brussels and Belgium from the Teutonic invasion.

At Quatre Bras the convoy struck the Namur road. A couple of miles farther on Kenneth's keen eyes detected a movement towards their left front. In double-quick time the lads dismounted and held up their hands, a signal that brought the convoy to a standstill.

"Cavalry, sir!" said Kenneth, pointing in the direction of a clump of trees.

"Our vedettes, without doubt," declared the Belgian officer, leisurely unstrapping his field-glasses. Before he could get them to bear, Kenneth was sweeping the country with his powerful binoculars. There was no mistake: the cavalry were Uhlans. They had already spotted the convoy, and were advancing at the trot to capture or destroy the weakly-protected mail escort.

Just then came a dull rumble at some distance to the rear of the line of halted cars. The enemy had blown up the railway bridge on the line between Charleroi and the north, thus cutting off the retreat of the convoy.

"Mon capitaine," exclaimed one of the cyclists who had been given a place in one of the cars; "I know this part of the country well. A kilometre farther on is a road to the right. It will bring us to Ligny."

The officer gave one glance towards the advancing Uhlans, now barely a mile and a half away.

"En avant!" he ordered.

It was touch-and-go which would first reach the junction of the roads. Only a momentary hesitation on the part of the Uhlans saved the situation, for, seeing the convoy advance at full speed, they feared an attack by the already dreaded motor-cars armed with mitrailleuses.

But as the convoy swung round the sharp corner a hail of bullets came from the carbines of the German cavalry; then, realizing that their discretion had got the better of their valour, the Uhlans dashed in pursuit.

The Belgians cheered ironically. The idea of horses competing with motor-cars seemed absurd. The latter covered three yards to the Uhlans' one, and every moment the animals were becoming more and more fatigued.

Suddenly Rollo gave vent to a warning shout. Ahead was the village of Ligny, but between the convoy and the nearest houses were dense masses of cavalry. Their capture seemed inevitable.

Again the motor-cars came to a halt. The Belgian captain saw that he was in a trap.

"Turn about!" he ordered. "We must charge these Prussians behind us. It will be easier to force our way through a hundred than——"

"Mon capitaine!" shouted an excited voice.

The Belgian officer turned, almost angrily.

"We are saved—regardez!" continued the speaker, pointing to the railway line about three hundred yards to the right of the road.

Making their way along the hollow by the side of the line were swarms of men in blue coats, red trousers, and kepis. There was no mistaking them: they were French troops. The cavalry, too, close to the village of Ligny were French chasseurs. The long-expected aid had become an accomplished fact. French armies were on Belgian soil.

Already the Uhlans had perceived their peril. They turned and rode for dear life.

Up came a group of French officers. Gravely they exchanged salutes with the commander of the convoy.

"We hope to effect a junction with the Belgian army before nightfall, monsieur," announced a colonel. "We have been instructed to occupy the line Ligny-Tirlemont. It is to be hoped that these pigs of Prussians have not tampered with the railway."

"Unfortunately they have, sir," replied the Belgian captain. "Already they have blown up a bridge on the Quatre Bras road."

The Frenchman rapped out an oath.

"More work for our engineers," he remarked. "Nevertheless, the Prussians shall pay. We have them. With the English between Antwerp and Louvain, and your army between Louvain and Tirlemont, these Germans are in front of a wall that cannot be climbed. You say that part of your convoy is destined for Namur? Send them on, monsieur. We hold both banks of the Sambre. For the rest we cannot, unfortunately, offer you any guarantees."

Accordingly the convoy was split up, Kenneth and Rollo going with the cars containing the mails for the Belgian troops at Tirlemont.

"The papers were right after all, old man," remarked Kenneth. "Our troops are in Belgium. Now, admit that your doubts were ill-founded."

"I suppose so," admitted Rollo; "but all the same I should like to see a khaki regiment, if only for the sake of ocular demonstration."

Before four that afternoon the mail for the 9th Regiment of the Line was safely delivered, and with the utmost dispatch the work of distribution began. It seemed a fitting reward that Kenneth should receive half a dozen letters, three of which, bearing different dates, were from his father. Rollo had to be content with four.

While the latter, with his usual deliberation, opened his communications in the order of their postmarks, Kenneth impetuously tore the envelope of his latest-dated one, and read as follows:—

"DEAR KENNETH,

"I wrote you at the Poste Restante at Liége, on the off-chance that you might receive it on the eve of the declaration of war. From the contents of your letter I have reason to believe that you did not. I am naturally most anxious concerning Thelma. Up to the time of writing I have had no tidings whatsoever, although I made enquiries of the British Consuls at Antwerp, Rotterdam, and The Hague.

"In my previous letters addressed to you at the Field Post Office of the 9th Regiment of the Line, I expressed my fullest approval of the step you have taken. In case you have not received my former letters I must repeat these sentiments. You are doing your duty to your country by serving under the Belgian flag as faithfully as if you were under your own—for ours is a united cause. Perhaps more so, since you are not yet of an age to accept a commission. Should you be in need of funds, I have placed the sum of Fifty Pounds to your account in the Credit Belgique at Brussels.

"I am also sending you a batch of newspapers ["They have gone adrift," thought Kenneth] which will be of interest to you.

"I hear also that ... [Here was a long excision by the Censor.]

"Once more, good luck. Do your duty manfully and fearlessly. Regards to young Barrington. I made a point of seeing his father the other day, and he is with me in my view of the step you two have taken. Needless to say, my Mediterranean trip is off. There is other work even for an old buffer such as I am.

"Your affectionate father,
"THOMAS EVEREST."

"The pater's a brick," declared Kenneth, after he had finished wading through his other correspondence; then, observing that Rollo was still scanning his budget, he made his way across to the motor-cycles. In his excitement he had forgotten to turn off the petrol tap of his mount, and had just remembered the fact.

On the way back he ran across Major Résimont, whom he had not seen since the night of the evacuation of Liége.

The Major greeted him warmly, congratulated him upon gaining his stripes, and asked him how he had fared.

"I have, unfortunately, bad news," said the Major sadly. "It would be well to keep the information to yourself: the Liége forts have fallen, and General Leman is a prisoner."

"I thought they could hold out for months," Kenneth blurted out, his sense of discretion overcome by the suddenness of the news.

"We all thought so," rejoined Major Résimont quietly. "But those huge German guns, they cracked the cupolas like nutshells, and killed or wounded every man in the forts."

"The French are here, though," announced Kenneth. "We came in touch with them this morning."

"I know," said the Belgian. "They have already succeeded in taking Dinant. We have certain hopes in the French."

"And the British troops are in Belgium."

The Major shook his head.

"See, sir," persisted Kenneth, producing the copy of the paper he had purchased in Brussels.

"I have already seen it," said Major Résimont; "it is only a rumour. It is, moreover, false; there is not a single English regiment in Belgium. Your country is, I fear, too late to save Brussels from the invaders."

CHAPTER XIII

Separated

Major Résimont's sentiments were shared by the majority of his deep-thinking compatriots. The great faith in the prompt action of Great Britain in sending a strong Expeditionary Force to Belgium had received a severe set-back. Even yet the promised aid might be forthcoming—but it would be too late to spare the greater portion of the country, including the capital, from invasion.

When the Major stated that the Belgians had "certain hopes" in the French, he spoke with a justifiable sense of caution. He realized that the object of throwing French troops into Belgium was not to stay the threatened occupation of Brussels, but to avoid, if possible, the disastrous results of the presence of a German army on French soil. In short, Belgium was once more to be made the battle-ground between French and German troops, provided the fortresses on the borders of Alsace-Lorraine were strong enough to hold back the invaders in this quarter.

Unfortunately, in spite of the utmost efforts of the War Office, backed by the whole-hearted support of a united Parliament, Great Britain was just four days too late in the dispatch of her Expeditionary Force. Yet the brave Belgians did not repine, nor did they relax for one instant their opposition to the enormous and relentless masses of Germans who were now pouring in through the strategic railways between Aix-la-Chapelle and Liége.

But the sacrifice of Belgium was not in vain. By the heroic resistance of General Leman the clockwork regularity of the German time-table had been thrown hopelessly out of gear. The stubborn defence of Liége had delayed the Teuton advance to such an extent that France and England were able to complete their respective mobilizations, and to thwart the German Emperor's hopes of "rushing" Paris and thus forcing France to conclude a humiliating and disastrous peace.

"Corporal Everest!"

"Sir?"

"You are to take this dispatch to Major Foveneau, who is holding the village of Cortenaeken. Your compatriot may accompany you. Exercise particular care, for there are numerous Uhlan patrols in the neighbourhood of Diest."

It was on the second day after the British dispatch-riders' return with the mail-escort. Captain Planchenoît, who had already fully recognized the intrepidity and common sense of the two lads, had been instructed by his Colonel to communicate with the isolated post of Cortenaeken, and he could decide upon no fitter messengers than Kenneth Everest and his friend Rollo Barrington.

"You will observe that the dispatch is at present unsealed," continued Captain Planchenoît. "You must commit the text to memory. Should you be in danger of capture, destroy the dispatch at all costs. It is far too important to risk being hidden, yet Major Foveneau must have, if humanly possible, written orders."

"Very good, sir," replied Kenneth, saluting.

He then went off to find his chum, whom he found cleaning his mount. Kenneth had given up cleaning his motor-cycle days ago; beyond satisfying himself that it had plenty of oil and was in good running order, he troubled nothing about its appearance. Both lads had, moreover, wrapped the handle-bars in strips of brown linen, while the remaining bright parts had been covered with dull-grey paint.

"It's Cortenaeken this time," announced Kenneth. "Goodness knows how we get to the place, for there doesn't seem to be a vestige of a road leading to it, according to the map. Here's the dispatch—sounds important, doesn't it? We have to commit the words to memory, in case we have to destroy the paper."

"The best thing we can do is to ride for Tirlemont and make enquiries there," suggested Rollo, handing the dispatch back to his chum. "As regards concealing the paper, we must place it somewhere where we can get at it easily. I have it: we'll stow it in your petrol tank; the stuff won't injure the paper or interfere with the writing, and if things came to the worst, you can whip it out and set fire to it."

Accordingly the dispatch, cleverly rolled, was placed inside the gauze strainer to the patrol tank, and the metal cap replaced. Five minutes later the two motor-cyclists were buzzing along the congested road at a modest twenty miles an hour, dodging between the lumbering transport wagons and the military vehicles with an agility that surprised themselves.

Presently, as they struck towards the rear of the long lines of troops, the road became less encumbered and speed was materially increased. Soon the pace reached nearly forty miles an hour, for the highway was fairly broad, and ran as straight as a Roman road as far as the eye could reach.

"Puncture!" shouted Kenneth, as the front wheel of his cycle began to slither and bump upon the *pavé*, the machine running nearly fifty yards before he brought up and dismounted.

A hasty examination showed that a rusty iron nail, quite six inches in length, had penetrated the tread of the tyre, while to make matters worse its point had worked out close to the rim. The offending piece of metal, catching against the front forks, had already enlarged the hole in the tread till it became a slit nearly half an inch in length.

"Don't wait," he continued, as he unscrewed the cap of the petrol tank and produced the dispatch. "Take this, and hurry on. I'll patch this up and follow. If you can, wait for me at Cortenaeken till two o'clock."

"Right-o!" assented Rollo. "You can manage all right?"

"I can't ask you to bear a hand if I don't," replied Kenneth. "I'll make a job of it somehow. Good luck!"

Rollo was off. Kenneth stood beside his crippled steed and watched his friend's receding figure out of sight; then taking out his repair outfit he began his task. It was a long job. The cover, being practically a new one, was an obstinate one to remove. It had to be patched with canvas, while the double puncture in the inner tube took a considerable time to clean and prepare.

While he was waiting for the solution to get "tacky", a peculiar buzzing sound greeted his ears.

"Aeroplanes!" he muttered. "Whose, I wonder?"

He looked upwards. The sun shining in a cloudless sky dazzled his vision. He put on his tinted goggles, which during the repair operations he had removed. Then he saw, perhaps three thousand feet above him, a large Zeppelin moving in a westerly direction. He watched it with a sort of contemptuous interest.

"The vaunted German terror of the air—perhaps!" he soliloquized. "I wouldn't give much for its chances if even half a dozen aeroplanes tackled it. Ah! Thinking better of it?"

This last remark was uttered as the gigantic airship began to turn, pitching as it did so like a lively ship in a sea-way.

Bringing his binoculars to bear upon the Zeppelin, Kenneth watched its undignified progress. Apparently it had encountered a strong air-current that tended to drive it in a westerly direction. By the aid of the glasses Kenneth could see that the immense fabric showed, in spite of its supposed rigidity, a decided tendency to "whip" as it swung broadside on to the direction of the wind. Then, steadying itself on a course in exactly the opposite direction to that which it had previously been following, the Zeppelin forged ahead, still see-sawing ominously.

Suddenly the bow portion dipped, then with ever-increasing velocity the huge airship plunged earthwards. Its propeller ceased to revolve; from the cars, ballast—not loose sand, but solid material—was thrown out in the hope of checking the now terrific descent. Then it disappeared from the motor-cyclist's view, beyond a slight ridge of hills about five miles off.

"That's done for it, thank goodness!" ejaculated Kenneth, as he replaced his binoculars and reapplied himself to the repairs to the tyre; "if it were not for this rotten puncture I'd slip over and have a look at the remains. I hope the thing's fallen within the Belgian lines. It will cheer the plucky beggars up a bit."

It took him quite another half-hour to patch the torn canvas and coax the stubborn cover back into its rim. Then, with a feeling of gratification that he had overcome difficulties, he began to inflate the tyre.

"Almost hard enough," he said to himself, ceasing his efforts to prod the rubber with his thumb. "I'll give it another dozen strokes just to show there's no ill-feeling."

Bang! With a report like the discharge of a small field-piece the tyre collapsed. A portion of the inner tube had been nipped, with the result that a gash four inches in length was demanding attention.

"Confound it!" exclaimed Kenneth angrily.

With the perspiration pouring off him, he again tackled the obstinate cover with savage energy. This time the repair was a complicated one. Three times the patch failed to hold, but finally, at the end of an hour and a half's hard work, the tedious task was accomplished.

At Tirlemont Kenneth made enquiries, and was given such minute directions that before he had gone another five miles he was hopelessly befogged. The roads were little better than narrow lanes; there were no direction posts, and he had long forgotten whether he had to take the first turning to the left and the third to the right, or the third to the left and the first to the right. There were several isolated cottages, but their inhabitants had fled. The whole district seemed depopulated, for the great exodus to Brussels had begun. There was plenty of evidence of the hurried flight of the civil population. Articles of domestic use, found to be too heavy to carry far, had been jettisoned by the roadside. Here and there was an abandoned cart, still laden with the household goods of some unfortunate Belgian family.

At length Kenneth found that the lane he was following came upon a small stream. Here a bridge had recently been destroyed. Further progress in that direction was impossible, unless he decided to abandon his cycle and swim across the fifteen feet of water to the opposite bank. Following the stream was a rough path, badly cut up by the tracks of cattle. It was the only possible way unless he retraced his route.

Producing his military map Kenneth attempted to fix his position. He could only come to the conclusion that the stream was the River Velp, on which the hamlet of Cortenaeken stands. He was, he decided, about ten miles from the village, which ought to be reached by following the path he had struck.

It was bad going. The deep ruts made riding a nerve-racking ordeal. Here and there the path had slipped bodily into the reed-grown mud that fringed the stream. Dismounts were frequent; speed was out of the question.

After a mile or so of this unsatisfactory mode of progression the path ended abruptly, but here the stream was crossed by a narrow plank bridge. On the opposite side, at about two hundred yards from the bank, was a cottage, and—thanks be!—from the chimney a wreath of faint blue smoke was rising.

Kenneth dismounted, set his motor-cycle on its stand, and proceeded to examine the apparently frail bridge. It sagged considerably under his weight; what would it do with the additional weight of his mount? In addition there was the transport problem. He could not carry the heavy cycle; the plank was too narrow for him to attempt to ride across. Yet he did not feel at all inclined to go back along that rutty path.

"I'll give a few toots on the horn," he declared. "Perhaps the people in the house will come out and bear a hand. Hullo! There's a punt over there in the rushes. With assistance I could get my bike across in that."

The raucous blasts on the horn disturbed the quietude of the sylvan scene, but without the desired result. He tried again, still without success.

"Perhaps these people have also cleared out in a hurry and left a fire burning," he soliloquized. "Otherwise they must have heard the explosions of the engine as I rode up. Well, here goes!"

Crossing the stream he took his way to the spot where the punt was made fast. Here, again, his hopes were dashed to the ground, for not only was the flat-bottomed craft chained and padlocked to a massive post, but it had a gaping hole at one end and was half-full of water.

"It's only waste of time tramping across to that cottage," he said to himself. "I'll have a shot at getting the bike across first, and make enquiries later."

With that he retraced his steps to where his cycle was standing on the wrong side of the

tantalizing stream. Throwing out the clutch and standing astride the saddle, Kenneth walked his motor-cycle towards the plank bridge; then shuffling very cautiously, he began the hazardous crossing.

At every step the soles of his boots were almost at the very edge of the worn plank. As he approached the centre it creaked ominously, while, to add to his difficulties, the motion of the water as it flowed underneath tended to make him giddy. He dared not look up unless he stopped, and that he was loath to do. One false step would send himself and his motor-cycle into six or seven feet of mud and water.

At length, safe and sound, Kenneth found himself on the farther bank. Here a road, very little better than the one he had recently traversed, led away from the house, the only visible approach to which was by means of a stone stile and a footpath.

Again leaving his cycle, the lad leapt over the low wall and hastened towards the building.

The door was wide open. Across the threshold lay the body of an old man, with a ghastly wound in his head. Kenneth recoiled in horror; then, thinking perhaps that the unfortunate farmer—for such he was—might still be living, he again approached.

Even in the attempt to move the man, he heard the sound of a heavy snore, while, as if in answer to the noise, a horse began to neigh.

"Germans!" ejaculated Kenneth. Once more he began to back, when, recollecting that even the sound of his motor had not disturbed the brutal slumberer, he drew his revolver and stepped across the threshold.

Coming in from the brilliant sunshine the place seemed almost pitch-dark, but in a few seconds the dispatch-rider's eyes grew accustomed to the gloom. He found himself in what was at one time the living-room of the farm. There was no hall or passage; the outer door opened straight into it.

The whole place was in a state of almost indescribable confusion. The table had been overthrown, the chairs smashed—and smashed deliberately, for no ordinary struggle would have resulted in such complete demolition of the furniture. On the walls were a few cheap, highly-coloured prints, slashed by a keen instrument, while the glass was shattered to fragments. On the floor were the remains of broken bottles and crockery. The cupboards had been ransacked, and their contents hurled all over the room. Even the hearthstone had been forced up; the despoilers had evidently thought that the thrifty farmer had hidden a store of money beneath it.

The rest of the rooms on the ground floor were in a similar state of confusion. Kenneth set his jaw tightly. He no longer had any inclination to beat a retreat. The sight of the foully-murdered Belgian and his devastated home filled him with rage.

Holding his revolver ready for instant action, the lad began to ascend the stairs. They creaked horribly under his weight, but still the sounds of drunken slumber continued.

At the head of the stairs four rooms opened on to a fairly spacious landing. Three of these were unoccupied by any living creature. In one was a huddled-up form.

"Brutes!" muttered the British lad. "No quarter!"

He pushed open the door of the remaining bedroom, whence the porcine grunts proceeded. Here were four men in the uniform of the dreaded Uhlans. Three, fully dressed and wearing their heavy boots, were sprawling in drunken slumber on the bed. They were nursing partly-consumed wine bottles, while the bed-clothes and floor were stained with the spilt liquid.

The fourth Uhlan was sitting in a chair, with his head resting on his chest. Across his forehead and over both ears was a blood-stained bandage. The wound had but recently been inflicted, so the Belgian farmer had apparently made a brave but unavailing stand in defence of his home. On the floor by the Uhlan's side lay his sword; his carbine was propped up against the arm of the chair.

"The brutes!" ejaculated Kenneth again. "Hang it, I can't shoot these fellows while they are asleep!"

Just at that moment the wounded Uhlan opened his eyes and raised his head. His brain had not been dulled by drink, for with a swift movement he seized his carbine, at the same time shouting to his comrades that the Belgians were upon them.

CHAPTER XIV

A Friend in Need

"Seems a bit low-down, but there was no other way as far as I could see," commented Kenneth as he made his way down the stairs.

It was a relief to get into the open air once more. Inserting four fresh cartridges into the chambers of his revolver, he replaced the weapon in his holster, and without giving another glance at the house of death and destruction he made his way to the stables, where the Uhlans' horses were tethered. He would not leave the helpless brutes to be fastened up perhaps for days. They would at least have a chance to eat and drink, for there was plenty of pasture and the river was handy.

Having given the animals their liberty, the lad remounted his cycle and rode along the only possible route. By the position of the sun he knew that he was going nearly due north, which was not in the direction he supposed Cortenaeken to be. To add to the difficulties of the situation there was the unpleasant fact that patrols of German cavalry were already in the district. Where, then, was the Belgian force that was supposed to be holding the district between Diest and Tirlemont?

There were houses scattered about in plenty; some to all outward appearance intact, others either burning furiously or reduced to four smoke-blackened walls.

After traversing about five miles of the indifferent lane, Kenneth found himself on a broad highway, bordered on both sides with trees. Here were civilians in throngs—men, women, and children—and a more woebegone crowd the British lad had never before beheld. Most of them were on foot, staggering under weighty bundles. Even the children had their burdens, mostly domestic pets. There were fowls in crates, rabbits, cats, and pigeons; masterless dogs tore frantically through the sad procession; others, harnessed to small carts piled high with goods and chattels, trotted docilely by the side of their masters. There were large farm-carts, too, creaking under the weight of furniture, on the top of which were perched refugees either too old or too young to make the journey afoot. The men were stolid of feature, but several of the women were crying; while with few exceptions the children, unable to comprehend the real nature of their hurried exodus, were laughing and chattering with excitement at their novel experience.

Kenneth dismounted and stopped an old Belgian, who by his dress had evidently been well-to-do.

"Can you direct me to Cortenaeken, monsieur?"

"To where Cortenaeken was," corrected the man. "It has been burnt by the accursed Prussians."

"And the troops? I have a message for Major Foveneau, who was holding the village——"

"You will not find a single Belgian there, monsieur—at least, not a living one. They have been compelled to retire on Louvain."

The Belgian courteously raised his hat and passed on hurriedly, for while he was speaking came the distant intermittent reports of rifle-firing. The whole procession of refugees quickened its pace. The menace was too close to be ignored.

Kenneth pulled out his map. He was now able to form a fairly accurate idea of where he was. He had no desire to return. His anxiety concerning his chum urged him to make his way as quickly as possible to Louvain. There, at least, he might be able to gain information concerning the British dispatch-rider who ought to have reported himself to Major Foveneau.

According to the map, Kenneth saw that there was a road to the left at a mile or so from where he stood. It struck the village of Winghe St. Georges, which was on the main road between Diest and Tirlemont and slightly nearer to the latter town.

Springing into the saddle Kenneth set off at a furious pace. Ahead, but slightly to the right, was a dense column of smoke that marked the site of the destroyed village of Cortenaeken. Farther away were more pillars of black vapour, the handiwork of the vengeful invaders, whose principle was to terrorize the luckless Belgians into a spirit of non-resistance.

The lad was heartily glad when he gained the branch road, since it led away from the desolated area. But before he had gone very far he became aware that he was crossing the tracks of a fighting force in retreat. Over the fields on either side and across the road were numerous deep ruts caused by wheels of artillery and service wagons. Here and there were abandoned carts, while half-buried in a muddy ditch was a field-piece with one wheel shattered. Its limber and several either dead or wounded horses still in the traces had overturned on the other side of the road. Yet, apart from the distant cannonade, there were no sounds of actual combat.

Kenneth was sorely tempted to follow the tracks of the retirement. It would be hard going, he argued, but where a gun could go his motor-cycle ought to be able to follow. But on further consideration he decided to keep to the road, at least as far as Winghe St. Georges.

Onwards he rode till he approached a ruined homestead. Four shattered walls, two gaunt gables, and a few scorched rafters were all that remained of the house. Surrounding it was a wall, broken in many places. Abutting on the wall were several roofless sheds.

"Halte-là!" exclaimed a voice. "There is danger ahead."

Kenneth pulled up sharply and, dismounting, looked in the direction from which the voice came. As he did so a man in the uniform of the Belgian lancers came out of the ruined house. He had lost his helmet, his coat was torn and covered with dust. Above his right knee was a blood-stained bandage. He was supporting himself by means of a rifle, using the weapon as a crutch with the butt under his armpit.

"What has happened, comrade?" asked the lad.

The soldier regarded him with evident suspicion.

"You are not a Belgian," he said pointedly, "yet you are in the uniform of our dispatch-riders."

"Quite so," replied Kenneth, producing his identification card. "I am a British subject in the Belgian service."

"British?" repeated the man. "What, then, is British? In faith, I do not know."

"English, then."

"Ah, English—good! Now I comprehend. But, monsieur, it is unsafe to go farther. There are Germans in force a few kilometres along the road. Their cavalry screens are thrown out over yonder. We had to retire. To me it is amazing how you came so far without falling in with the accursed Prussians."

"I saw a few Uhlans," announced Kenneth.

"Tête bleu! And what did they do?"

"Very little as far as I was concerned," replied the lad. "They murdered some civilians, so I shot them."

The Belgian's eyes glistened.

"You are a brave youth," he exclaimed.

"I think not in this case," objected Kenneth. "They were half-drunk, and had only just awoke. It seemed hardly fair play, yet——"

"Do not apologize, monsieur," growled the lancer. "After what these devils have done they have no right to expect any consideration. Over there, for example—but come within. It is hazardous to remain in the open. Perhaps, even now, we have been observed through some Prussian field-glasses. Your bicycle? It will be of no further use. It is better to destroy it and throw the remains into the ditch."

Kenneth shook his head.

"No fear," he objected resolutely. "I'd rather take my chances on the road."

"Impossible," declared the Belgian. "You would be shot before you went another three kilometres. And if the Germans see your motor-cycle they will be doubly suspicious and search the house."

"I'll leave it for the time being in one of those sheds," suggested the lad. "It won't be seen from the road."

The Belgian, beyond muttering "imbecile" under his breath, made no further objection. He even assisted Kenneth, as well as his wound would permit, to lift the heavy mount over the rubble in the gap of the outer wall.

"This place will do," declared the lad as he reached the furthermost shed. The roof and one angle of the brickwork had been demolished, but the rest of the building was almost intact. Having removed the sparking-plug, so as to render the cycle useless to the enemy in the event of its discovery, Kenneth placed the cycle on its side and covered it with a thick layer of damp and rotten straw. To all appearance the interior of the shed was a farm refuse-heap. No prowling German would be likely to want to use the straw for bedding or any other purpose.

"Come this way," said the Belgian, who, during the progress of Kenneth's operations, had begun to alter his opinion as to the danger of leaving the cycle as "incriminating evidence". "We will go to the house. In the cellar we can rest and perhaps have food. Have you anything to eat?"

"Two rolls and some chocolate," replied Kenneth. "We will share that."

"Good!" exclaimed the lancer, his eyes glistening at the prospect of food. "But there are

others—three comrades of mine. We have not eaten anything to-day but raw turnips, and raw turnips are not very sustaining food on which to make a cavalry charge. It was in front of Cortenaeken that I got this," and he pointed to his wounded leg.

"Yet it is nothing," he added lightly, "a mere scratch; but I repaid the Prussian who gave it to me. Ah! This is what I require. I will now be able to discard this rifle. My own carbine is within."

He had stopped in the midst of his narrative, and was pointing to a hay-rake that rested in a corner of the wall.

"I will knock off the teeth and shorten the handle. Ciel! It will make an excellent crutch. As for the rifle, I may safely throw it down the well, unless you, monsieur, might care to have it. It may be useful to you."

"I have no cartridges."

"We have enough—about four hundred between the four of us. Nevertheless, you will have to clean the barrel carefully, for it is caked with earth. If you fired it in that state, without doubt it would do you more harm than the man at whom you pointed it. There, did I not say so?"

With a wave of his disengaged arm the Belgian indicated a cloud of dust rising from the road.

"We must hasten, yet be cautious," he continued. "That dust hides a column of German infantry."

Kenneth followed his new comrade into the house. The upper floor had almost disappeared. The ground floor was littered with charred fragments of rafters and boards, cakes of plaster and partly-burned thatch, in addition to broken articles of furniture. The parting-walls had been overthrown, so that the interior of the building presented the appearance of an open space.

Scrambling over the debris the wounded lancer made his way to a corner of the tottering walls. He stooped painfully and with considerable effort, and thrusting his fingers between the rubbish took hold of an iron ring. At this he heaved, and lifted a large flap about six inches.

"Assist me, monsieur," he said. "I am not quite so strong as I was four hours ago."

"One minute," exclaimed Kenneth. "I'll clear some of this rubbish away."

"Tiens!" ejaculated the Belgian. "Let it remain, for when we let the flap fall it will spread and hide the cracks in the floor. No one will then suspect that there is a cellar. Now, lift together.—Soyez tranquille!" he shouted, to reassure his comrades in hiding.

At a gesture from his newly-found friend, Kenneth descended the steep wooden ladder till his feet touched the stone floor of the cellar. The Belgian lancer followed more slowly, uttering maledictions under his breath at every step. Another of the occupants of the cellar ascended, and pulled the flap down with a resounding crash. The place seemed in total darkness.

"A new comrade—an Englishman in the service of our country," announced the lancer; and Kenneth's hands were warmly grasped by his unseen hosts.

After a while his eyes grew accustomed to the semi-gloom, for the daylight filtered through a small irregular opening at one end of the underground room. The Belgians present did not belong to the same regiment. One was a corporal of infantry, another an artilleryman, the third a Civil Guard, whose head-gear, somewhat resembling a bowler hat, made him easily recognizable. Their rifles were resting against the wall, their cartridge pouches and heavy packs had been thrown on the floor, and by their sides were some partly-consumed slices of turnip.

Kenneth promptly shared his rations, which were ravenously eaten by the half-famished men. The corporal, having swallowed his portion of roll and chocolate, took up his position at the opening through which the daylight could be seen.

"They come!" he announced. "The pigs! Look!"

The rest of the men made their way to the post of observation. The cellar was of brick, with massive oaken rafters overhead and a stone floor. At one end was a flight of stone steps that at one time communicated with the outside of the house. A fall of brick-work had almost entirely closed this exit, leaving a space about two inches in height and a little more than a foot in width between the top of the debris and the underside of the arch. The aperture was thus broad enough to afford an outlook for two persons without the faintest risk of discovery.

The corporal, as observation man, remained at his post, the others taking turn to gaze upon the approaching regiment of their hated foes.

The German troops had evidently gone through a rough experience. They looked utterly done up. Most of them were in their shirt-sleeves, their coats and accoutrements hanging from their rifles. Several were without caps, and many had been wounded. In spite of the sweltering heat they marched in close column, wellnigh choked with dust, and only kept at a brisk pace by the unsympathetic orders and threats of their officers.

As the head of the column approached, several men were ordered to double up to the ruined house. Already the German commander had good reason to dread the fury of the Belgian civil population, and every house on the line of march was searched for possible snipers before the regiment was allowed to march past it.

Kenneth could hear the Prussians' boots crunching on the rubble overhead, and their guttural shouts as they reported that the building was untenanted.

Then the column was again set in motion, and as the troops marched stolidly by, Kenneth saw that in their midst were about twenty peasants of both sexes.

The Belgian corporal rapped out an oath.

"The cowards!" he hissed. "They will use these people—countrymen—to screen their advance. They did so at Haelen and Landen. I would gladly bring down that red-faced Colonel but for the fact that those peasants would be instantly massacred."

Reluctantly the man closed the safety-catch of his rifle. The impulse to shoot had been tantalizing. Only his concern for his luckless fellow-countrymen had prevented the Belgian from sending a bullet through the Prussian officer's heart. Ignorant of his escape the Colonel rode past, followed by the rest of the regiment, for, from motives of extraordinary caution, he was in the centre of the column.

Another and yet another grey-clad regiment tramped past. With feelings akin to consternation, Kenneth realized that a considerable portion of the German army was now between him and his regiment. And Rollo—what had become of him?

Several hours passed. The Belgians, unable to control their natural vivacity, chattered gaily, relating their individual adventures, and closely questioning Kenneth as to his views on British aid for the sorely-harassed country. Occasionally, when their look-out reported fresh troops in sight, they would relapse into silence. The artilleryman jotted down in a pocket-book particulars and estimated numbers of all the German regiments that passed along the road, remarking that to-morrow, perhaps, the information might be useful to his officers.

About five in the afternoon the stream slackened, and half an hour later there were no signs of the invaders. The Belgians discussed the possibility of making a dash for their own lines, and eventually decided to attempt to put their plan into execution shortly after midnight. Even the wounded lancer expressed his confidence in his ability to keep up with his comrades.

"And will you accompany us?" he asked, addressing his British comrade.

"There's my motor-cycle," said Kenneth tentatively.

"Pouf! It is of no consequence. Let it remain; there are others to be obtained. It is useless to attempt to take it with you. The roads are unsafe, while in the open the ditches are too wide to take it across."

Still Kenneth hesitated. He had no doubt that the Belgian spoke truthfully, and that he could obtain another mount at head-quarters; but it would not be the same cycle, to which he was greatly attached.

While the wounded lancer was still endeavouring to persuade Kenneth to make the attempt on foot, the corporal, from the post of observation, reported that a patrol of Uhlans was approaching.

"There are but seven," he announced, "and they have a prisoner with them. Shall we——?" and he significantly tapped his rifle.

After a short interval one of the Belgians stood aside to allow Kenneth to look at the approaching patrol. They were riding their horses at a walking pace, their long lances being stepped in "buckets" behind their backs. Most of them were smoking large curved pipes.

Suddenly Kenneth uttered a half-stifled shout of surprise, for the prisoner was his chum, Rollo Barrington.

CHAPTER XV

Captured

On parting with his comrade on the road to Cortenaeken, Rollo rode at a great pace towards his goal. He was to a certain extent fortunate in finding people at the various branch roads to

give him directions; and in less than an hour from the time of parting company with Kenneth he was in sight of the hamlet where he hoped to meet Major Foveneau.

The place seemed deserted. Perhaps, he thought, the Belgian troops were entrenched on the other side of the slightly rising ground. At a great distance off he could hear the rumble of guns in action. Evidently there were two separate battles in progress. From the direction of one cannonade it seemed as if the rival forces were engaged in the district through which he had so recently ridden, yet he could have sworn that he had not seen either a single Belgian or German soldier.

Suddenly, as he glanced to the left, Rollo's heart gave a tremendous thump. He had already ridden more than half-way past the rear of a masked German battery. There were perhaps a dozen guns placed in position behind a ridge. The weapons were trained for high-angle firing, while, to render them invisible from Belgian aircraft, they were screened by branches of trees. By the side of each field-piece was an armoured ammunition cart. The body of the vehicle was upturned to a perpendicular position, the shells being kept in place by a "pigeon-hole" arrangement. The gunners were "standing easy", while, from the tip of a neighbouring haystack, a number of officers were observing the Belgian position through their field-glasses.

Hearing the sound of the motor-cycle, several of the men turned and looked at the dispatch-rider, but they made no attempt to stop him. Evidently they thought he was one of their cyclists, for Rollo's uniform was smothered in grey dust, so that there was no perceptible difference between him and a motor-cyclist attached to the invading army.

Fortunately Rollo kept his head. Without slackening his speed he continued on his way until he was within two hundred yards of the nearest house in the village. Here he dismounted and began to rack his brains as to the best course to pursue.

He had fallen into a trap. Cortenaeken had been taken and was now in the possession of the enemy. He could see that several of the buildings were damaged by shell-fire. Unknown to himself he had ridden through the advanced German lines without any suspicion that thousands of men were concealed in the fields and thickets on either side of the road. The German left flank had been thrown forward a considerable distance, and their motor-scouts had been constantly in touch with the centre. Thus, by a pure fluke, Rollo had ridden through with a German motor-cyclist ten minutes ahead of him and another five minutes behind.

"I'll destroy the dispatch at once," decided the lad. "After that I'll try and ride back by the way I came. So here goes!"

He drew the petrol-soaked paper from the tank, and carried it to a dry ditch by the side of the road. The dispatch flared as soon as Rollo struck a match and set light to it. Its destruction was rapid and complete.

Before he could regain his mount a motor-cyclist dashed up. As he approached he slackened speed, gripped the exhaust-lifter, and took advantage of the consequent reduction of sound to shout something in German. Rollo shook his head; his knowledge of German was too elementary for him to reply, but he gathered that the man was asking whether he required any assistance.

Then, to the lad's consternation, the German dispatch-rider stopped, dismounted, and walked towards him.

"There's only one thing I can do—-I must pretend I'm deaf and dumb—temporary effect of the concussion of a shell, although I can't show a wound," thought Rollo. "It wouldn't be cricket to shoot the chap, especially as he stopped in all good faith. Well, here goes!"

Opening his mouth and working his chin like a gasping cod-fish, the lad awaited with considerable misgivings the result of his experiment.

The German was a round-faced, fair-haired fellow of about twenty—a student fresh from college. He looked quite sympathetic, and when Rollo explained by means of signs that there was something wrong with the electric ignition of his cycle, his face lighted up. Strolling up to the British lad's mount, he proceeded in quite a natural way to examine the sparking-plug, and, for the benefit of the supposed distressed rider, he made a pantomimic display of rubbing it with emery-cloth.

This done, he walked across to the spot where he had left his own cycle, still holding the plug in his hand.

"He's going to clean the blessed thing for me," thought Rollo, "and it's in perfect order, too."

But the next moment his amusement was changed to consternation, for, leaping into his saddle, the German made off at full speed, leaving Rollo with a motor-cycle that was now out of action with a vengeance.

Rollo was not left long in doubt as to the fellow's intentions. Soon he reappeared from the village accompanied by a patrol of Uhlans. The British-made motor-cycle had aroused his suspicions, and a closer inspection of Rollo's dust-covered uniform had confirmed them.

"The brute!" ejaculated Rollo. "At all events those fellows won't make use of my cycle."

With a quick movement he unscrewed the cap of the petrol tank, and threw his highly-prized mount on its side. Then, striking a match and deliberately waiting till it was well alight, he threw it into the escaping spirit. With a flash and a roar the petrol caught, and in an instant the cycle was enveloped in flames.

Rollo did not wait to see the end of his act of destruction. Taking to his heels he ran towards a wood about a couple of furlongs from the road. The hoarse shouts of the pursuing Uhlans rang in his ears as he fled, while a bullet, missing him handsomely, whizzed ten feet above his head.

Another shot followed with no better result. It was not the rifles of the pursuing horsemen that he feared; it was their obvious superiority in speed.

He could hear the thud of the horses' hoofs in the soft ground growing momentarily louder and louder. Only twenty yards more, and the Uhlans would be balked by the dense foliage. Ahead was a ditch, six feet in width, with a fairly high bank on the opposite side. In his heated imagination the fugitive could almost feel the points of those ugly lances thrust into his back.

With a stupendous effort he leapt, alighting on the other side of the ditch on his hands and knees. The Germans, fearing to risk the jump, began to rein in their horses. For the time being he had won.

Rollo staggered to his feet and clambered up the bank, when to his horror he found himself confronted by a dozen levelled rifles. It was a case of "out of the frying-pan into the fire" with a vengeance.

Had there been a ghost of a chance to break away Rollo would have seized it, but there was none. He raised both hands above his head.

The next instant he was held by two powerful soldiers, while others, with a dexterity acquired by much practice, searched him. Not only was he stripped, and the lining of his coat ripped open, but his boots were removed and the soles cut through, in case a hidden dispatch might be found. They even forced open his mouth to make certain he was not swallowing any document; and they took good care to retain the letters he had received from home.

Finding nothing of the nature they suspected, the sergeant in charge of the men gruffly ordered him in very imperfect French to dress. Then, escorted by four men, and followed by the patrol of Uhlans and the motor-cyclist who had raised the alarm, Rollo was taken into the village and brought before a group of officers.

"Ah, Englishman! We have caught you, then," exclaimed one of the Prussian officers.

Rollo looked straight at him. The German was in the uniform of the line. His head was swathed in surgical bandages, but there was enough of his face left exposed to give the British lad a clue to the identity of the speaker. He was the major who had treacherously attempted to shoot the Belgian officer by whom he had been given quarter, on the occasion of the night attack upon Fort de Barchon. On the fall of the Liége fortresses the Prussian had been released by his comrades, and in spite of his wound was once more at the front.

For the next ten minutes Rollo was closely questioned. He replied only when he felt fairly certain that there was no harm in so doing; but, when pressed to give information respecting the Belgian forces, he resolutely refused.

The German officers swore, and threatened him.

"You cannot make me disclose information," declared Rollo. "It is against the rules of war to coerce a prisoner."

A chorus of loud jeering laughter greeted this statement.

"My young friend," quoth the Major when the mirth had subsided, "you do not understand. When Germany makes war she makes war: there are no half-measures. Why should we, the greatest nation upon earth, be bound by rules and regulations laid down by a self-constituted peace party—the Geneva Convention?"

"But Germany was a party to it."

"Because at the time it suited her purpose. It is no use arguing, young Englishman. The point is, do you answer all our questions, or must we exercise pressure? Bear in mind that if you give false information, which we are certain to find out, you will be shot."

Rollo felt far from comfortable. His faith in the traditions of war, in which he had been versed by his father, was ruthlessly destroyed by the cold-blooded declaration of his captor. It was as well that he was given to pondering rather than to forming a hasty and impulsive resolution, otherwise he might have told the German major to do his worst. Under similar circumstances the impetuous Kenneth might have sealed his own death-warrant; but Rollo remembered that a still tongue makes a wise head.

Fortunately at this juncture an orderly knocked at the door. In response to an ungracious permission to enter he strode stiffly into the room, clicked his heels, and saluted.

"What is it?" demanded the Major.

The soldier handed his officer a sealed dispatch. The German broke the flap of the envelope with a violent movement of his thick fingers. It was characteristic of him and his profession: the use of brute force, even when dealing with the frailest thing that balked him.

His brows darkened. With an oath he tossed the document to his brother officers. They, too, swore. The news was not at all reassuring.

"Sergeant!" roared the Major. "Tell one of your men to have the swiftest motor-car he can find brought here at once. Those Belgian brutes have been causing trouble near Tirlemont. Then pick out a reliable patrol to escort this prisoner to Tirlemont, where I will deal with him in due course."

The sergeant saluted, and ran as hard as he could to execute his superior's commands. Rollo was removed in charge of the guards, until the arrival of the Uhlans detailed to act as his escort. Then, having made arrangements with his brother officers for the hurrying up of the regiment to repel the new phase of the Belgian offensive, the Major entered the waiting car and was whirled off along the Tirlemont road.

Rollo smiled grimly as he noted the numbers of the Uhlan escort.

"Seven of them: they are not going to take much risk of my giving them the slip," he thought. "All the same I'll keep my eyes well open, and if there is the faintest possible chance I'll take it. Anything is better than being threatened by that brute of a Prussian major. I wish I had knocked him over the head that night."

After traversing about two miles of the road the Uhlans relaxed their vigilance. No longer did they carry their lances across the saddle-bow, ready to transfix their prisoner at the first sign of trouble. Out came their pipes, and, under the soothing influence of the tobacco, the Uhlans attempted a conversation in broken French with their youthful charge. It was not a pleasant subject, for, with grim vividness, they impressed upon the lad the fact that they had already seen more than twenty summary executions, and judging by the manner in which the prisoners met their fate, the process was sharp and practically painless. But they could not understand why Herr Major had gone to the trouble to have the prisoner sent after him to Tirlemont, instead of having him put out of the way without further delay.

A mounted scout came galloping along the dusty road. The corporal in charge of the Uhlans stopped him to ask whether there were any Belgian troops in the district. Receiving a negative reply, the Uhlan grunted that it was just as well, as he had no desire to be shot at by those troublesome rascals.

"It is as safe as in the Unter den Linden," added the scout. "There is not an armed Belgian within ten miles of you. Our 43rd and 62nd Line Regiments have just gone forward. You might almost see the rear-guard; so keep up a brave heart, comrade."

The corporal growled at this joking advice, yet in his own mind he felt greatly relieved. After all there was no hurry to reach Tirlemont. If the patrol arrived before sunset, it was more than likely they would be ordered to perform another and more hazardous service.

"We'll halt at that farm-house," he said to his men. "There may be something worth finding. Two of you will be sufficient to keep an eye on the prisoner. He doesn't seem as if he will give trouble."

CHAPTER XVI

Entombed

"Ciel! What has hit you?" asked the Belgian corporal, regarding Kenneth with evident alarm.

"I am all right," replied the lad; "but those Uhlans have captured my friend—the English motor-cyclist I told you about."

"Get your rifles, comrades," ordered the corporal. "Louis, since you are wounded, remain at this loop-hole."

The lancer, struggling into his cartridge-belt, made his way to the observation post; while Kenneth and the rest of the Belgians pushed back the trap-door and took cover on the ground

floor of the partly-demolished house. There was plenty of time, for the Uhlans were proceeding at a leisurely pace.

"It is safe to fire," continued the corporal, having satisfied himself on all sides that there were no other German troops within sight. "I will take the leading Bosche on the right; Gaston, the one by his side will make a broad mark, since you are not a first-class shot. You, Étienne, cover the Uhlans on the prisoner's left; and you, monsieur, try your luck on that fellow in the rear. The rest we must polish off with the second round: none must escape, or we are undone. Now, monsieur, when I give the word, shout to your friend and tell him to fall to the ground. Even a hulking German will not stop a bullet, and I am sure your friend would not like a second-hand piece of lead."

Slowly the seconds seemed to pass. The Belgians, with their rifles resting on the broken brickwork and their fingers lightly touching their sensitive triggers, were ready for their prey. Admirably concealed, they were still further favoured by the light, for the setting sun shone full in the faces of the unsuspecting Uhlans.

"Now, monsieur!" hissed the corporal.

"Rollo!" shouted Kenneth. "Lie down!"

For once, at least, Rollo acted promptly. He threw himself on the road so swiftly that the horse of the Uhlan behind him reared. The German corporal, although he could not understand what was said, suspected the truth.

A word of command was on his lips, when he tumbled from the saddle with a bullet through his brain. Two more Germans shared the fate of their non-commissioned officer; but the fellow at whom Gaston had aimed came off lightly, with a neatly-drilled hole through his bridle-arm.

Two more, dismounting and taking cover behind their horses, attempted to use their carbines; while the seventh, seized with a panic, wheeled, and galloped as hard as he could from the scene.

Again the Belgian rifles rang out. The fugitive horse stumbled and fell, throwing its rider with a sickening thud upon the hard road. From the semi-underground retreat the Belgian corporal's rifle flashed, and one of the dismounted Uhlans dropped, while his horse, wounded in the neck by the same bullet that had killed his master, reared, and plunged upon Rollo as he lay upon the ground.

The other dismounted German, seeing the fate of his comrades, attempted to remount, but he too fell, shot through the heart.

In the midst of the confusion the wounded Uhlan set spurs to his steed and, bending over the animal's neck, tore down the road.

"Drop him: if he gets away we are as good as done for!" shouted the Belgian corporal.

Shot after shot whistled after the fugitive. Once he was seen to give a spasmodic movement and then again to drop over the horse's neck. Still the terrified animal tore onwards, and at length was out of sight.

"Quel dommage!" ejaculated the corporal. "The rascal has got away."

"He'll drop. I'll swear that he was badly hit," said Étienne, the artilleryman.

"We are not to know that," grumbled the corporal; "at least, not at present. Quick, there! We must remove all traces of the affair, and trust to luck that the fellow will be able to tell no tales."

Resting their rifles against the wall, Kenneth and his Belgian comrades ran into the road. They found Rollo little the worse for his experiences, beyond a bruised ankle caused by a kick from the struggling horse.

"Congratulations after. Work first," exclaimed the corporal. "Together, comrades!"

The corpses of the Uhlans and their horses were dragged across the highway and thrown into the broad ditch, where in the now gathering twilight they would escape observation, while dust was thrown upon the traces of the encounter.

"Now to the cellar!" exclaimed the corporal. "Nevertheless, I will remain without for a time. I am not at all satisfied. The escape of that wounded Uhlan troubles me, so I will keep watch from without."

"He received his quietus, never fear," declared Gaston. "He will tell no tales."

"If your opinion is not more true than your aim—" began the corporal meaningly. "But we must hope that it is so. All the same I will keep watch."

The rest of his comrades regained their underground retreat, leaving the trap-door open in

order that the corporal could descend without delay. Rollo was this time the centre of attraction, and the rescued lad had to give a long and detailed account of his adventures in the hands of the Germans.

"Your foot is hurting you," observed Kenneth, noticing that Rollo was wincing towards the close of his narrative. "Take off your boot and let me see what is wrong."

Examination showed that Rollo's leg was badly bruised from the ankle to the knee; in addition there were slight abrasions.

"It's lucky you didn't get a direct kick from that horse," continued Kenneth. "I'll bring some water and bathe it. I'm sorry we haven't any first-aid stuff with us."

With that Kenneth reascended the ladder, and made his way to a well that was situated about ten paces from where the back door of the house used to be. It was now nearly dark. The Belgian keeping his solitary vigil was hardly visible in the gloom.

The lad raised the heavy iron bucket, emptied about half the contents away, and was about to return to the cellar when the corporal gripped him by the shoulders.

"Regardez bien!" he whispered, pointing along the road that led to Cortenaeken.

"German cavalry!" exclaimed Kenneth.

"Would that it were!" said the Belgian. "Then we might see some fun. They are artillery. Ten thousand plagues on the clumsiness of Gaston! By missing that fellow, he allowed him to bring this hornets' nest about our ears. To the cellar! We cannot fight, we must hide and trust to luck."

Quickly the cellar-flap was shut, and in total darkness the six men waited for the opening of the German guns.

An appalling crash, followed by the rumbling of fallen bricks, announced that the first shell had hit the building. Mortar dropped from the arched roof of their underground retreat. The Belgians chuckled.

"Let the rascals waste their shells," declared Étienne. "They will want them badly before the war is over."

"Did you bring the water?" asked Rollo.

"Rather! I am not such an ass as to forget about you, old man," replied Kenneth. "Can you limp as far as the end of the cellar? There's a bench or something of the kind. It will be better than sitting on the cold stones."

Carefully and deliberately Kenneth bathed his chum's injured leg, while without the deafening crashes continued at rapid intervals.

"There can't be much of the house left," observed Rollo. "It wasn't much of a show when I first saw it. By the by, where is your bike?"

"Under some damp straw in an outhouse. It ought to be well out of the bursting area of those shells. At any rate——"

A vivid flash of light filled the cellar. There was a terrific roar, followed by an avalanche of bricks and stones. Kenneth, who was kneeling by his chum, was thrown violently against Rollo, and the two, deafened by the concussion, found themselves gasping for breath amid the sulphurous fumes that wafted around them.

A shell, crashing through the cellar-flap, had burst in the underground refuge. The luckless Belgians were literally blown to atoms. Kenneth and Rollo had escaped almost by a miracle, only to be confronted by a new danger. They were buried alive, and in peril of suffocation from the noxious gases of the burst projectile.

Kenneth staggered to his feet. His head came in contact with an immense slab of stone. He stretched out his arms, to find that his hands touched a shaking mass of brickwork on both sides.

"We're trapped!" he whispered. "If those brutes fire again, the rest of the cellar will cave in on top of us I wonder how the other fellows got on."

He called the Belgians by name, at first softly, then gradually raising his voice, but no reply came through the intervening barrier of debris.

The firing had now ceased. The last shell—the most destructive of all—had reduced the farm-house to a heap of ruins. Above ground, hardly one brick or stone adhered to another, while beneath the mound of ruins the two British lads were entombed, and apparently doomed to a lingering death.

CHAPTER XVII

The Way Out

For nearly a quarter of an hour, though it seemed like a long-drawn night, Kenneth and Rollo remained silent. Gradually the air became purer as the fumes escaped through the crevices in the brickwork. It was the darkness they dreaded most—a darkness that could almost be felt. It seemed to have weight, to press upon their eyes.

"I wish I had a match," whispered Kenneth.

Rollo felt in his pockets. It was, as he expected, a vain quest, for when in the hands of the Germans he had been rigorously searched, and every article in his possession had been confiscated.

"This is the limit," said Kenneth dolorously. "I'd much rather be shot in action. Here we may be snuffed out and no one will be a bit the wiser. We may not be found for years, perhaps never."

"Oh, shut up!" exclaimed his companion. "It's bad enough without rubbing it in."

"I wasn't."

"Yes, you were; but, I say, don't let us start quarrelling. The question is——"

"Hist!" whispered Kenneth. "I hear voices."

The lad was right. Almost above their heads heavy boots were stumbling over the debris, while the muffled sounds of guttural voices were borne to the ears of the two prisoners. The Germans were searching the ruins.

"I vote we shout. They'll dig us out," suggested Kenneth.

"I vote we don't," objected Rollo sturdily. "See, the gleam of a lantern is showing through a crack or a hole in the brickwork, so it can't be so very thick. We may be able to tunnel our way out when they clear off. If we gave ourselves up, ten to one they would shoot us for giving them all this trouble."

It was that small glimmer of light that raised their hopes, without which they would, through sheer panic, have called frantically to their foes for aid, without considering the consequences.

For perhaps an hour the Germans continued their search, until, discovering the passage of the final and fatal shell, they removed sufficient of the debris to enable them to descend to the cellar. The entombment of the two lads now proved to be a blessing in disguise, for, screened from observation by the mound of rubble, their retreat was unsuspected by the searchers.

Having found sufficient evidence to satisfy themselves that the Belgians who had ambushed the Uhlan patrol were themselves slain, the Germans concluded their investigations and went away.

For another long period the lads remained silent, until they felt convinced that once more they were free from the unwelcome attentions of the German troops. Then Rollo broke the silence.

"I'm jolly thirsty," he remarked.

"So am I," declared Kenneth. "There's some water in the bucket. We needn't be too particular. I dipped my handkerchief in it, but it was fairly clean."

"I'm ready to mop water out of a ditch," said Rollo.

Kenneth groped for the bucket. It was within six inches of his foot and standing upright, but it was empty. A fragment of shell had torn a hole through it close to the bottom. Not a drop of liquid was left.

"We've had a jolly narrow squeak," said Kenneth. "After that it would be hard lines if we were knocked out in the last lap. I don't think we shall be. Suppose we start tunnelling."

"Steady on, old man! We ought to wait till it gets light. Then we will be able to see what we are doing," expostulated his companion.

"I can feel."

"Yes, perhaps; but by dislodging part of the rubble you may cause a sort of landslide and bury us completely. I vote we exercise just a little more patience."

They had been conversing in whispers, lest the sound of their voices might be heard by a sentry, for it was quite possible that the Germans might think they had not accounted for the whole garrison of the ruined farmhouse. They had good reason to believe that the British dispatch-rider had taken refuge there; the only chance was that they might have come to the conclusion that Rollo was one of the unrecognizable victims of the deadly shell.

Slowly the hours of darkness passed, the silence broken only at intervals by the dull grinding of the subsiding debris and by a desultory, whispered conversation between the lads. Then Kenneth became aware that he could indistinctly discern his companion's face The long-hoped-for dawn had come at last.

In another half-hour it was light enough to form a fairly accurate idea of the state of affairs. The prisoners were in a triangular-shaped space, two sides consisting of the adjoining walls of the cellar. The third was composed of a bank of broken bricks and stones, diminishing in thickness as it grew in height. Overhead a part of the vaulted roof had fallen, but the brickwork remained cemented together, forming a shield from the rubble above it. But for this mass of brickwork the lads would have been crushed to death by the immense weight of the ruined walls of the farm-house.

Between the topmost bricks and the overhead protection quite a strong light penetrated into the cavity where they crouched. The early morning sun was shining directly upon the heap of debris.

"I think we can shift this stuff," remarked Kenneth, cautiously feeling a loose brickbat.

"All right, carry on," replied Rollo. "Only be careful to test each piece of rubble before you remove it. If we cannot make a hole through in that direction we must try cutting through the existing wall. It will be a tough job, but you have your knife."

"I hope we won't have to do that. The cement is as hard as iron. It would take us a week. Let's hope for the best."

Proceeding very cautiously, Kenneth removed enough of the debris to disclose an opening sufficiently large to thrust his head through. Upon attempting to enlarge the hole the mass began to slide; the overhead slab of brickwork rumbled.

"Steady on!" cautioned Rollo in alarm. "The whole show's caving in."

"It won't any more," declared Kenneth after a brief investigation. "See that wedge-shaped brick? It's acting as a keystone of an arch. All we have to do is to remove the rubbish from the lower part of the hole and squeeze out sideways."

In another half-hour the gap through the mound of rubble was enlarged to roughly eighteen inches wide and two feet in height. To all appearances the danger of further subsidence was past.

"I'll go first, old man," said Kenneth. "Then, if I get through all right, I can give you a hand. Think you'll manage it with that leg of yours?"

"I hardly feel it," replied Rollo, which was indeed no exaggeration. Keeping fairly still in that confined space, he had not tried the injured ankle. But, almost as soon as he made the declaration, he became aware of a throbbing pain from his hip downwards. In spite of Kenneth's attention to the sprained ankle on the previous night, the limb had swollen to an alarming extent.

Rollo made no mention of this to his comrade. He shut his jaw tightly and endured the pain.

With the utmost caution Kenneth began to wriggle through the narrow tunnel, using one outstretched arm to pull himself over the rough brickwork. The other arm he had to keep close to his side, and even thus it was a tight squeeze. Before his head emerged from the opening he stuck—and stuck fast. He felt as if he were suffocating; he was assailed by the horrible dread that the rubble was slowly yet surely subsiding. He wanted to struggle madly and desperately; to shout for aid. He was momentarily panic-stricken.

Controlling himself by a strong effort, Kenneth ceased to waste his strength in a useless attempt to drag himself from that horrible passage. With the sweat pouring from him he kept quiet, filling his lungs with the cool morning air from without.

"What have you stopped for?" asked Rollo anxiously.

"Can't help it," was the muffled reply. "Give my legs a shove, old man."

This Rollo did effectively by applying his back to the soles of his companion's feet. Keeping absolutely rigid, Kenneth found himself being pushed slowly yet gradually towards freedom. His head emerged—then his shoulders. He could now draw up his left arm and assist in the nerve-racking operation. Wellnigh breathless, bruised and scraped, covered with dirt and dust, and with his clothing rent in several places, he gained the open air.

Kenneth had already had sufficient military experience to learn the value of concealment. Without attempting to stand he made a careful survey of his surroundings. He was in a bowl-like

depression enclosed on all sides by irregular hummocks of pulverized brickwork, tiles, and charred timbers.

With a sigh of relief the lad realized that there were no Germans in sight. The attacking party had not thought fit to leave a picket in charge of the ruins of the farm-house. To all appearances the two comrades were the only living persons for miles around.

"I'll get the rope from the well and give you a pull out," announced Kenneth upon returning to the mouth of the tunnel. "It will be a fairly easy job."

"Don't be long, then," said Rollo anxiously.

"I won't," replied the lad encouragingly, and without further delay he hastened towards the well. It was no longer there. Only a deep cavity partly filled with rubbish marked its site. A shell had exploded close to it, causing the walls to cave in, and throwing out enough earth to leave a pit three yards in diameter. The windlass and the rope had vanished utterly.

"That's done it!" exclaimed Kenneth; then a brilliant idea flashing across his mind, he bent his back and ran across to the partly-demolished outhouse where he had hidden his motor-cycle.

With a shout of satisfaction he found the machine exactly as he had left it. The Germans had visited the adjoining shed, for several bundles of fresh straw had been removed. Wisps of straw were scattered on the ground, but the rotten material which Kenneth had thrown over his mount had been considered unworthy of the spoilers' attention.

Deftly Kenneth removed the belt from the cycle and doubled back to the tunnel.

"You've been a time!" exclaimed Rollo with evident relief. "I thought you'd tumbled into the well or had been collared by the enemy."

"Neither, thanks, old man. The well's gone to blazes and the rope as well, but this belt will answer our purpose. Hang on with both hands, turn over on your side, sprained foot uppermost, and say when you're ready."

Upon receiving the signal Kenneth began to haul. To his great surprise Rollo was pulled through the narrow opening with very little difficulty. Once more they were free; but they were not yet out of the wood. Between them and the Belgian army lay the lines of a vigilant and wary foe.

CHAPTER XVIII

Through the Enemy's Lines

"Everything's all clear, as far as I can see," reported Kenneth. "The question is, how are we to rejoin our regiment?"

"I can foot it," declared Rollo.

"But not ten miles. Your ankle would give out before you walked a hundred yards. What I vote we do is that I ride the bike and take you on the carrier."

Rollo shook his head.

"Too jolly conspicuous," he protested. "One fellow might stand the ghost of a chance, but two ——"

Kenneth turned over the question in his mind for a few moments. To remain where they were was impracticable. They would be starving before many more hours had passed.

"Tell you what!" he exclaimed as an idea flashed through his brain. "We'll rig ourselves out in German uniforms——"

"And get shot as spies if we're collared! No, thanks, Kenneth. If we are to be plugged I'd rather be in Belgian uniform, since a British one is at present out of the question."

"It's a risk, I admit. Everything is, under existing circumstances. If we are spotted, then there's an end to it and us; otherwise we stand a better chance by masquerading in these fellows' clothes."

"But if we are challenged? We couldn't reply in German."

"You're meeting trouble half-way."

"I like to go into the pros and cons," declared Rollo. "If you can convince me that your scheme is a sound one, I'm on; otherwise—dead off. For one thing, where are the German uniforms?"

"You've forgotten the Uhlans we slung into the ditch."

Rollo shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"I draw the line at donning the saturated uniform of a dead Uhlan."

"Come, don't be squeamish. If you are never asked to do a worse thing than that in the course of your natural, then you are a lucky individual. You'll find it's like taking a header into the sea on a gusty summer's day. The wind makes you shiver, and you think twice about it, but once you are in the water it's comparatively warm."

"You haven't got over the language difficulty."

"Yes, I have; at least I think so. If we meet any patrols, you must pretend to be half-dead——"

"I guess I shall be dead entirely if we do."

"Badly wounded, then. I'll bandage you up, and at the same time put a scarf round my jaw."

"What for?"

"Haven't you any imagination, old man? Why, to make out I've been wounded in the mouth and am unable to speak a word."

"You may think me an obstinate mule, Kenneth," said his comrade, "but why should two wounded men be trying to make their way to the front? Naturally they would be making tracks to the nearest field hospital."

"You've done me there," declared Kenneth. "But I can't see how we can go direct towards the German lines. Whether we go to the right or left the road runs nearly parallel to the enemy's front."

"Perhaps we may as well risk it," decided Rollo. "I believe I noticed a plank across the ditch about a mile along the road. The question is whether the bike will stand it over the rough ground."

"She will—she'll tackle anything within reason," said Kenneth optimistically. "So let's make a move."

Overcoming their natural repugnance, the two lads recovered the bodies of a couple of Uhlans from the muddy ditch and proceeded to strip them of their uniforms. These they wrung out, and placed on the broken brickwork to dry.

"I say!" suddenly exclaimed Rollo. "How about these boots with spurs? Do Uhlans ever ride motor-bikes?"

"Rather! They've a couple of motor-cyclists to each troop. All we have to do is to knock off the spurs, and there you are!"

As soon as the two lads had completed their change of uniforms they made a final reconnaissance. Finding the road clear of troops, Kenneth started the engine and stood astride the saddle, while Rollo took up his position on the carrier.

They looked a pair of bedraggled scarecrows. The Uhlan uniforms were wet and plastered with mud. Rollo's forehead was bound round with a grimy scarf, while, to give a most realistic touch, Kenneth had tied the blood-stained handkerchief that had been applied to his chum's ankle round the lower part of his face, completely covering his mouth.

"Ready?" asked Kenneth in muffled tones. Receiving an affirmative reply from his companion, he slipped in the clutch and away the cycle glided.

"Here's trouble!" the lad thought before many yards of road had been traversed, for ahead was a rapidly-nearing cloud of dust that evidently betokened the approach of cavalry or horse artillery.

"Troops of sorts coming," he informed his companion.

"Thanks, quite comfortable," was Rollo's inconsequential reply; for the handkerchief round Kenneth's mouth, the noise of the engine, and the rush of air as the motor-cycle tore along prevented the passenger from hearing the information given, while Rollo was unable to look ahead.

"Germans in sight!" yelled Kenneth.

This time Rollo understood. Resisting the temptation to look over his companion's shoulder, he drooped his head, as becoming the rôle of a badly-wounded man.

The on-coming troops turned out to be neither cavalry nor artillery, but a motor section, including a machine-gun mounted on an armoured side-car. Fortunately the pace as Rollo and Kenneth tore past was such that recognition or detection was out of the question.

"Here we are," announced Rollo a few seconds later.

Kenneth quickly pulled up. As he did so he gave a hurried look around. There were no signs of more Germans, while the motor-cyclist detachment was almost out of sight.

The plank across the ditch was about nine inches wide. In places it was worn to such an extent that there were holes in the wood. Kenneth eyed it with obvious distrust, yet it seemed the only likely means of gaining the open country beyond, across which a footpath promised fairly easy going.

"I didn't know that it was so rotten as that," said Rollo apologetically. "I don't know whether it will bear the weight of the bike."

"We'll risk it anyhow," declared Kenneth. "Can you put your foot to the ground without much pain? You can? Good! Steady the jigger a second."

Unhesitatingly Kenneth jumped into the ditch. He sank above his ankles in mud, with the water up to his thighs, yet he was able to keep the motor-cycle in an upright position while Rollo, steadying himself by means of the saddle, pushed it along the creaking plank.

"That looks bad," commented Kenneth, pointing to a small object lying on the ground. It was a brass button from the tunic of a Prussian soldier. Some of the enemy had passed that way, and were consequently between the lads and the Belgian lines.

"We may find a gap," declared Rollo, for by this time he was whole-heartedly devoted to the carrying out of his comrade's plans. "If it comes to the pinch we will have to abandon the bike."

"Steady, old man!" said Kenneth in mock reproof. "Because you lost your motor-cycle there is no reason why you should suggest my doing likewise. Now, jump up."

Kenneth maintained a moderate pace, keeping a bright look-out for any indications of the invaders. Judging by the state of the path and the ground for a few yards on either side, a regiment had recently passed that way, marching in fours. That meant that they were some distance from the supposed firing-line, otherwise the men would have advanced in open order. From the north came the distant rumble of guns. An action was in progress in the neighbourhood of Diest and Aerschot.

"Look out!" suddenly exclaimed Rollo. "There's a Taube."

"Where?" enquired his companion, slipping the handkerchief from over his mouth.

"Right behind us, and coming this way. I believe it's going to land."

"The rotter!" ejaculated Kenneth. "I wonder if they have spotted us, and are suspicious."

There was no time to say more, for the aeroplane was now passing overhead at an altitude of about two hundred feet. The motor had been switched off, and the Taube was vol-planing towards the earth.

It descended clumsily, striking the ground with a terrific bump that demolished the wheels and landing-skids. Directly the Taube came to rest, the pilot alighted and waved frantically to the two supposed Uhlan motor-cyclists.

"I'll have to go," mumbled Kenneth, who had readjusted his bandage. "You stay here. Now, steady—let me help you. Remember you are badly wounded, yet you want to skip like a superanimated gazelle. That's better; let your arms trail helplessly."

Having placed Rollo in a dry, shallow ditch by the side of the path, Kenneth walked quickly towards the disabled Taube. Outwardly he was cool enough, but his heart was beating rapidly.

At ten paces from the observer he stopped, clicked his heels, and saluted in correct German fashion.

The flying-officer spoke rapidly, at the same time pointing in a westerly direction. Kenneth knew not a word of what he said, but replied by nodding his head and indicating his bandaged jaw.

The German scowled, then, turning to the pilot, spoke a few quick sentences. Kenneth's hand wandered to the butt-end of his revolver. It imparted a feeling of comparative security. Then, recollecting his rôle, he pulled himself together and stood rigidly at attention, at the same time ready, at the first sign of suspicion on the part of the airmen, to draw his weapon and blaze away.

Presently the pilot produced some sheets of paper and a buff calico envelope. The observer

scribbled a few lines, sealed the missive, and held it towards the pseudo Uhlan.

Although Kenneth could not understand the other's words, their meaning was clear enough. He had been peremptorily told to make tracks and deliver the message somewhere towards the west, where the German lines were. With another salute he wheeled, and returned to his companion. Not daring to speak a word, he assisted Rollo to his seat on the carrier and set the motor in action.

"We're in luck, old man," said Kenneth, when they were well out of sight of the disabled Taube. "If we are spotted by any patrols this letter will pass us through. It's evidently a report to the colonel of one of the regiments in the fighting-line."

"Don't you think you had better drop me?"

"Drop you—what on earth for?"

"You might get through as a German dispatch-rider; but with a supposed wounded man going towards the firing-line? Looks a bit suspicious, eh?"

"No fear; we'll stick together. If one gets through, the other must; otherwise we'll both go under. Hello! Here's a road."

It was a sharp corner as they swung from the path to the highway. Kenneth wisely slowed down, and found himself almost in collision with a German patrol.

The men were evidently exhausted. Two were standing in the centre of the road, and leaning heavily upon their rifles. Half a dozen more, having discarded their rolled coats and cumbersome knapsacks, were reclining on a bank. The two faced about on hearing the approach of the motor. The others sprang to their feet and seized their rifles.

Producing the buff envelope Kenneth waved it frantically, at the same time increasing speed. The Germans stood back, the sergeant grunting a few words as the two lads flashed by. No bullets whistled past them; the aviator's dispatch had proved a safe passport.

For the next two miles they were continually passing troops, some going in the same direction, accompanied by heavily-laden supply wagons; others, wounded in action, painfully making their way towards the nearest field hospital.

The action, whatever the result might be, was no longer in this part of the field of operations. Ahead were the bivouacs of the Germans holding the line of front. The air was thick with the smoke of their campfires. Right and left, as far as the eye could see, were masses of grey-coated men, without a sign of a gap through which the British lads could make a dash for freedom.

Two hundred yards to the left of the road was a battery, the guns of which were admirably concealed from view from the front by a bank of earth on which were stuck branches of trees. The muzzles of the artillery were pointing at an angle of thirty degrees, so that they must have been shelling a Belgian position at a range of about five miles. Since the guns were now silent, Kenneth could only reiterate his belief that the heroic Belgians had had to retire in the face of overwhelming numbers, and that a distance of at least seven miles lay between the two lads and their friends.

After passing numerous detachments of troops without alarming incident, the confidence of Kenneth and his companion grew stronger; but they had a nasty shock when they were peremptorily challenged by a picket and ordered to halt. The sight of half a dozen levelled bayonets left no doubt as to the demands of the sergeant in charge of the party.

Kenneth brought the motor-cycle to a dead-stop, keeping his saddle and supporting the machine by placing his feet on the ground. Rollo, too, made no attempt to dismount, but, clinging to his companion, drooped his head with well-feigned exhaustion.

Pointing to the bandage over his jaw, Kenneth produced the official document. The sergeant took it, read the inscription, and pointed to a turning on the right. That, the lads knew, ran parallel to the German front.

Meanwhile one of the soldiers stooped and peered into Rollo's face. Then he said something to the sergeant, who signified assent. The private began to lift Rollo from his perch—not with any degree of violence, but carefully, as if actuated by feelings of compassion, addressing him as *kamerade*.

Rollo hung on tightly. Kenneth turned his head and expostulated in dumb show. The private again appealed to his sergeant, at the same time pointing to a Red Cross motor-wagon that was standing at some distance off.

With a jerk of his head the sergeant bade the man desist. After all, it was not his business. If the wounded Uhlan preferred to be jolted about on a motorcycle rather than be properly attended to in an ambulance cart, it was his affair.

Not to be outdone, the private gave Rollo a drink from his water-bottle. Then, having

returned the envelope to Kenneth and given him elaborate directions, made fairly clear by many movements of his hand, the sergeant allowed the two lads to proceed.

To continue along the road would arouse immediate suspicion. Accordingly Kenneth turned off and followed the route indicated by the German. Here, although there were plenty of troops moving up and down, most of the traffic was across the road between the bivouacs of the advance lines and the supports. Men were hurrying, each with a set purpose, and the two supposed wounded lads attracted but little notice.

The road they were now following was gradually converging upon the line of resting troops. Unless it made a bend to the right it would cut through the mass of German soldiery. And perhaps the officer whose name was on the envelope might be within close distance. His acquaintance neither Kenneth nor Rollo had the faintest desire to make.

So suddenly that Kenneth almost overshot it, a narrow lane, running at right angles to the direction in which they were travelling, came into view. It separated two infantry regiments, while at the cross-roads two machine-guns commanded the approach from the westward.

In an instant Kenneth made up his mind. Round swung the motor-bike, grazing one of the machine-guns by a bare inch; then, at full speed, Kenneth began his hazardous dash for safety. He had not ignored the risk, but there was a chance of success. The lane wound considerably, and, before the machine-guns could open fire, the fugitives would be screened by a bend of the tree-lined avenue.

A dozen voices shouted to him to stop. A bullet whistled high above the heads of the fugitives. A soldier, more alert than his comrades, had let loose a hasty, ill-aimed shot. Other bullets followed, some hitting the ground, others zipping overhead; but to Kenneth's relief there was no tap-tap of the deadly machine-guns.

"An outpost, by Jove!" muttered Kenneth.

He had not reckoned upon this. A quarter of a mile in advance of the line of bivouacs were a dozen infantrymen, lying hidden in a copse. Hearing the rifle-firing they started to their feet.

Kenneth never attempted to slacken his pace. He realized that everything depended upon speed. Before the outposts could solve the mystery of two men in Uhlan uniforms tearing towards them, the motor-cycle with its double burden was upon them. They gave back. One man attempted to lunge with his bayonet, but the tip of the steel flashed a good hair's breadth behind Rollo's back.

A ragged, ill-aimed volley was the parting salute. The two British lads were through the enemy's lines.

CHAPTER XIX

Arrested as Spies

"We're safe for the present," remarked Kenneth, after the two fugitives had placed a distance of at least four miles between them and the outlying German post. "I didn't mention it before, but the belt is slipping horribly. The strain has stretched it a lot; so we may as well shorten the rubber."

"By Jove, it is slack!" exclaimed Rollo, testing the "give" of the belt. "It's a wonder it didn't let us down badly. It's a funny thing, old man, but I've often noticed that if we expect a lot of trouble we get through without hardly any bother. The last lap, when we rushed the German lines, was as easy as ABC."

"Yes," assented his companion. "I've noticed that too. It's the unexpected trifle that often leads to greater difficulties. Got your knife handy? Oh, I suppose the Germans took a fancy to that too. Can you get mine from my pocket? That's right, cut the belt through at an inch from the end."

The motor-cyclists had halted in the midst of a war-devastated area. Farm houses and buildings were numerous, but in almost every case they had suffered severely from shell-fire. Not a living creature, besides themselves, was in sight. Here and there were corpses of the gallant defenders of Belgium, some in uniforms, some in civilian attire. These men, shot whilst in the act of retiring under a terrific artillery fire, had been left where they fell, showing how heavy had been the German attack; for in most cases the plucky Belgians contrived to carry off those of their comrades who had died for their country.

Close to the spot where Kenneth and his companion had stopped was a large farm wagon

piled high with furniture. Yoked to it were the bodies of two oxen, while a short distance away lay a dead peasant—an old man. The wagon, on which the refugee had been attempting to remove his goods and chattels from his threatened homestead, had fallen an easy target to the German guns.

A gnawing hunger compelled the British lads to examine the shell-riddled contents of the wagon in the hope of finding food. But in this they were disappointed. Not so much as a scrap of anything to eat was to be found.

Both lads were parched, Kenneth especially so. Even Rollo had almost forgotten the refreshing taste of the water given him by the German private. Yet, even in the pangs of a burning thirst, they could not bring themselves to drink of the stagnant water in the ditches by the roadside.

The repair completed, the motor-cyclists remounted. They were most eager to push on, even for the sake of obtaining drink, food, and rest. It could only be a matter of a few short, easy miles before they would be safe for the time being in the country still held by their friends, the Belgian troops.

"She's pulling splendidly now," announced Kenneth, referring to the transmission of power from the engine to the driving-wheel. Both lads had now discarded the bandages over their bogus wounds, and conversation was a fairly easy matter.

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when the motor began to falter. Then it "picked up", ran for about a quarter of a minute and slowed down again, finally coming to a dead-stop.

"No petrol," announced Rollo ruefully. "The tank is empty."

"Rot!" ejaculated his companion incredulously. "It was full when we started, and I'll swear we've done nothing like sixty miles on it yet."

Kenneth examined the gauge, then turned to his chum.

"Sorry, old man," he said. "I'm wrong. The stuff's all gone."

Further examination revealed the unpleasant fact that there was a small leak between the piping and the carburettor. Unnoticed, a quantity of the petrol had run to waste.

"It's a case of push," continued Kenneth. "How's your foot? Fit for a tramp? If not, you may as well get on the saddle and I'll run you along."

Although young Barrington's ankle was paining considerably, he sturdily refused to take advantage of his companion's offer. From experience he knew that pushing a motor was no light task. Kenneth might be capable of giving him a lift, but Rollo would not trespass upon his friend's generous conduct to that extent.

On and on they plodded, Rollo resting one hand on the saddle and striving to conceal his limp. Presently a practically ruined village came in sight. Not only had it been heavily bombarded, but subsequent fires had increased the work of destruction. Thick columns of smoke were rising high into the sultry air, while above the roar of the flames could be heard the excited tones of human voices.

"The villagers are trying to save the little that remains of their homes," said Kenneth. "They'll be able to give us some information as to where we can pick up the Belgian troops. Perhaps, though I doubt it, we may be also able to procure petrol."

Suddenly a peasant, who was standing about a hundred yards in front of the nearest house, took to his heels and ran, shouting as he went. Before he gained the village, spurts of dull flame burst from behind a heap of debris piled across the road, and half a dozen bullets *zipped* past the two lads.

"Lie down!" exclaimed Kenneth, stopping only to place his precious motor-cycle behind a tree by the side of a ditch, before he followed the prompt example of his companion. "Those fellows have mistaken us for Uhlans. I don't wonder at it, now I come to think about it."

Although sheltered by a mound by the side of the ditch, their place of concealment was known to the peasants. The latter kept up quite a hot fire from antiquated muskets and sporting-guns. Shots whizzed overhead, and showers of pellets fell all around the two lads.

"Can't blame them," said Rollo. "Let's hoist the white flag; it's no disgrace in this case."

Kenneth produced a very discoloured pocket-handkerchief. At one time it had been a white one, but owing to the various uses to which it had been put its colour resembled that tint which the French, with a reason, call "isabelle". For want of a staff he was obliged to hold it by his uplifted arm. In return he received a couple of pellets from a "twelve-bore", which, fortunately, only inflicted two punctured wounds in his skin.

"I'm not a rabbit," muttered Kenneth, and he continued to wave the "white flag".

Presently the firing ceased, and a swarm of men, accompanied by several shrieking women, bore down upon the two supposed Uhlans.

"We're friends!" shouted Kenneth. "We're English. We've escaped from the Prussians."

He might just as well have attempted to stem a torrent with a feather. The villagers saw only the hated uniforms of their merciless oppressors. They had no cause to grant quarter to Uhlans, for Uhlans were brutal and murderous to all with whom they came in contact when on their dreaded raids.

"A mort! A bas!" rose from the mob like the growling of a pack of half-famished animals. The two British lads were in dire peril of being torn limb from limb.

"A bas les Prussiens! Nous sommes Anglais," shouted Kenneth again, folding his arms and trying his level best to appear calm.

A stick, hurled by a woman's hand, missed his head and struck him heavily upon the shoulder. At almost the same time Rollo was hit by a broken brick, the missile striking him in the ribs.

"Tenez!" thundered an authoritative voice. "Let us show these vile Uhlans that Belgians are civilized. We will give them a fair trial, and shoot them afterwards."

"Anything for a respite," thought Kenneth. Even in this moment of peril the Belgian speaker's idea of a fair trial tickled his sense of humour.

The man who had intervened was a short, thickset fellow, with lowering eyebrows and a crop of closely-cut hair. He was dressed in black, while round his waist was a shawl, evidently intended for a badge of office. He had donned it in such a hurry that the loops of the bows had come undone and were trailing in the dust.

Grasped by a dozen toil-hardened hands, and surrounded by the rest of the survivors of the justly exasperated inhabitants, the two lads were hurried towards the village.

"I wish we had kept on our uniforms under these, old man," said Rollo. "We've nothing to prove our identity."

"They're speaking in German. That proves their guilt," announced one of their captors.

Neither Kenneth nor Rollo attempted to deny the statement—somewhat unwisely, for their unsophisticated guards took silence as an expression of assent to the accusation.

The military passes provided by the Belgian Government had been destroyed—Rollo's, when captured at Cortenaeken; Kenneth's, when the lads made their hitherto beneficial exchange of uniforms. As Rollo had remarked, they possessed nothing that they could produce to prove their identity.

Happening to look over his shoulder, Kenneth saw a peasant kicking his motor-cycle. Unable to wheel it, since its owner had slipped in the clutch previous to placing it under cover, the Belgian was venting his annoyance upon the machine.

"Stop!" shouted Kenneth. "That's an English motor-cycle. Would you do harm to anything made by your friends the English?"

He used the word "English" advisedly, for experience had taught him that the term "British" is hardly known to the peasantry of Belgium. Even the educated classes make use of the expression "English" more frequently than "British".

"Aye; do not injure it, Henri," called out the man who evidently held the office of Mayor. "When the English soldiers arrive to help us to drive back the Bosches it may be useful to them. Parbleu! It is useless to us."

In front of the ruined church the villagers held a most informal trial upon their captives. From the Belgians' point of view the evidence was absolutely conclusive against the prisoners. They were in German uniforms.

In vain the lads mentioned the names of Major Résimont, Captain Planchenoît, and other officers of the 9th Regiment of the Line. The peasants knew nothing of them; besides, they declared, it was an easy matter to invent names. Again, the prisoners spoke French with a foreign accent; they had been caught whilst coming from the direction of the German lines. They were, no doubt, scouts of the Uhlan patrol, bent upon completing the work of massacre and destruction that the guns had begun against the unresisting village.

"Hang them: powder is too good to waste upon canaille such as these," suggested one of the peasants.

"Yes, hang them," agreed another. "I'll do the job. 'Twill be but a slight revenge for my murdered wife and children. Let the Uhlans see, when next they come, that we, too, can be

terrible."

The Major nodded his head approvingly. A man shuffled forward with a coil of rope.

"One moment," exclaimed Kenneth, who even in this moment of peril did not lose his head. "If we are to die, cannot we have the service of a priest?"

It was a faint chance. A representative of the Church would undoubtedly have great influence with his flock. He would, more than likely, listen impartially to the story of the two condemned prisoners.

"A priest?" echoed one of the peasants mockingly. "Is it likely that Germans who have purposely shattered God's house can hope for absolution from a priest?"

"Besides, we have not a priest," added another. "Monsieur le curé was wounded early in the day. He was taken to Louvain."

"Hurry with the execution, camarades," said the Mayor. "Time is precious. At any moment a strong body of these Uhlans may be upon us. Prepared, we may bring down a few and sell our lives dearly—but this is not being prepared."

Kenneth shivered when he felt the contact of the rope round his neck. He glanced at his companion. Rollo's face was red with suppressed fury. He looked as if he were on the point of breaking loose and making a desperate bid for freedom. It was the injustice of the whole business, not the fear of death, that agitated him.

"Let's have a slap at them," said Rollo in a low tone. "If we get a dose of lead it will be better than a rope. Quickly, before they begin to tie our hands. Ready?"

"Aye," replied Kenneth calmly.

"One moment! You mark time with that fellow with the scar over his eye. We'll keep together as long as we can. I hardly feel my ankle——"

He stopped. His ready ear detected the clatter of horses' hoofs. The peasants heard it too. In evident alarm they gripped their antiquated fire-arms. The fellow with the rope let the noose fall from his hands and made a rush for his musket.

"It is well, camarades," shouted the Mayor. "They are our soldiers."

Down the main street of the ruined village rode a troop of Belgian lancers, followed by a motor-car on which was mounted an automatic gun. Seeing two men in Uhlan uniforms surrounded by a mob of angry peasants, the officer in charge ordered his men to halt, and rode up to ascertain the cause of the commotion.

As he did so, Kenneth recognized him as one of the officers who took part in trapping the Uhlans after their raid on Tongres.

"A nous, mon capitaine!" he said in a loud, clear voice.

"What have we here?" exclaimed the officer in astonishment; then recalling Kenneth's features he continued: "The English soldier in Uhlan uniform! What is the meaning of it all?"

In as few words as possible Kenneth related the circumstances that led to their present condition.

When he had finished, the captain turned to the leading villager.

"Monsieur le maire," he said. "I will be answerable for these two Englishmen. Believe me, in your zeal for your country's good you have slightly overstepped the bounds. Fortunately there is no real harm done, and messieurs les Anglais will no doubt forgive an unintentional injury."

The Mayor, who had meanwhile readjusted his sash, saluted the lancer captain, then held out his hand to Kenneth.

"Pardon, camarade," he said.

Now that the danger was over, both lads felt able to accept the deep apologies of the peasants. The latter had been labouring under a genuine grievance, and their somewhat high-handed action would admit of an excuse. They were quaking in their shoes lest their former prisoners should take steps to secure their punishment; but finding themselves magnanimously treated, they responded with three hurrahs for England and the two men who had come from that country to aid stricken Belgium in her troubles.

"Now what do you propose doing?" asked the Captain. "As for us, we must push on. We have an important reconnaissance to make."

"We want to rejoin our regiment—the 9th of the Line, sir," replied Kenneth.

The officer smiled grimly.

"I regret, messieurs, that I cannot help you in that direction," he said. "Perhaps the best thing you can do is to make your way to Brussels, and there await news of your regiment. Should anyone question you, say that I—Captain Doublebois—have instructed you. Is there anything else?"

"We've run short of petrol, sir," announced Rollo, pointing in the direction of the motor-cycle, the handlebars of which were just visible above the edge of the ditch.

"Parbleu! Petrol is now as precious as one's life-blood. Nevertheless, I think we may be able to spare you a litre. Corporal Fougette," he shouted, addressing the non-commissioned officer in charge of the motor machine-gun, "measure out a litre of petrol for these messieurs—good measure, not a drop more or less."

The Captain stood by while Kenneth brought up the cycle and had the petrol poured into the tank.

"Now, messieurs," he continued, "this will suffice to take you as far as our nearest depot. After that, proceed to Brussels. I'll warrant you'll be in need of a rest, but there will be plenty to occupy your minds, or my name is not Captain Raoul Doublebois. But take my advice, messieurs, and get rid of those accursed uniforms!"

CHAPTER XX

Stranded in Brussels

It was late in the day when Kenneth and Rollo having partaken of a plain but satisfying meal on the way, arrived in Belgium's capital.

The streets were crowded with refugees from the war-inundated districts. Throngs of pale-faced women and children, for the most part unnaturally apathetic, stood in mute despair around the country carts piled high with their belongings. Many of them had seen their houses torn by shot and shell, their neighbours slain by the German guns. Rendered homeless, they had fled to Brussels; their villages might be overrun and occupied by the invaders, but the capital—never! The Allies would never permit that.

Old men related the tales of their grandsires, how, almost a hundred years ago, England saved Brussels from the invader. History would, they felt convinced, repeat itself. So in their thousands the refugees poured into the already congested streets of the city.

Kenneth and his companion were indeed fortunate in securing the room they had occupied during their previous stay in the Belgian capital. Quickly divesting themselves of the civilian garb that they had managed to procure, they threw themselves into bed and slept like logs until nine the next morning.

When Rollo attempted to rise he found that his ankle had swollen to such an extent that it was almost a matter of impossibility to set foot to ground. The excitement and continual movement of the previous day had tended to make him forget the injury, but once his boot was removed and the limb allowed to rest, inflammation and consequent enlargement of the joint were the result.

"Take it easy, old man," suggested Kenneth. "When we've had breakfast I'll saunter out and see how things are progressing. Let me see, what's the programme? New uniforms; money—we have about ten centimes between the pair of us. It's lucky the pater placed that fifty pounds to my credit in the bank. The trouble is, how am I to prove my identity? Then there's Thelma. Perhaps Major Résimont's family has returned to the Rue de la Tribune, so I'll find out. I'll be gone some little time, old man."

"I don't mind," replied Rollo. "Before you go, you might get hold of a paper."

The cost of their simple breakfast was an "eye-opener". Already famine prices were being asked in the overcrowded city. Somewhat shamefacedly Kenneth had to explain the reason for his pecuniary embarrassment; but to his surprise the short, podgy woman who corresponded to the British landlady expressed her willingness to wait until messieurs les Anglais were accommodated.

"Perhaps, although I trust not, I may have to entertain Prussians," she added. "Then I know it is hopeless to expect payment."

Having had breakfast, Kenneth went out. He had put on an overcoat, lent by his obliging

hostess, in order to conceal the nondescript garments he had obtained as civilian clothes.

The crowded streets were strangely quiet. Beyond the occasional crying of a child or the barking of some of the numerous dogs, there was little sound from the listless throng.

When Kenneth was last in Brussels the people were vociferously discussing the situation, especially the momentarily expected arrival of the British Expeditionary Force. Now hope seemed dead. No longer was there any talk of foreign aid. People began to accept as a matter of course the fact that their city would be handed over to the Germans without opposition. Already the seat of government had been removed to Antwerp. The Civil Guards, who had at first commenced to erect barricades on the roads approaching from the eastward, had been ordered to remove the obstructions and to disarm themselves. In order to spare their city from sack and destruction, the Bruxellois had decided to admit the Huns without opposition.

Before Kenneth had gone very far his progress was barred by a vast concourse of people. Civil Guards were forcing a way through the throng, to allow the passing of a Red Cross convoy. There were thirty wagons, all filled to their utmost capacity, for the most part with mangled specimens of humanity. For every soldier wounded by a rifle-bullet there were, roughly, twenty-nine maimed by shell-fire.

Another battle had just taken place, with the now usual result. The Belgians, utterly outnumbered and outranged, had been compelled to fall back in spite of a determined and vigorous defence. Of their army a portion had retreated towards Ostend, while the greater part had retired to the shelter of the vast and supposedly impregnable fortress of Antwerp.

As soon as the convoy had passed, Kenneth hurried to the military depot. He found the place locked up. Not a soldier was to be seen. Enquiries brought the information that, regarding the fall of Brussels as inevitable, the authorities had transferred practically the whole of the military stores to Antwerp and Bruges.

"You want a uniform?" repeated the old citizen to whom Kenneth had announced his requirements. "Ma foi! Your only chance, unless you get a discarded uniform from the hospital (and there, alas! there are many), is to follow the army to Antwerp. But you are not a Belgian?"

"No, English," replied Kenneth. "And I must remain in Brussels for a few days."

"Then, mon garçon, put the idea of a uniform out of your head whilst you are here. Otherwise, when the Bosches arrive—— Ah, mon Dieu, they are barbarians!"

"Perhaps the old chap is right," thought Kenneth as he resumed his way. "I cannot desert Rollo, and if I were to be found in Belgian uniform it would mean at least a trip across the Rhine and confinement in a barbed-wire compound till the end of the war. Now for the Credit Belgique."

Upon arriving at the bank the lad had another setback. The premises were closed; all the windows were heavily shuttered, whilst on the door was a notice, printed in French and Flemish, to the effect that the whole of the bullion and specie had been taken over by the Government, and that the bonds had been sent to London for security until Belgium was free from the invading German armies.

"Bang goes my fifty pounds!" thought Kenneth. "We'll have to exist on our corporal's pay—one franc fifty centimes a week, if we can get it."

From the bank Kenneth made his way to the Rue de la Tribune. Here most of the shops were shut and every other private house deserted. At the house owned by the Résimont family there was no sign of occupation. One of the windows on the ground floor had been broken. Through the empty window-frame a curtain fluttered idly in the breeze. Already it was frayed by the action of the wind. Obviously the damage had been going on for some considerable time, without any attempt to prevent it.

Hoping against hope, Kenneth hammered at the knocker, but the door remained unanswered.

From the doorway of a tobacconist's shop opposite, the portly, well-groomed proprietor appeared. Raising a jewel-bedecked hand, he beckoned to the shabby youth standing on the Résimonts' doorstep.

"Monsieur requires——?" he asked, raising his eyebrows to complete his question.

"I wish to see Madame Résimont, monsieur."

"Madame set out soon after the war broke out. Whither I know not. But Monsieur is not Belgian?"

"No, English," replied Kenneth promptly, at the same time wondering why two people had asked that question that morning. It was a shock to his self-confidence, for he was beginning to pride himself upon his perfect French accent.

"You live in the city?"

"For a few days, monsieur."

"Good! Perchance I may hear news of madame. If you will let me have your address, I will in that case let you know." Kenneth furnished the desired information, and, having thanked the tobacconist, began to retrace his steps. As he did so he glanced at the name over the shop. In brass letters were the words "Au bon fumeur—Jules de la Paix ".

The worthy Jules did not wait until Kenneth was out of sight. Tripping back into the shop, he grabbed an envelope from the counter and wrote the name and address which he had obtained.

"English. Spy undoubtedly," he muttered gleefully. "In another two days that will be worth much to me."

For Jules de la Paix was Belgian only as far as his assumed name went. In reality he was a Prussian, a native of Charlottenburg, and a spy in the pay of the German Government. For over twenty years he had been in business as a tobacconist in the Rue de la Tribune, fostered by Teutonic subsidies, waiting for the expected day when the Kaiser's grey-clad legions were to strike at France through the supposedly inviolate territory of Belgium.

"I'll call at the post office," decided Kenneth. "I don't suppose it will be of any use, but on the off-chance there may be letters waiting for Rollo or me. There's no harm in trying."

In blissful ignorance of the danger that overshadowed him, Kenneth made his way through the crowd invading the post office. It was nearly forty minutes before his turn came. In reply to his request, a hopelessly overworked clerk went to a pigeonhole and removed a pile of envelopes.

"Nothing, Monsieur Everest," he announced, after a perfunctory glance at the various addresses. "Nor is there anything for Monsieur Barrington."

"Hullo, Everest, old boy! What on earth are you doing here?" exclaimed a voice in Kenneth's ear.

Turning, the lad found himself confronted by a tall, erect Englishman, whose features were partly concealed by the turned-down brim of a soft felt hat.

"I'm afraid I don't—— Why, it's Dacres!"

"Right, old boy! But you haven't answered my question. What are you doing in Brussels at this lively moment?"

Dick Dacres was an old St. Cyprian's boy. He was Kenneth's senior by several years, having left the Upper Sixth while young Everest was still in the Third. Kenneth ought to have recognized him sooner, for he had been Dacres's fag for one term.

"Let's get out of this crush," continued Dacres, grasping his old schoolfellow by the arm. Once clear of the crowd he noticed for the first time the lad's shabby clothes, but with inborn courtesy he refrained from passing any remark that might cause any confusion on the part of young Everest. "I'm out here on service; can't give you any particulars. What are you doing here?"

"I'm with Barrington—you remember him? We're corporals of the 9th Regiment of the Line—motor-cyclist section."

"Indeed! Where is Barrington?"

"In bed with a sprained ankle. Would you like to see him? It isn't very far."

Dacres glanced at his watch.

"I should, only I can't stop very long. I have an appointment with the——" He broke off suddenly.

"You're not in uniform, I see."

"No; we had to discard ours. I have been trying to get a fresh equipment, but it seems hopeless in this place."

"Fire away and let's have your yarn," said Dacres encouragingly, as they walked side by side along one of the fairly-unfrequented streets running parallel with the Rue de la Tribune.

Before they reached the modest lodging Dacres had skilfully extracted the main thread of his late college-chums' adventures.

"Then you're temporarily on the rocks," he observed.

"I didn't say so," expostulated Kenneth.

"My dear man, I know you didn't, but I can put two and two together. It's a delicate subject, Everest, and I'm afraid I'm rather a blunt sort of chap, so excuse me. You're on your beam-ends?"

"Unfortunately, yes," admitted Kenneth. "The pater sent a draft to the Credit Belgique, but before I could draw on it the bank's been transferred. But it will be all right soon, I expect."

"Very well then, until things get a bit straight, let me give you a leg-up. Don't be uppish, old man. Remember we're Britons in a strange land. Luckily I'm fairly flush."

So saying, Dacres produced his purse, and extracting five twenty-franc pieces forced them into Kenneth's hand, abruptly checking the lad's mingled protestations and thanks.

"Rollo, old man, I've brought someone to see you," announced his comrade, as he opened the door of the room in which Rollo was lying in bed.

"Hulloa, Barrington!"

"Hulloa, Dacres!"

That was the prosaic greeting, nothing more and nothing less; yet there was a wealth of cordial surprise in the interchange of exclamations.

The time Dacres had at his disposal was only too short. He was, he explained, a sub-lieutenant in one of the recently-raised naval brigades, and had accompanied an officer of rank upon an important mission to Belgium. More he was unable to say. He had already been to Ostend, and was now about to proceed to Antwerp.

"We're returning home to-night," he concluded. "If you like to entrust me with a letter, I'll see that it's posted safely the moment I set foot ashore in England. If I've time I'll look your people up and let them know you're doing your little bit. It all depends upon whether I can get leave, but we are hard at it whipping recruits into shape."

"Awfully decent chap," commented Kenneth, when Dick Dacres had taken his departure. "He would insist upon lending me a hundred francs. Otherwise, old man, we would be on the rocks—absolutely. I've drawn three blanks—no uniforms obtainable, no tidings of the Résimont family, and no letters from home. I think we ought to hang on here a little while until your ankle's fit. We may see the beastly Germans marching through the city, for the burgomaster has gone, so I hear, to obtain terms of capitulation."

"Where are the Belgian troops?"

"Mostly in Antwerp."

"Then if I were you, I'd make tracks for Antwerp while there's time."

"Are you fit, then?"

"I wasn't referring to myself. This ankle will keep me here some days longer, I'm afraid. But you go, and if I have a ghost of a chance I'll find you again within a week."

Kenneth shook his head.

"Can't be done," he declared. "I mean to stand by you till you're well again. It would be interesting to watch how those Germans behave in Brussels."

"It's risky," remarked Rollo.

"So is everything connected with this business, old man. Besides, we are acting under the orders of Captain Doublebois, so that settles it."

CHAPTER XXI

Denounced

The morning of the 20th August—a fateful day in the history of Belgium—dawned, accompanied by a drizzling rain. The sky seemed to be shedding tears of sympathy at the impending fate of Brussels, for, according to the terms of the agreement made between the German commander, Sixtus von Arnim, and the Belgian burgomaster, the invading troops were to march in unopposed.

When the triumphant Prussians entered Paris after the siege of 1870, their pageant-like progress was witnessed only by a few exasperated Parisians from behind the shuttered windows of their houses. The streets along the line of route were practically deserted. Had the Bruxellois adopted a similar plan, much of the effect of the gaudy display of Germany in arms would have

been thrown away.

But the citizens of Brussels acted otherwise. In spite of their fear and trembling they assembled in vast, silent throngs. Curiosity had got the better of their national pride. Those who had good reason to doubt the plighted word of a Prussian took courage at the high-spirited yet conciliatory proclamation of the debonair M. Max, the burgomaster:

"As long as I live, or am a free agent, I shall endeavour to protect the rights and dignity of my fellow-citizens. I pray you, therefore, to make my task easier by refraining from all acts of hostility against the German soldiery. Citizens, befall what may, listen to your burgomaster. He will not betray you. Long live Belgium, free and independent! Long live Brussels!"

Accordingly the citizens, amongst whom were few able-bodied men, assembled in crowds ten or twelve deep along the principal thoroughfares. Amongst them was Kenneth Everest, who, in his civilian garb, attracted no attention from those who stood near him. Since a dignified silence seemed to brood over the humiliated Belgians, Kenneth had no occasion to speak, and thus disclose his nationality. He knew, by reports from his hostess, that there were spies innumerable mingled with the throng; but he was unaware that he was already marked for denunciation to the German authorities as soon as the Prussian rule was established in Belgium's capital.

Presently a wave of dull expectancy swept through the heavy-hearted populace. It was now early in the afternoon. From the south-east and east came the faint discord of military bands playing one against the other. Louder and louder grew the noise, till the strident tones of "Deutschland über Alles", played by the leading regimental band, drowned the chaotic blare of the next.

Craning his neck in order to obtain a clear view through the forest of dripping umbrellas—for the rain was now falling steadily—Kenneth could discern the head of the procession—a general, swarthy and heavy jowled, who scowled under his heavy eyebrows at the crowd as he rode by. He was the personification of German brute force, a stiffly-rigid figure in grey. He reminded Kenneth of a cast-iron equestrian statue smothered in grey paint.

In close formation came the various regiments of the invaders, men whose fresh uniforms and faultless equipment gave the appearance of troops straight from their regimental depots rather than war-worn veterans. And this, in fact, was the case. The men who had learned to respect the courage and determination of the hitherto despised Belgian troops had not been permitted to engage in the triumphal pageant through the surrendered city. Others of the almost innumerable Teutonic legions had been sent forward to impress the remaining inhabitants of Brussels.

Suddenly a guttural order rang out. As one man the grey-clad ranks broke into the machine-like goose-step. Possibly this spectacular display was meant to seal the impression upon the onlookers. If so, those responsible for the order were grievously mistaken. Regarding the action as one of insulting triumph, the Belgians strengthened their resolutions to impress on their absent troops the necessity of resisting to the last cartridge.

With the troops came large transport sections, motor machine-guns, batteries, and siege-trains. During that memorable afternoon nearly fifty thousand German troops poured into the city. They were resolved to hold and bleed the luckless citizens to the last gold piece—an indemnity for non-resistance.

"So they're here?" asked Rollo of his companion upon the latter's return. "I heard the din and the terrific discord of their brass bands. Have they done any damage?"

"Not as far as I could see. It is too early to come to any conclusion. At any rate, we'll lie low for a few days. I don't suppose they'll trouble us. How's the ankle?"

For the whole of the next day Kenneth remained indoors with his partly-crippled companion. Perhaps the most galling part of his detention was the total absence of news from without, for none of the papers were permitted to appear.

Small detachments of Germans patrolled the side streets, and, generally speaking, order was well maintained. The conquerors evidently wished to impress the citizens of Brussels with their magnanimous conduct; but, with the record of their deeds against the unresisting villages of the provinces of Liége and Brabant, the Germans made very little headway in gaining the goodwill of the inhabitants.

About nine on the following morning the lads heard a furious hammering on the street door of the house. They exchanged enquiring glances. Kenneth rushed to the latticed window, opened it cautiously, and looked down into the narrow street.

Standing outside the house were a dozen Prussian infantrymen. A sergeant was about to hammer again upon the door. Beside him stood a lieutenant, drawn sword in hand. A crowd of inquisitive civilians stood at a respectful distance; while, from the windows of the houses on the opposite side of the street, the frightened inhabitants peeped timorously at the display of armed force outside the dwelling of the highly-respected Madame Hirondelle.

"What's up?" asked Rollo.

"Prussians. They're after us, old man."

"Nonsense! Why should they be?"

"Someone's given us away," declared Kenneth savagely. He realized that they were trapped. There was no means of escape along the roofs of the adjoining houses, no place in which to hide without being easily and ignominiously hauled out. Even had there been a chance of getting clear, Rollo's injured ankle had to be taken into consideration.

They heard the door being opened; the harsh voice of the German lieutenant interrogating Madame Hirondelle in execrable French; then the tramp of heavy boots as the file of soldiers entered the house and began to ascend the stairs.

Rollo sat up in bed. His companion stood by the side of the alcove, gripping the back of a chair.

Then came a heavy knock at the door of the room, as a harsh voice shouted:

"Englischemans, surrender; if not, we shoots!"

Then the door was pushed open a little way, and a spiked helmet thrust forward on the muzzle of a rifle. Finding that this emblem of German militarism was not the object of an attack, the lieutenant plucked up courage and dashed into the room, brandishing his sword and revolver like an eighteenth-century melodramatic pirate.

After him crowded the sergeant and most of the men, two privates being left to guard Madame Hirondelle, in order that she would not be able to communicate with the supposed spies.

Kenneth was roughly seized by the throat. His hands were grasped and tied behind his back. The sergeant then proceeded to ransack his pockets, without discovering any documents, incriminating or otherwise. The unexpended portion of Dick Dacres's loan was taken possession of by the lieutenant, whose avidity in grabbing the money seemed to suggest that there was but slight possibility of it finding its way into the coffers of the Imperial treasury.

Meanwhile Rollo had been ordered to get out of bed. His clothes, after being searched and examined, were handed to him.

Other German soldiers were busily engaged in ransacking the room. The bed was uncovered, the mattress cut open in the vain hope of finding incriminating evidence; the contents of cupboards and drawers were turned out upon the floor, the Prussians taking care to retain "souvenirs" of their exploit as they did so.

Greatly to his disgust and disappointment, the lieutenant's efforts to obtain proofs of the supposed spies' guilt were fruitless.

He gave an order. Soldiers surrounding the two lads urged them through the door and down the narrow stairs. Determined to make a good haul, the officer ordered the arrest of Madame Hirondelle, the concierge, and the two maid-servants; then, with much sabre-rattling, he led the prisoners through the streets.

A quarter of an hour later Kenneth found himself alone in a gloomy cell. The prospect was not a pleasing one. Even with a clear conscience as far as the charge of espionage went, the lad realized the terrible position in which he and Rollo were placed.

They were British subjects; they were not in uniform; they had no documents to prove the truth of their statement that they were corporals in the Belgian army. There was no one, excepting the thoroughly-terrified Madame Hirondelle, to speak a word in their favour.

For half an hour he paced the limited expanse of floor, pondering over the difficulties of the situation. Then, without any thought of attempting an escape, he began examining the walls and floor of his cell. The place was roughly twenty feet in length and nine in breadth. The walls were of brick, set in hard, black cement. They had, at some previous time, been coated with yellow limewash, but most of the colour had been worn off. The floor was paved with irregular stone slabs. Eight feet from the ground was a small unglazed window, with two rusty and slender vertical bars. Opposite the window was the door of worm-eaten oak.

The floor was half a dozen steps lower than the level of the ground without. A sentry was posted outside the window. Although standing erect, the only part of him visible from within was from his knees to his belt, so Kenneth knew that on that side the ground was about five or six feet above the floor of his cell.

It also appeared likely that the room was not generally used as a place of confinement. It had no furniture. On the stone floor were wisps of straw and hay. It might, but for the steps from the doorway, have been used as a stable.

"The Germans don't surely mean to keep me in this rotten hole," thought Kenneth. "It isn't fit for a dog."

Slowly the morning passed. At noon the sentry without was relieved. The sergeant's guard made no attempt to look through the window. The new sentry seemed ignorant of the presence of the English lad. There he stood, as rigid as a statue, while the minutes ran into hours. Not once did the grey-coated soldier "walk his beat". No one passed by. The sentry was to all intents and purposes posted in a totally unnecessary position.

Just as the clocks chimed the hour of two, the door of the cell was opened and a sergeant and file of Prussian infantrymen entered. Silently the non-commissioned officer pointed to the open door. Preceded and followed by the soldiers, Kenneth set out to be tried for his life.

CHAPTER XXII

The Sack of Louvain

Passing along several gloomy passages and ascending two flights of stairs, Kenneth was ushered into a large, well-lighted room overlooking the city square. From without came the noise and bustle of hundreds of troops. Several regiments, having recently arrived, were partaking of a meal in the open, the food being cooked in large portable kitchens, the smoke from which drifted in through the open windows of the room.

Seated at a massive oak desk was an officer in the uniform of the German General Staff. Behind him stood a major and two captains. At a writing desk against the wall, facing the windows, sat a military clerk. The soldiers of Kenneth's escort lined up behind him, the sergeant standing rigidly at attention on his right. Of Rollo there were no signs.

For some moments Colonel von Koenik, the president of the court, regarded the lad before him with a fixed glare. Kenneth met the president's gaze unflinchingly, yet he realized that there was a menace in the German's manner. It was a hatred of England and of all men and things English.

Finding that he could not browbeat the prisoner, von Koenik rasped out a few words to the major who stood behind him. With a stiff salute the latter advanced to the side of the president's desk.

"What is your name, prisoner?" he asked in fairly good English, although there was a tendency to substitute the letter "b" for "p" in most of his words.

Kenneth told him. The major referred to a paper that he held in his hand.

"You are English? What are you doing in Brussels?"

"I am a soldier in the Belgian service."

"In the Belgian service perhaps; but a soldier—no, never."

"Pardon me, sir," protested Kenneth; "I am a corporal of the 9th Regiment of the Line."

The Major waved his hand contemptuously.

"You are not—what you call it?—ah!—bluffing an English magistrate this time. You have a Prussian officer to deal with. If what you say is true, why are you not in uniform? Where are your identity papers? Say rather that you are in the employ of that arch-plotter Grey; tell us exactly the truth, then perhaps we will be merciful."

"Of what offence am I accused, sir?"

"Espionage—surely you know that without asking an unnecessary question."

"It is not true. I have never attempted to spy. Who, sir, is my accuser?"

"It is undesirable to mention names. Our informant states that you have been several days in Brussels, always in civilian clothes. You frequented public buildings; you were seen watching the arrival of our troops."

"That I admit," said Kenneth. "There was no secrecy about the ceremonial parade of the German army through the streets."

"Then perhaps you would tell your friends in England how the victorious Germans will march through London, hein?" asked the Major mockingly.

"I'm afraid they won't," retorted Kenneth, throwing discretion to the winds. "Your troops have to reckon first with our army and then with our fleet."

"Your army? Faint-hearted mercenaries. Englishman, in less than a fortnight our troops will march right through the English and their friends the French, and be in Paris. After that, London."

"No fear!" ejaculated Kenneth.

The German major shrugged his shoulders.

"It is wasting the time of the court," he remarked. "To return to the business in hand. You, an Englishman, have been caught red-handed. You admit you are interested in military matters, although your claim to be a corporal in the Belgian army does not hold. Again, you admit that you took up arms against us?"

"Certainly—as a soldier, and strictly in accordance with the code of war."

"Your code is not our code," sneered the Major. He then turned and addressed the president. Colonel von Koenik inclined his head, and gave an order to the sergeant of the guard.

Three men filed out, returning after a brief interval with Rollo. Limping badly, young Barrington was marched across the room and placed by the side of his chum.

The president stood up and removed his helmet. The other officers also uncovered.

"Accused," he said, speaking in English, "you are found guilty on a charge of espionage. The sentence is death."

Von Koenik sat down and resumed his head-dress. He scanned the faces of the two lads, as if to detect signs of fear. But there were none. Beyond an almost imperceptible tightening of the lips, the young Britons received the grim intelligence unflinchingly.

"But on account of your youth I am going to make what you English call a sporting offer. You"—addressing Rollo—"expressed an opinion that our armies would never reach Paris."

"I did," replied Rollo, whose examination had been concluded before Kenneth had been brought before the court.

"And you also"—to Kenneth—"made a similar rash statement."

"Not rash, sir; but a candid statement."

"Very good. You will both find that you are in error. Now, this is my offer. You will not be shot straight away. You will be kept in close confinement. As soon as Paris is taken—as it will be in about a fortnight—your sentence will be put into execution. If within thirty days from now our armies should by some unprecedented accident fail to reach Paris, your lives will be spared and your sentences commuted to ten years' imprisonment in a fortress. You comprehend?"

Von Koenik broke off to exchange a few words in German with the major. Then he resumed:

"Major Hoffmann here will be answerable for your custody. So long as you give no trouble, and make no attempt to escape—such attempt will be bound to be a failure, let me add—you will be treated with as much consideration as it is possible to accord to convicted spies."

Again the president conferred with the major. Then, stiffly saluting, Major Hoffmann gave an order. The soldiers closed around the two prisoners.

With their heads held erect, Kenneth and Rollo were about to be marched from the presence of the grim Colonel von Koenik, when the latter rapped the desk with an ivory mallet.

"Of course," he added, "when our armies enter Paris—about the 1st of September—you will accept the decree of fate? Perhaps. But it is not pleasant to be confronted by the muzzles of a dozen rifles of a firing-party. There is one more chance. If you give us true and full information concerning certain points which will be raised later, the full penalty will be mitigated. You understand?"

Both Kenneth and Rollo began to protest, but von Koenik silenced them.

"You English are too fond of acting and thinking rashly on the spur of the moment," he exclaimed. "Think it over—carefully. It is worth your calm deliberation."

On being removed from the court, Kenneth and Rollo were placed in the same cell—the room in which the former had been kept pending his appearance at the farcical trial.

Colonel von Koenik had no intention of carrying his threat into execution. He was one of those men who are firm believers in the application of methods of tyranny to gain their ends. Kenneth Everest had been denounced as a spy by the tobacconist of the Rue de la Tribune—himself a German secret agent. The information had to be acted upon, and Rollo, living in the same house as the accused, had also been arrested.

Von Koenik would not condemn a prisoner without conclusive evidence. He was convinced, mainly on the testimony of Madame Hirondelle, that neither Kenneth nor Rollo was a spy; at the same time they were Englishmen, and that was sufficient to merit their detention. Again, by intimidation or cajoling they might be able to furnish valuable information to the German authorities. Since the informal sentence of death did not move the accused to beg for mercy, a slower and constantly terrifying method must be applied.

The firm expressions on the forthcoming failure on the part of the Germans to enter Paris—an expression that both lads made independently of each other—gave von Koenik an idea. On his part he was absolutely certain that no mortal power could arrest the victorious march of the Kaiser's legions; and such was his obsession that he imagined both Kenneth and Rollo could have no inmost doubts on the matter. By proposing a "sporting offer", von Koenik knew that his methods to terrorize would have time to work and undermine the resolution of the English lads. In a very few days, he decided, they would be willing to save themselves from a haunting dread by offering the information he desired.

It was by no means a new experiment on the part of Colonel von Koenik. During his tenure of office in command of a line regiment in an Alsatian town, he had frequently terrorized civilians who had fallen under his displeasure, by the application of methods based upon the legendary sword of Damocles. Hitherto this form of the tyranny of the Mailed Fist had been most successful; but it was different in the case of Kenneth Everest and Rollo Barrington.

"What was that swashbuckler driving at, I wonder?" asked Rollo, when the two chums found themselves alone in their cell. "Do you think that he really intends to have us shot?"

"I should say yes; only I don't understand why the sentence was not carried out at once. It is a low-down trick keeping us on tenterhooks; but from what we have already seen and heard, these Germans—the Prussians especially—do not draw the line at anything."

"Anyhow, the fellow thinks he's on a dead cert. on the Paris trip. I don't; so if he's as good as his word on the month's grace we'll escape the firing-party. As for the ten years, that's nothing. We'll be liberated at the end of the war."

"Unless we 'break bounds' at the first opportunity," added Kenneth. "We both seem to have been born under a lucky star, and having given those fellows the slip once, there is no reason why we shouldn't be equally successful the next time."

The two following days the lads passed in uneventful captivity in the cell. Straw had been provided for bedding, while their meals consisted of rye bread and water, and, once a day, a bowl of soup. For half an hour they were allowed to take exercise in an enclosed courtyard, four soldiers, carrying loaded rifles, having been told off to prevent any attempt at escape.

On the morning of Tuesday, the 25th of August, the prisoners were ordered to leave their cell. Guided by the same four soldiers, they were marched into the courtyard, where a dozen Belgian civilians were formed up under an armed guard. In a doorway opening into the quadrangle stood Major Hoffmann, watching the proceedings with a supercilious air.

"Are they going to shoot the crowd of us?" whispered Kenneth; but before Rollo could reply, a sergeant gave the speaker a violent blow and sternly ordered him in French to be silent.

The names of the prisoners were then called out, each man having to answer to his name. This done, the sergeant in charge took the list to Major Hoffmann, who initialled the document and returned it.

Then the large gates at one end of the courtyard were thrown open, and the prisoners, surrounded by their armed guards, were ordered to march.

Along the Chaussée de Louvain—one of the principal thoroughfares of Brussels—the melancholy procession passed. There were crowds of people about in addition to the numerous German troops. The citizens regarded their compatriots under arrest with suppressed feelings. They were afraid to make any demonstration of sympathy. The iron heel of Germany had crushed the spirit out of the Belgians who still remained in the fallen capital.

"Do you know where they are taking us to?" asked Kenneth of the prisoner marching next to him, evidently a well-to-do business man before the great calamity that had overtaken him.

"They say to Germany, there to work in the fields and help to feed our enemies," replied the man. "At all events, we have to march to Louvain and be entrained there."

Kenneth's great fear was that Rollo would be unable to stand the strain of the long march. His ankle had improved, but he still limped slightly.

"I'm all right," replied Rollo cheerily, in response to his chum's anxious enquiry. "It's better than being cooped up in that rotten hole. Besides," he added in a whisper, "we may get a chance of giving them the slip."

So far the information given by the Belgian seemed to be correct. The prisoners were

trudging along the highway leading to Louvain. Beyond that point, railway communication was now possible; for with their advance upon Brussels the German engineers had lost no time in repairing the lines and erecting temporary bridges in place of those sacrificed by the Belgians in their efforts to impede the enemy's advance.

At twelve o'clock the prisoners reached the village of Cortenburg, about half-way between the capital and Louvain. Here they were halted, and driven into a church. For food and drink they had to depend upon the charity of the villagers, who, notwithstanding the fact that they had been despoiled by the invaders, gave the famished and travel-worn men bread and milk.

For three hours Kenneth and his companions in adversity were kept under lock and key, while their escort, having obtained copious quantities of wine, were becoming boisterously merry. When, at length, the order was given to resume the march, some of the soldiers were so drunk that they could not stand. The sergeant thereupon ordered the villagers to provide two carts, and in these, lying on bundles of straw, the besotted men followed their comrades.

Before the prisoners had covered a mile beyond Cortenburg an open motor-car dashed past. In spite of its great speed both Kenneth and Rollo recognized its occupants. They were Colonel von Koenik and Major Hoffmann.

"They don't mean to get out of touch with us, old man," remarked Kenneth, after the car had disappeared in a cloud of dust. "I suppose they'll go on by train to whatever distance we are bound for. I'll warrant they'll be waiting at Louvain."

"I wish I had the chance of bagging that motor-car," said Rollo. "It's a beauty. We'd be in Antwerp in less than an hour."

"Instead of which we're tramping along, with a dozen of more or less intoxicated soldiers to keep an eye on us," added Kenneth. "I believe if we made a bolt for it they would be too tipsy to aim properly."

"It's too risky," declared Rollo. "There are hundreds of German troops scattered all over this part of the country. Besides, if we did get away, the other prisoners would get a rough time. What's that?"

"Rifle-firing," replied Kenneth, as the rattle of musketry could be faintly heard, the sounds coming from the north.

"A battle before Antwerp, probably," suggested Rollo. "The Germans will have a stiff task if ——"

A vicious box on the ear from the nearest soldier brought the conversation to a sudden close. The fellow who dealt the blow grinned with intense satisfaction at his deed. The next instant Rollo's fist shot out straight from the shoulder, and the German dropped like a log. He was too drunk to feel the blow, so he sat on the road, his rifle on the ground, holding his jaw with both hands and bawling in pot-valiant style.

Taking advantage of the momentary confusion, two of the Belgian prisoners made a dash for liberty. One was the man to whom Kenneth had spoken—a short, stout, apoplectic individual; the other a tall, lean fellow who had the appearance of a trained athlete.

Before the astonished Germans could level their rifles both men had got across a wide ditch, and had placed a hundred yards of marshy ground between them and their late captors. Then half a dozen rifles rang out, but the fugitives held on, the taller one having established a lead of twenty yards. They were making for a wood, not more than a quarter of a mile off.

Again and again the Germans fired. The lads could see some of the bullets kicking up spurts of dirt a long way wide of their mark; others must have sung harmlessly overhead.

Suddenly the short man stopped. He could run no farther. He called to his companion; but the latter, taking no heed, did not slacken his swift pace. The corpulent fugitive looked over his shoulder, and seeing that some of the Germans had attempted pursuit, began to walk after his compatriot. The fact that the soldiers had missed him at short range had given him confidence. Presently the tall Belgian gained the outskirts of the wood. Here he stopped, and waved his arms with a contemptuous gesture at the German soldiers. It was his undoing, for by sheer chance a bullet struck him in the head. He pitched on his face and lay motionless.

The other man, alternately walking and running, got clear away.

The English lads now had their turn. They were kicked, prodded with rifle-butts, and repeatedly struck by the fists of the infuriated, half-drunken soldiers, till the sergeant, fearing that he might get into serious trouble if Colonel von Koenik's special prisoners were much injured, ordered his men to desist. Two of them were sent to bring the body of the foolhardy Belgian. Dead or alive the whole of the prisoners had to be accounted for, and the fact that one was missing caused the sergeant considerable misgivings.

Meanwhile the sound of distant firing still continued. If anything it seemed nearer. The

German escort began to hurry their prisoners along.

A mile or so farther on they reached a small village. Here most of the inhabitants had left, but a few gazed timorously upon the grey-coated soldiers from the upper windows of their houses.

The sergeant gave the order to halt, then spoke hurriedly to two of his men who were not so intoxicated as the rest. These two walked up to a door and knocked. Receiving no reply, they shattered the woodwork with their rifles and entered the house. In less than a minute they reappeared, dragging between them a peasant so old and feeble that he could hardly walk. Him they bundled into the cart beside the body of the dead Belgian, and the convoy resumed its way.

"The brutes!" ejaculated Kenneth. "I see their game. They're going to palm off that poor peasant as the man that escaped."

"It seems like it," agreed Rollo; "but what will happen when they read the roll-call? It will give the show away."

"Trust those fellows for carrying out a dirty piece of work. Hist!"

The lads relapsed into silence. They did not want a repetition of the scene when their last conversation was interrupted. Already they were bruised from head to foot.

Shortly before six in the evening the prisoners reached the outskirts of Louvain. The town, the principal seat of learning of Belgium, was, of course, in the hands of the Germans; but hitherto they had refrained from any vandalism. According to their usual procedure they had terrorized the inhabitants, who still remained in fear and trembling. Everywhere were placards in French and Flemish, warning the townsfolk that any act of hostility towards the German troops would result in severe penalties. With the examples of the fate of other towns and villages—where the luckless inhabitants, in defence of their lives and homes, had ventured to resist the invaders and had been ruthlessly massacred—the people of Louvain had rigidly abstained from any action that could be regarded as aggressive to German authority. On their part the invaders behaved fairly well, and confidence was beginning to be restored amongst the Belgians who still remained in Louvain.

Suddenly a shot rang out, quickly followed by others. Bullets screeched over the heads of the prisoners and their German guards. In a few moments all was confusion. The prisoners flung themselves on the ground to escape the deadly missiles. Some of the escort followed their example. Others, kneeling behind the two wagons that brought up the rear of the procession, returned the fire.

"Good!" ejaculated Kenneth. "Louvain has been recaptured. That accounts for the firing we heard this afternoon."

"I trust so," replied Rollo. "There's one fellow down—another rascal the less."

It was the German who had received a taste of a British fist. Rendered incautious in his maudlin state, he had recklessly exposed himself. A bullet passing through his chest laid him dead on the spot. Another German was leaning against the wheel of a wagon, with his hand clapped to his right shoulder.

Just then the sergeant caught sight of the troops who were blazing away at his party. With a succession of oaths he bade his men cease fire. Here was another blunder. The Germans were firing at each other.

At length the exchange of shots ceased. A Prussian officer, accompanied by half a dozen of his men, advanced to meet the prisoners and their escort. His face was purple with fury. For ten minutes he bullied and browbeat the luckless sergeant, whose men had not been responsible for opening fire. Then other officers—members of the staff—hurried up, and a hasty consultation followed.

Presently Colonel von Koenik tore up in his motorcar. He was accompanied by another staff-officer, Major von Manteuffel, whose name was presently to be execrated throughout the civilized world.

Von Manteuffel was in a high pitch of nervous excitement. Evidently he was trying to fix the blame upon the men escorting the Belgian prisoners, while von Koenik, cool and calculating, championed their cause.

Kenneth and Rollo watched the scene with well-concealed satisfaction. The mere fact that some small portion of the mechanism of the Mailed Fist had gone wrong elated them. It was an insight into the blustering methods of German military organization; but they had yet to learn that the Bullies of Europe had a drastic remedy for their errors, whereby the penalty fell upon the weak and helpless.

Von Koenik gave an order, the sergeant bundled Rollo and Kenneth into an isolated house situated about half a kilometre from the town. What befell the Belgian prisoners the lads never knew, but from the window in the upper room in which they were confined, the British youths

could command a fairly-extensive view of Louvain and the road which approached it.

Two German soldiers were locked in the room, but they offered no objection when Kenneth and Rollo went to the window.

Above the tiled roofs of the houses, the ancient and venerable church of St. Pierre shot up like an island in the centre of a lake. Other buildings—churches, the Hôtel de Ville, and the university—were slightly less conspicuous, yet clearly discernible above the expanse of houses. Along the road were hundreds of grey-coated troops, while a small black patch in that long-drawn-out riband of silver-grey indicated the position of the way-worn band of Belgian prisoners, who were now almost within the limits of the town.

While the British lads were at the window, then German guards produced from their knapsacks some pieces of roll, sausages, and a bottle of wine. Soon the room was filled with the disagreeable sounds of Teutonic mastication, which, unless one has had the misfortune to hear it, cannot satisfactorily be described. Kenneth and Rollo, thanking their lucky stars that they were not compelled to witness the performance, remained at the window.

Suddenly, just as the town clocks were chiming the hour of six, a succession of shots rang out.

"Good!" ejaculated Kenneth. "The Belgians are driving home an attack."

The two Germans gave not the slightest hint of alarm, but stolidly continued their meal. Their indifference caused the lads to wonder. It was not a conflict between two armed forces, but a massacre! It was the commencement of what was, in the words of the Prime Minister of Great Britain, "the greatest crime against civilization and culture since the Thirty Years' War".

Fortunately Kenneth and his companion were spared the horrors of having to witness the indiscriminate shooting of luckless civilians, but, from their coign of vantage, they were spectators of the scene of destruction that followed.

Tall, lurid flames burst forth from the centre of the town of Louvain. Gradually the ever-widening circle of fire spread till the bulk of the houses was one vast holocaust.

Throughout that terrible night the lads remained at the window, watching the progress of the conflagration and listening to the shrieks of panic and terror from the brutally-maltreated inhabitants.

That was von Manteuffel's method of covering up the blunder made by his half-drunken troops.

CHAPTER XXIII

A Bolt from the Blue

At seven the following morning the two guards were relieved. During the night they had been stolidly indifferent to everything that was taking place. They permitted their prisoners liberty of action within the limits of the room, but they maintained a ceaseless vigilance, keeping their loaded rifles within arm's-length the whole of the time.

The new guards were men of a different stamp. Their first act upon being left with their charges was to compel the lads to leave the window and take up a position in one corner of the room. At the first attempt at conversation between the two chums the Germans would shout threats which, although unintelligible as words, left no doubt as to their significance.

An hour later a very meagre repast was brought in for the prisoners, the soldiers making a thorough examination of the food before the lads were allowed to partake of it. This was a precautionary measure, lest some communication might have been secreted; but the fact that their food had been coarsely handled by the Germans did not make it any the more appetizing. Nevertheless Kenneth and his companion, now almost famished, attacked the meal with avidity.

Just before noon a motor-car drew up outside the house. The guards sprang to their feet, adjusted the straps of their equipment, seized their rifles, and drew themselves up as stiff as ramrods. The expected arrival they knew to be a person of consequence.

It was Colonel von Koenik. He was civil, almost apologetic, to the English prisoners.

"I trust that you were not disturbed by last night's business," he remarked. "There was a serious riot amongst the Belgian townsfolk. Our troops were treacherously attacked, and in self-defence they were compelled to fire some of the houses. Unfortunately the flames spread

considerably, in spite of our efforts to the contrary.

"If you wish to write to your friends in England," he continued, "you are at liberty to do so, and I will see that the letters are forwarded to Holland. Paper and writing materials will be provided. You will understand that all communications must be left unsealed."

He paused for a moment, then in more deliberate tones said:

"It would doubtless be interesting to your fellow-countrymen if you mentioned last night's riot. Englishmen are supposed to pride themselves upon their love of fair play. Our act of necessary—absolutely necessary—self-defence will certainly be distorted by these Belgians. The written evidence of two Englishmen such as yourselves will do much to remove a wrong impression. Meanwhile, until writing materials can be produced, you are at liberty to take exercise in the garden."

"What is that fellow driving at?" asked Rollo, when the two chums, still watched by their guards, found themselves in a secluded garden enclosed on three sides by a high brick wall. "There's something behind his eagerness for us to write home."

"We'll take the chance anyway," replied Kenneth; "only I vote we make no mention of last night's affair. Of course his version might be right, but I doubt it."

Accordingly the prisoners spent half an hour in writing to their respective parents. The epistles were couched in guarded terms. There was nothing to indicate that they had been harshly treated; no mention of the manner of their arrest. Nor was there a word about the destructive fire in Louvain.

When the Colonel reappeared the unsealed envelopes were handed to him. Without a word or a gesture he read them through, then wrote something on the envelopes.

"These are in order, gentlemen," he remarked. "You may now seal them, and they will be carefully forwarded."

But months later the chums learnt that the letters had never been delivered. There was a good reason, for von Koenik took the first opportunity of destroying them.

"There is some news for you," remarked the Colonel. "Yesterday our armies occupied Namur. The forts were helpless against our wonderful siege guns. Our Zeppelins have destroyed nearly the whole of Antwerp; our fleet has signally defeated the British in the North Sea. Your flagship, the *Iron Duke*, is sunk, together with seven Dreadnoughts. Jellicoe is slain, and the rest of the English fleet is bottled up in the Forth. Your little army in Belgium is already on the retreat; it will be hopelessly smashed before it reaches Maubeuge. Our troops will be in Paris within a week —and then?"

The Colonel paused, expecting to see dismay painted on the faces of his listeners. Instead, Kenneth coolly raised his eyebrows.

"Indeed?" he drawled. "Do you, Herr Colonel, really believe all that?"

Von Koenik suppressed a gesture of annoyance.

"Certainly," he replied. "It is in our official reports. If you possessed sufficient culture to be in a position to read and speak our language, you could see it with your own eyes. We are winning everywhere. Now, perhaps, to save further unpleasantness you will tell me the actual reason why you were in the Belgian service?"

"Merely our inclination to help in a just cause. We happened to be on the spot, the opportunity occurred, and we took it."

The Colonel bit his lips. He was confident that the prisoners were actually persons of military importance, sent over to Belgium by the British Government, and possessing valuable information concerning the Allies' plan of campaign. He considered it well worth his while to cajole or threaten them into surrendering their secret, but, up to the present, he was forced to admit that his attempts had met with very little success.

Apart from the lax code of German military morals his procedure had been extremely irregular. The so-called trial was before an illegally constituted court. The proper authorities had not been informed of the Englishmen's arrest, trial, and sentence. Yet he considered that he was furthering the interests of the Kaiser and the German nation by wresting the secret of the object of the lads' presence in Belgium from them by the likeliest methods at his disposal.

Colonel von Koenik was on his way to take up a staff appointment at Verviers, a strategically important Belgian town on the German frontier, and a few miles from Liége, and on the direct railway line between that city and Aix-la-Chapelle. Here he could keep his prisoners in safety, relying upon the wearing-down tactics, backed by the threat of what would happen when the victorious Germans entered Paris, to compel the two Englishmen to surrender their supposed important secret.

It was not until after dark that same day that Kenneth and Rollo were conveyed in a closed carriage to the railway station at Louvain. Von Koenik was greatly anxious to conceal from them the stupendous amount of wanton damage done to the town. So far he succeeded; and, in partial ignorance of the fate of Louvain and the actual causes that led to its sack and destruction, the lads were escorted to a troop-train which was about to return to Aix, laden with wounded German soldiers whose fighting days were over.

For the next ten or twelve days Kenneth and Rollo existed in a state of rigorous captivity. They were placed in a small store-room of the commissariat department at Verviers. A sentry was posted without, but otherwise their privacy was not intruded upon except when a soldier brought their meals.

This man, a corporal of the Landwehr, was a grey-haired fellow nearly sixty years of age. A great portion of his life had been spent in England. Von Koenik had detailed him to attend upon the prisoners in order that he might communicate to them the progress of the victorious Germans towards Paris.

Max—for that was the corporal's name—was admirably adapted to the purpose. He could speak English with tolerable fluency; he implicitly believed all the stories that had been told him of the wide-world German success, and, believing, he retailed the information with such bland fidelity that at first his listeners had to think that he really was speaking the truth.

He was also genuinely attentive to his charges, and before long Kenneth and Rollo appreciated his visits although they did not welcome the news he brought.

"Ach, you English boys!" he would exclaim. They were always addressed as "English boys" by Corporal Max, somewhat to their chagrin. "Ach! It has been a bad day for your little army. Much more bad than yesterday. To-day the remains of the English army, it has fled towards Paris. Our Taubes have almost nearly the city destroyed by bombs."

The next day Max would appear with the tidings that General French was still running away. Vast numbers of English and French prisoners had been taken. The German losses had been insignificant.

This was followed by a lurid description of the retreat of the Allies across the Marne and then over the Aisne.

"Paris, too, is in panic. The French Government, it has run away to the south of France. And our navy, it is great. Yesterday a sea battle took place. The Admiral Jellicoe's flagship the *Iron Duke* was sunk by our submarines——"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Kenneth. "Colonel von Koenik told us that the *Iron Duke* was sunk more than a fortnight ago."

Max shrugged his shoulders.

"You English are so deceitful. Ach! They must have given to another ship the same name. Dover is in flames, and London bombarded has been by our Zeppelins. Ireland is revolted, and the Irish have proclaimed our Kaiser as King——"

"Steady, Max!" exclaimed Rollo expostulatingly.

"But it is so," protested the corporal.

The next day Max's report was one of indefinite progress. During the three following he made no mention of the brilliant feats of German arms. Kenneth rallied him on this point.

"How far are the Germans from Paris to-day, Max?"

For the first time Max showed signs of irritability. By accident he had seen in Colonel von Koenik's quarters a report of the check of the German armies' progress, and of their eastward movement. Following this came the news of von Kluck's defeat and disorderly retirement across the Marne. Too stupidly honest to keep the news to himself, Corporal Max blurted out the information that the advance upon Paris had been temporarily abandoned.

"If it were not for the treacherous English," he added—"they are always meddling with other nations' business—we would have walked through the French and in Paris have been. Peace would be forced upon the French, and then I could return home to my wife."

"But you told us that the British army was practically annihilated, Max," exclaimed Kenneth gleefully.

"You English boys, I tell you word for word what was told me," protested Max in high dudgeon. "If you mock, then no more will I say."

"Can we see Colonel von Koenik, Max?"

The corporal looked at Kenneth in astonishment.

"You have no complaint against me?" he asked.

"Not in the least," replied Kenneth affably. "But we should very much like to see the Colonel."

Max delivered the message, but von Koenik did not put in an appearance. Incidentally he discovered that the corporal had let out the momentous news of von Kluck's defeat, and Max had a very warm quarter of an hour in consequence. As a result, a surly Prussian was given the work of looking after the two English prisoners, and Max passed out of the lads' knowledge.

September had well advanced. Kenneth and Rollo still existed in captivity, without the faintest opportunity of effecting their escape. Had there been the slightest chance of breaking out of their prison they would have taken it, but the vigilance of the sentries posted outside the place seemed untiring.

About the twentieth of the month—the lads had lost all accurate idea of the date—there were signs of more than usual activity in Verviers. A cavalry brigade had arrived, accompanied by a huge transport column.

From the solitary window of their room the prisoners were able to witness many of the movements of the troops. The square in front of the range of stores was packed with transport wagons, both motor and horse. The horses were picketed in lines between the regular rows of vehicles. The drivers stood by their charges, instead of being billeted on the inhabitants. Everything pointed to a hurriedly resumed journey.

Presently Kenneth and his chum noticed that the Germans were deeply interested in something above and beyond the storehouse in which the lads were quartered.

A few men would point skywards, others would follow their example, till every soldier in the square was gazing in the air. Then above the hum of suppressed excitement came the unmistakable buzz of an aerial propeller.

"Air-craft!" ejaculated Kenneth.

"Taubes, most likely," added his companion; "otherwise the troops would be blazing away instead of merely looking on."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the scene underwent a complete change. Horses plunged and reared, some falling and kicking madly on the ground. Men ran hither and thither, seeking shelter, while several of them pitched upon their faces. Yet not a sound was heard of an explosion. A mysterious and silent death was stalking amidst the German transport. Overhead the drone of the propeller increased, yet the aeroplane was invisible from the lads' outlook.

Something struck the stones of the courtyard a few feet from their window. It was a small featherless steel arrow, one of thousands that a French aviator had let loose upon the astonished and terrified Germans.

Simultaneously there was a crash in the room. Turning, the occupants made the discovery that three of the darts had completely penetrated the tiles of the roof and had buried themselves three inches deep in the oaken floor.

"Keep close to the wall," exclaimed Kenneth; "it is the safest place."

"It's all over now," announced Rollo after a brief interval. "There she goes!"

He pointed to a monoplane gliding gracefully at an altitude of about five hundred feet. He could just distinguish a tricolour painted on each tip of the main plane. A desultory but increasing rifle-fire announced its departure, and, unruffled, the air-craft sailed serenely out of sight.

"Pretty effective weapon," remarked Kenneth, vainly endeavouring to wrench one of the darts from the floor. "They must hit with terrific force. I wonder how they were discharged?"

"Simply dropped by the hundred, I should imagine," replied Rollo. "The force of gravity is sufficient to give them a tremendous velocity after dropping a few hundred feet. I guess they've knocked these fellows' time-table out."

The drivers and several cavalrymen had now emerged from their hiding-places, and were carrying their less-fortunate comrades from the scene. A few of the latter were moaning, but most of them had been slain outright. The "flechettes", or steel darts, had in several cases struck their victims on the head, and had passed completely through their bodies. In addition to about thirty casualties, nearly a hundred horses were either killed on the spot or were so badly injured that they had to be dispatched. Several of the motor-wagons, too, were temporarily disabled by the terrible missiles. Clearly it was out of the question that the convoy could proceed that day.

Darkness set in. The work of repairing the damaged vehicles still proceeded briskly by the aid of the powerful acetylene lamps fixed upon the parapets of the surrounding buildings. Fresh animals were being brought up to take the horse-wagons away, in order to make room for the artificers to proceed with their work. The square echoed and re-echoed to the clanging of

hammers and the rasping of saws, and the guttural exclamations of the workmen.

Kenneth and Rollo had no thoughts of going to bed. Usually, as soon as it was dark they would throw themselves upon their straw mattresses, for lights were not allowed them. But now the excitement, increased by contrast to their monotonous existence, banished all idea of sleep.

Crash! A blaze of vivid light that out-brillianced the concentrated glare of the lamps flashed skywards, followed almost immediately by a deafening report. Windows were shattered, tiles flew from the roofs. The walls of the room in which the two lads were standing shook violently.

"A shell!" exclaimed Rollo.

"A bomb!" corrected Kenneth, for in the brief lull that followed could be heard the noise of an air-craft. Either the same or another French airman was honouring the Germans at Verviers with a second visit.

Twenty seconds later another explosion occurred at the back of the building. With a terrific crash one of the outer walls was blown in; a portion of the roof collapsed; the floor, partially ripped up, swayed like the deck of a vessel in the trough of an angry sea.

Kenneth found himself on the floor, rendered temporarily deaf and covered with fragments of plaster and broken tiles, and smothered in dust.

Staggering to his feet he groped for his companion, for the place was in total darkness, the force of the detonation having extinguished all the lamps in the vicinity. His hand came in contact with Rollo's hair.

"Steady on, old man; don't scalp me," expostulated Barrington.

"What do you say?" asked his companion. Rollo repeated the protest, shouting in order to enable Kenneth to hear what he said.

"Hurt?"

"Not a bit of it; but we may be if we hang on here."

Another fall of rafters and tiles confirmed the speaker's surmise; then, as the cloud of acrid smoke and dust slowly dispersed, they could see a patch of starlight where a few moments before had been a blank wall.

CHAPTER XXIV

Across the Frontier

Kenneth regained his feet.

"Let's shift," he said.

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Be steady; mind where you tread, and look out for brick-bats falling on your head."

The caution was well needed. Stumbling over the mass of shattered brickwork, the lads passed through the jagged gap and gained an open space to the rear of a long range of storehouses. Even as they did so another bomb exploded, this time some distance off, though the concussion was sufficient to complete the destruction of the room in which they had been but a few moments previously.

Not only in the square but all over the town a state of panic existed. The terrified horses stampeded; the German troops, temporarily thrown into disorder, ran for shelter; while those of the civil population who did not take refuge in their cellars poured out into the streets and fled towards the open country.

"Rollo, old man, let's make a dash for it."

The idea of taking advantage of the air raid in order to effect their escape had not until that moment entered Kenneth's head. Both he and Rollo, temporarily dazed by the explosion, had thought only of getting clear of the subsiding building.

Everything was in their favour. Scaling a low brick wall, they found themselves in the company of about forty panic-stricken inhabitants. In the confusion no one noticed the two

hatless lads, for before they had gone fifty yards they ran past a squad of German troops, who, under the threats of their officers, were engaged in coupling up a hose to play upon a fire kindled by the explosion of one of the destructive missiles.

"Keep with the crowd," advised Rollo. "We're safe enough. The monoplane has made off by this time."

The street emerged into a wide thoroughfare, where the throng of people was greatly increased; but after a while, finding that there were no more detonations, the crowd began to thin, many of the townsfolk returning to their homes. A few, however, numbering perhaps forty, unable to control their fear, ran blindly towards the open country, and with them went the two British lads.

"It's about time we struck a line for ourselves," whispered Kenneth.

"Not yet; we'll stick to the main road," said his companion. "These people know their way; we don't, and it's no fun blundering across ditches and marshy fields on a night like this. I wish we had our coats."

"Being without them is an inducement to keep on the move," remarked Everest. "If we have to stand about or hide anywhere it will be a numbing business. The question is, what's our plan?"

"Keep as far as possible in a northerly or northwesterly direction after we find ourselves alone. That ought to land us in Dutch territory before morning. It's only a matter of twenty miles."

"And if we are held up?"

"Then we must hide during the day. It wouldn't be worth a dog's chance to fall in with any Germans."

The lads had been conversing in French, lest their whispers should be overheard by the hurrying crowd. Amongst that number of Belgians there might be a spy, and the incautious use of English would be fatal to the enterprise. But before two miles had been traversed the two British lads were alone. The rest of the crowd, finding that the explosions had entirely ceased, had either retraced their steps or had awaited possible developments.

Taking their direction by means of the position of the North Star, for the night was now quite cloudless, the fugitives pushed on. They had no fear of pursuit, since, by the demolition of their place of detention, the German authorities were bound to come to the conclusion that their prisoners had been buried under the ruins.

It was too hazardous to attempt to follow the road farther. From their local knowledge the lads knew that it led to Julimont and Visé, and that the valley of the Meuse, especially on the Dutch frontier, would be strictly guarded.

"Railway ahead!" whispered Kenneth.

Outlined against the starry sky was a low embankment, fringed with the characteristic telegraph poles of the Belgian state railways. Directly in their path was a culvert, on the top of which were the silhouetted figures of three greatcoated soldiers. On the other side of the embankment a fire was burning brightly, its glare alone betraying its position.

The fugitives promptly retraced their steps for nearly two hundred yards, then striking off at right angles kept parallel to, and at a fairly safe distance from, the railway line.

"We'll have to cross that line," whispered Kenneth. "It runs between Liége and Aix, I believe."

"Let's hope the whole extent of it isn't guarded."

"Only the bridge and culverts; but you can take it for granted that they patrol between the various posts of sentries. Carry on, old man; another half a mile and we'll try again."

A short distance farther the fugitives encountered the main road from Liége to the German town of Aix-la-Chapelle. It was quite deserted, but beyond it they had to turn slightly to the right to avoid the railway, which ran in a north-easterly direction.

"Why not have a shot at it?" asked Kenneth.

"Not yet. It will run in a northerly direction again. I noticed that in the map. We must cross, if possible, somewhere to the south of Aubel. It is still early in the evening. The nearer midnight we make the attempt the better."

It was now bitterly cold. A hard frost made the ground like iron. Since it was too hazardous to proceed at a rapid pace, the lads felt the piercing air accordingly. With their shoulders hunched and their ungloved hands thrust deeply into their pockets, they kept on, shivering in spite of the fact that in the excitement of regaining their liberty—temporarily, at any rate—their nerves were a-tingle and the blood surged rapidly through their veins.

"What's that ahead?" whispered Kenneth. "Men?"

The lads peered through the darkness. Fifty yards ahead were several upright objects at regular intervals, looking exactly like an extended line of soldiers.

"Germans!" whispered Rollo. "Lie down."

They threw themselves upon the frozen ground and kept the objects under observation. Before long the effect of their recumbent positions in contact with the earth became painful. Rollo got to his knees.

"I'll go a little nearer," he whispered. "You stay here. They don't seem to be moving."

"I'll come too," whispered Kenneth in reply.

"No, you don't. One might escape notice where two might not. I'll be very cautious."

Kenneth remained. He could just discern the form of his chum as he slowly and carefully approached the line of mysterious objects. Presently he saw Rollo regain his feet and walk towards him.

"It's all right," announced Harrington. "They are a row of alders."

His companion arose, slowly and stiffly. He had to swing his arms vigorously for some minutes to warm his chilled body.

"Let's get on," he said.

"Getting on" was not an easy matter, for upon arriving at the row of trees the lads found that they lined the bank of a sluggish stream, too broad to leap across and too deep to wade. Already thin ice had formed upon its surface. Swimming under these conditions might be performed, but the undertaking required a lot of pluck on a night like this. Furthermore, there was the after-effect to take into consideration.

"Now, what's to be done?" asked Kenneth. For once, at least, he realized that his impetuosity failed him, and that he must rely upon the calmer, deliberate, and perhaps over-cautious counsels of his chum.

"Cross dry-shod," replied Rollo. "We must follow the bank up-stream until we find a means of crossing. Not a recognized bridge—that would almost to a certainty be guarded—but a plank thrown across for the use of some farmer. It's no use wasting time here."

He stopped suddenly. From behind the shelter of one of the trees a tall, dark figure advanced swiftly and unhesitatingly.

The fugitives' first impulse was to take to their heels, but before they had recovered sufficiently from their surprise a voice exclaimed:

"What cheer, mates! What might you be doing here?"

Arrested by the sound of an unmistakable English voice, the lads held their ground. Kenneth, with studious politeness, said: "We are pleased to make your acquaintance," and then felt inclined, in spite of his physical discomforts, to laugh at the absurdity of his remark.

The man held out his hand. Kenneth grabbed it cordially. As he did so he noticed that the stranger was dressed almost in rags. He wore a battered slouch hat, a cloak that reached to his knees, and trousers so short in the leg that there was a gap between the foot of them and his grey socks. On his feet he wore a pair of sabots.

"What might you be doing here?" he repeated.

"Trying to regain our regiment," replied Rollo.

"Same here. What's yours?"

"The 9th Regiment of the Line."

The man glanced suspiciously at his informant.

"Never heard of it," he declared. "Mine's the Northumberland Fusiliers—'Quo Fata Vocant' is our motto, and strikes me Fate has led me a pretty dance. The 9th Regiment of the Line?"

"Of the Belgian army," explained Kenneth, for the man's declaration sounded like a challenge. "We're British volunteer dispatch-riders—corporals."

"Same here; I'm a corporal, unless I'm officially dead. But that's neither here nor there. Question is, where am I?"

"In Belgium, not so very far from Liége."

"That's a blessing. It's a relief to know I'm not on rotten German soil. But it's a long, long way to Tipperary."

"What do you mean?" asked Kenneth in astonishment.

The Northumberland Fusilier also betrayed surprise.

"You've not heard that song? Well, where have you been to? But let's be on the move. It's cold enough, in all conscience, without standing still to be frozen. Where are you making for?"

"The Dutch frontier—it's only about five or six miles off," replied Rollo.

"Not this child," declared the man vehemently. "So we part company, chums."

"Why?" asked Kenneth.

"I'm trying to rejoin my regiment. As for being interned in Holland, I'm not having any."

"You won't be interned; you're in mufti. Have you any idea how far you'll have to tramp? Across Belgium and a part of France—every mile of the way held by the enemy. Where are the British now?"

"Pushing the Germans back from Paris, chum; that's what they were doing when I got copped."

"We were told that the British army was annihilated."

"Some rotten German yarn," exclaimed the corporal contemptuously. "Take it from me, as one who knows, the Germans have bitten off more than they can chew. But is that right that the Dutchmen won't keep us till the end of the war?"

"Certainly, provided you are not in uniform."

"That settles it, then," declared the man. "By the right—slow march. There's a plank bridge a little way farther up-stream."

This obstacle having been surmounted, the three fugitives made in a northerly direction. Only once in half an hour did the Northumberland Fusilier break the silence.

"Got any tommy?" he asked. "Any grub?"

"Not a crumb."

"Rough luck! I haven't had a bite for sixteen hours or more, and my belt's in the last notch."

"How far have you come?" asked Rollo.

"Goodness only knows. Aching's the name of the show."

"Aching?" repeated Kenneth in perplexity.

"Yes, Aching," replied the man vehemently. "A fitting name, too. A-a-c-h-e-n, it's spelt, so there!"

The lads understood. He had spelt the German name for the town of Aix-la-Chapelle. His progress, then, had been very slow—sixteen hours to cover about twelve miles.

"That's Aubel," whispered Kenneth, pointing to a group of houses showing up against the sky. "We must cross the line here."

A hurried consultation followed, in which it was decided that Kenneth should take the lead, the others following at twenty paces interval.

As they approached the line of telegraph posts Kenneth made his way ahead and dropped on his hands and knees. In this position he covered the hundred yards that separated him from the railway. He listened. There was no mistaking the sound he heard. The noise of heavily-nailed boots treading slowly upon the frosty permanent-way was drawing nearer.

The lad crawled back to his chum, and both threw themselves flat upon the ground. The Northumberland man did likewise.

Presently two greatcoated figures came into view; German soldiers with rifles on their shoulders. The pale light glinted on the fixed bayonets. When opposite the spot where the fugitives were hiding, the guards stopped, grounded their weapons, and swung their arms. In spite of their heavy coats they were chilled to the bone.

The Germans showed no haste in proceeding on their patrol. To the shivering Englishmen it seemed as if they were deliberately prolonging their stay.

In spite of his frantic efforts the Northumberland Fusilier gave vent to a half-smothered cough. Almost simultaneously the Germans recovered their arms and fired in the direction of the hiding trio.

Suppressing an insane desire to break away and run for dear life, the three lay still. If the patrol had heard any suspicious sound they did not act further upon it, for after a few more minutes they sloped arms and tramped stolidly in the direction of Aubel.

Once again Kenneth crawled towards the railway. The way was now clear. Without being challenged he crossed the rails, and dropped down the embankment beyond. Here he was speedily joined by his companions.

A little later, to their consternation, clouds began to gather. It was no longer possible to follow a course by the stars. It became darker, and prominent objects could not be distinguished. All around there were untilled fields, as like each other as peas in a pod.

Half an hour's wandering convinced the fugitives that they were hopelessly out of their bearings, for the wind had fallen utterly, and even that means of keeping a rough course failed them.

"Ten to one we're walking in a big circle," declared Rollo. "The best thing we can do is to slow down till dawn."

"Another seven hours," objected the Fusilier. "We'll be dead with cold by that time. Let's step out and trust to luck."

"There's a barn or something, right ahead," announced Kenneth after they had traversed two fields. "I vote we make for that and take shelter."

The building was a detached one. Closer investigation showed that it was deserted. The door had been wrenched from its hinges and lay about five yards from the wall. In one angle of the brickwork was a gaping hole. The walls had been loopholed for rifle-fire, but the thatched roof was practically intact.

"Steady!" cautioned the British corporal. "There might be somebody inside."

He led the way, shuffling noiselessly with his feet and holding his arm in a position of defence. Having completed a tour of the interior, he announced that it was safe to enter.

The floor was dry, but destitute of hay or straw. Taking off his peasant's cloak the corporal spread it upon the ground, and on it the three huddled together for mutual warmth. Already Kenneth and Rollo were weak with hunger, cold, and fatigue. Their companion's chief regret was that he had no tobacco. Hunger, although severe, was with him a secondary consideration.

In this position they remained in a semi-dazed condition until the Northumberland man announced that dawn was breaking.

With difficulty regaining their feet, the two lads moved their cramped limbs till they were conscious of the sense of touch. Then out into the bitterly cold air they went.

"That's our course," said the corporal. "This time of year the sun rises in the north-east, so this is about north."

"Then it's exactly the opposite direction to which we were going last night," remarked Rollo. "You can tell that by the position of the barn."

"Yes, we must have been circling," agreed Kenneth. "We may yet be miles from the frontier."

On and on they trudged, guided by the gleam of light that was gradually growing in intensity. Detached farm-houses were now visible, affording landmarks which, although serviceable, had to be avoided.

"I'd do a burglaring job without a moment's hesitation," declared the corporal, "only it's too jolly risky. Liberty isn't worth chucking away for the sake of a chunk of bread; at least, I don't think so. Yet dozens of Germans have given themselves up to our chaps because they felt a bit hungry."

His companions agreed, but half-heartedly. Hunger, the ally of despair, was pressing them hard. They missed the plain but substantial meals that their captors had provided them with at Verviers.

Suddenly, from behind them, came a hoarse shout.

Turning, the three fugitives saw, to their consternation, that about a dozen German soldiers were following them and were now about four hundred yards behind.

"Cut for it!" exclaimed the corporal.

They broke into a steady run. The action was a relief after hours of slow trudging and sleepless, comfortless rest. Their pursuers also increased their pace, shouting for them to stop.

"We're holding our own," exclaimed Kenneth after a while.

"Can't keep it up, though," panted the corporal, who, to give himself greater freedom, had discarded his cloak. "But why don't the beggars fire?"

It seemed remarkable that their pursuers made no attempt to use their rifles. Some had already given up the chase, but others held on, streaming out into an irregular procession.

Ahead was a broad ditch. Kenneth, who was leading, braced himself to plunge through the coating of ice, but instead his feet slipped and he rolled sideways to the farthermost bank. His companions crossed more easily, for owing to the severe frost the water was covered with two inches of ice.

Rollo and the corporal assisted Everest to his feet. He was unhurt, but wellnigh breathless. During this episode the leading Germans were within fifty yards of them; but unaccountably they slackened their pace, stopping at the edge of the frozen ditch and shouting frantically at the fugitives.

"That's done it!" exclaimed the Fusilier.

In extended order a number of soldiers, some mounted, emerged from the shelter of a row of trees on the opposite side of the field, and stood waiting to receive the exhausted Englishmen. Escape was impossible. There was no cover either to the right or the left. Behind them were their pursuers; in front the troops, including cavalry.

"We've had a run for our money," remarked the corporal, as he raised his arms above his head in token of surrender. His companions noticed that, in spite of his dejection, the man never blamed them for suggesting a course that ended in recapture.

The Germans behind them still made no further attempt to advance. They stood in a row at the edge of the ditch, bawling unintelligibly.

"Hurrah!" suddenly shouted Kenneth.

His companions looked at him in amazement.

"We're all right," he continued. "We've crossed the frontier. These fellows are Dutch soldiers."

CHAPTER XXV

Thelma Everest

The detention of Rollo Barrington and Kenneth Everest on Dutch soil was of comparatively short duration. Well before the end of September they were allowed to recross the frontier within a few miles of the strong fortress of Antwerp.

The Northumberland Fusilier—his companions in peril never learnt his name—did not accompany them. At the first available opportunity he got into communication with a British Consul, and, through that official's instrumentality, was sent back to England. Here he reported himself at the nearest regimental depot, and, greatly to his satisfaction, was again sent across the Channel to rejoin his comrades-in-arms.

Upon gaining Dutch territory, almost the first act of Kenneth and Rollo was to communicate the news of their safety to their anxious parents, at the same time stating their intention of proceeding to Antwerp to continue their work as dispatch-riders to the Belgian forces.

Upon arriving at the great Belgian fortress the lads found, to their huge satisfaction, that the 9th Regiment of the Line—or rather the remains of it—formed part of the garrison, their duty being to man the trenches between Fort de Wavre Ste Catherine and Fort de Waelhem—posts that, owing to their strategical position, seemed likely to bear the brunt of the threatened German attack.

"Dieu soit loué!" exclaimed Major Planchenoît. He was captain no longer, having gained well-merited promotion. "It is messieurs the English dispatch-riders. What has befallen you?"

As briefly as possible Kenneth related their adventures from the time of their ill-starred ride to Cortenaeken.

"And now we wish to report ourselves again for duty, sir," concluded Everest. "Ought we to see Major Résimont?"

Major Planchenoît shook his head sadly.

"My gallant comrade, alas! has been severely wounded. There is, however, one consolation; he is safe in England, enjoying the hospitality of your incomparable fellow-countrymen. If we had not an assured refuge in England, where would we be? But, messieurs, it will be necessary to provide you with uniforms and equipment. I will give you an order for the Quartermaster. When you are fitted out, report yourselves at the divisional staff office."

Obtaining new uniforms was out of the question: there were none to be had. So, in place of their motor-cyclists' kit, the lads had to be content with second-hand infantryman's uniform—heavy blue coat, loose trousers tucked into black-leather gaiters, and a blue, peakless cap similar to the British "pill-box" of half a century ago, but worn squarely on the head instead of being perched at a rakish angle. To render their head-gear more conspicuous it was adorned by a band of dark-red cloth.

The Quartermaster was deeply apologetic.

"But, after all, messieurs," he added, "a uniform is a uniform all the world over. It entitles, or should entitle, its wearer to the courtesies of war."

The lads agreed on this point, although they realized that the heavy clothing was not at all suitable for dispatch-riding, where agility on the part of the cyclist and a near approach of invisibility in the matter of his uniform were essential conditions to efficiency.

Nor were revolvers served out to them. Instead, they were given Mauser rifles and short bayonets, the ammunition for the former being kept loosely in two large black-leather pouches attached to the belt.

"As regards your motor-cycles," continued the Quartermaster, "you may choose for yourselves. Believe me, we have a large and varied assortment."

As soon as Kenneth and Rollo had donned their cumbersome uniforms and equipment they were handed over to the care of a sergeant, who was told to escort them to the store where the reserve motor-transport vehicles were kept. This building, formerly a brewery, stood at a distance of two miles from the advanced line of trenches, and on the banks of the River Nethe.

In the brewery yard were nearly two hundred motor-cars and lorries arranged in various grades of efficiency; while in the cellars were rows and rows of motor-cycles and ordinary bicycles in all sorts of conditions.

"Voilà, messieurs!" exclaimed the sergeant with a comprehensive wave of the hand.

In spite of the fact that the lads were but corporals the sergeant invariably addressed them as "messieurs". From the staff officers downwards, all with whom the British lads came in contact paid this courteous tribute to their devotion to Belgium's cause.

Kenneth and Rollo were some time making their selection. They realized that their lives might depend upon the reliability of their mounts. Finally they decided upon two motor-cycles of British make, very similar to their own, although of an earlier pattern. Examination showed that the tyres were in excellent condition, and that with a slight overhauling the machines ought to prove most serviceable.

There was petrol in abundance, more than was likely to be required during the impending operations around Antwerp. Having filled up the tanks of their motor-cycles, the lads started back to the lines, the sergeant being perched upon the carrier of Rollo's mount.

The English lads were warmly welcomed by their new comrades of the motor section. Not one of the Belgian dispatch-riders who had taken part in the operations between Liége and Brussels was left. All of them had either been killed or wounded in the execution of their duty. Of the seven motor-cyclists now serving, one was in civil life an advocate, two were diamond merchants, a fourth a professor of languages, and the others railway mechanics. Yet, in spite of the great variations of social grades, the men were excellent comrades, united by a common cause.

There were twenty ordinary cyclists as well, while the section also manned an armoured motor-car mounting a machine-gun. This travelling fortress had already gained a reputation as a hard nut for the Germans to crack. Up to the present they had not succeeded, while the machine-gun had accounted for several of the invaders.

Kenneth and Rollo were not allowed to be idle. Eager to get to work again, they were taken in hand by a captain, who by the aid of a map pointed out the position of the various forts forming the outer and inner lines of defences. The lads had also to memorize the principal roads of communication between the city and the advanced works, as well as the chief thoroughfares and public buildings of Antwerp itself. Until they had a fair topographical knowledge they could be of

little use as dispatch-riders, but, owing to the comparatively narrow limits of the Belgian forces, this information could be mastered after a brief concentrated effort.

Major Planchenoît took good care to put the rejoined dispatch-riders to a practical test. Although glad of the help of the two British subjects, he was not an officer likely to employ them on important work until they knew the locality. Of their courage and sagacity he already had proof, but these qualifications were almost of a negligible quantity unless they knew the "lay of the land".

Next morning the lads had their instructions.

"You will proceed with the dispatch to the officer commanding the outpost at Lierre," ordered Major Planchenoît. "This done, go on to Vremde. There you will find a detachment of the regiment. This packet is for the company officer. This done, proceed to the city, seek Commandant Fleurus, and deliver this dispatch. Await further instructions from him, and report to me."

Kenneth and Rollo saluted, and hastened to the shed where their motor-cycles were stored. As they were giving them a final overhaul, Private Labori—formerly a diamond merchant and now a dispatch-rider—hailed them.

"Are you going into the city, camarades? You are? Good! Bring me some cigars, and I will be eternally indebted to you. I smoked my last yesterday, and without cigars I am as a man doomed to perdition. Of your charity, camarades, do me this favour."

Private Labori pressed a ten-franc piece into Kenneth's hand, and with a hurried expression of gratitude returned to his task of peeling potatoes for the midday meal.

"He's taken it for granted that we get the cigars," remarked Kenneth. "I suppose it would not be a breach of discipline to get them."

"Almost like old times," declared Rollo, as the riders sped side by side over the tree-lined road. "Pity we haven't our own motor-bikes, though."

He spoke with the same sort of affection as the huntsman has for his favourite horse, but Kenneth was more practical and unimaginative.

"We're lucky to be riding at all," he said. "After all, this jigger gets along pretty well. We're doing a good twenty-five."

The three dispatches were delivered in quick time. Commandant Fleurus greeted the lads warmly, and questioned them at great length on the subject of their adventures.

"It is not possible to give you a reply at once," he said at the close of the interview. "Come back at three o'clock, and the dispatch for Major Planchenoît will be handed you. Meanwhile it will not be necessary for you to return to Wavre Ste Catherine. You are at liberty to amuse yourselves until the hour named."

"Jolly considerate of him," remarked Kenneth after the lads had withdrawn from the Commandant's presence. "We'll put up the bikes and have a stroll round. It wouldn't be half a bad idea to call at the post office. There may be something for us, but we had better not reckon too much on it."

They were not disappointed, for on making application at the post office they were each handed quite a bulky packet of correspondence. There were letters from their respective parents and relatives, and a number from old school chums. These had been written when a part of their adventures in Belgium had been related by their proud parents to the head of St. Cyprian's. He, in turn, had passed on the news to the rest of the school, and the result was a swarm of congratulatory letters, sent to Mr. Everest and Colonel Harrington, who, upon receiving news of their sons' safety, had promptly forwarded the batch of correspondence.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Kenneth, "the pater's written to say that Thelma is a nurse in one of the hospitals here—St. Nicholas is the name. He wants me to keep an eye on her, so to speak, and pack her off to England if there's danger of the city being taken by the enemy."

"Let's find out where St. Nicholas Hospital is, and go there at once," suggested Rollo. "Only I hope we'll have better luck than when we tried to see your sister at Madame de la Barre's."

"We do look like a couple of brigands," said Kenneth as they hurried through the crowded streets; for their uniforms were far from being smart, while their rifles slung across their backs gave them a truly ferocious appearance.

"Think so?" asked Rollo with considerable misgivings. "Then I think I'll wait outside, if you don't mind."

"Nonsense, man," rejoined his companion heartily. "We're like the rest of the troops. It's an honour to wear a Belgian uniform, after what these fellows have done to delay the German advance and to upset the Kaiser's time-table. Only I'll bet that Thelma doesn't know me."

Kenneth was wrong in his surmise, for on calling at the hospital, Thelma happened to be passing through the hall. She recognized her brother at once, but he hardly knew the tall, graceful girl in the neat and becoming nurse's uniform as his sister.

"So you are my brother's chum," she remarked quite unaffectedly when Kenneth had introduced the bashful Rollo. "I've heard a lot about you from Kenneth when you were at St. Cyprian's, you know. And now you are soldiers fighting for brave little Belgium."

"And what are you doing here?" asked Kenneth with a display of fraternal authority. "There are at least three British hospitals in Antwerp, I believe. I wonder why you didn't join one of these."

"I wonder why you didn't join the British army instead of enlisting in the Belgian one," retorted Thelma in mock reproof.

"For one thing, we weren't old enough," explained her brother. "For another, we saw most of the fun before our troops landed in France. It's been a rotten time, but it's well worth it."

"Yes, I am glad you were able to do your bit," agreed Thelma. "And now I'll tell you why I'm here. My friend Yvonne Résimont and I both entered as nurses, so as to be together."

"Yvonne Résimont here?" asked Kenneth.

"Yes—do you know her?"

"No; but I might have done, had Madame de la Barre not been so confoundedly pigheaded. But it's not too late now," he added.

Thelma laughed.

"I'll find her," she said.

"One moment," exclaimed Rollo, who had hitherto held his tongue but had made good use of his eyes. "Does Mademoiselle Résimont know about her father?"

"No; she has not heard anything of or from him for weeks. He is not dead?"

"Badly wounded, and now somewhere in England. I don't know where; but perhaps Major Planchenoît could give further particulars. And Madame Résimont?"

"She is in Holland—at Bergen-op-Zoom. The doctors ordered her to go, otherwise she would have remained here and helped with the wounded. I'll find Yvonne."

In less than a minute Thelma Everest returned, accompanied by her Belgian chum.

Yvonne Résimont was a girl of medium height and well-proportioned. Her features were dark and clear, her hair of a deep brown. Notwithstanding the grimness of her surroundings she had a natural vivacity that could not fail to charm all with whom she came in contact.

"You, then, are Kenneth," she exclaimed in good English, with a slight foreign accent. "I know much about you from Thelma, but I did not expect to see you in the uniform of our brave Belgians."

Kenneth coloured slightly.

"I wish to goodness the uniform were a little better fitting," he thought; but it would not have mattered in the slightest degree. Yvonne was a patriot to her finger-tips. Every man in the uniform of her beloved country was to her a hero. The uniform, ill-fitting or otherwise, was in her eyes an emblem of right against might.

"Tell me, Kenneth," she continued, using his Christian name quite as a matter of course. It was excusable, since Thelma had never spoken of her brother by any other name, and Kenneth had not the faintest objection. "Tell me, how came you to be fighting with us in Belgian uniform?"

"Time, old man," announced Rollo, for during the animated conversation the minutes fled with astonishing rapidity. "It's nearly three o'clock."

"You'll both come to see us again whenever you have the chance, won't you?" asked Thelma, as the two chums bade the girls farewell. "For the next ten days we are on night duty, so you can call at any hour between eight and eight."

"And if we are asleep," added Yvonne, "tell them to awaken us. I will not be cross at being disturbed, and I do not think Thelma will be."

"Ripping girl, your sister, old man," remarked Rollo enthusiastically, as the twain hurried towards the staff office.

"Is she?" asked Kenneth absent-mindedly. He was thinking deeply of someone else.

CHAPTER XXVI

Self-accused

"We've a few minutes to spare," observed Kenneth, "so I'll get those cigars for Private Labori. There's a swagger shop just across the road."

In spite of the threatened bombardment of Antwerp the population was calm. It was a case of "business as usual". The cafés and shops were doing a good trade; the price of provisions, notwithstanding the great influx of refugees, was but a little above the normal. Were it not for the military element in the street, and the occasional visit of a Zeppelin or hostile aeroplane, it would have been difficult to realize that the city was almost within range of the German siege guns, and that day by day those guns were slowly yet steadily advancing.

Kenneth entered the tobacconist's first. As he did so he momentarily forgot that he carried his rifle across his back. In passing through the narrow doorway the muzzle of the weapon struck the plate-glass window of the porch and cracked it.

Alarmed by the crash the shopkeeper rushed out, but before Kenneth could offer any apologies the man gave a howl of terror.

"Mercy, monsieur Englishman!" he exclaimed. "Indeed I could not help it. Von Koenik compelled me to disclose your name."

Kenneth, ever quick-witted, grasped the situation instantly. The tobacconist was none other than the spy who, under the name of Jules de la Paix, kept a similar establishment at Brussels. There his dirty work had been completed; at Antwerp it was just beginning.

The fellow had also recognized Kenneth as the Englishman he had basely denounced to his paymasters, the Germans. Seeing him in uniform and armed, with a fully-accoutred companion, the spy jumped at the hasty and erroneous conclusion that Kenneth had discovered his duplicity and had come to arrest him.

His panic at seeing the man whom he supposed to be dead amounted to a superstitious terror. Hardly knowing what he said, he let fall the damning admission that he was at least partly responsible for Kenneth's arrest at Brussels.

"You are my prisoner!" exclaimed Kenneth sternly.

Momentarily recovering his courage, the fellow drew back. His hand flew to his pocket, but before he could produce a concealed weapon the British lad grasped him by both arms.

Meanwhile Rollo, guessing by the crash of the broken glass that something was amiss, had sauntered leisurely into the shop, fully expecting to hear his chum apologizing profusely to the tobacconist for his clumsiness. To his surprise, he found Kenneth and the shopkeeper swaying to and fro in a desperate struggle. Chairs had been overturned, cases of pipes and packets of tobacco were being thrown in all directions.

In spite of being encumbered with his rifle and kit, Kenneth succeeded in throwing the spy to the floor and kneeling on his chest.

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KENNETH SUCCEEDED IN THROWING THE SPY TO THE FLOOR

"Get a strap, a rope, or something, old man," he exclaimed breathlessly. "We've collared a spy."

Rollo obeyed. It was one of those rare instances when he acted on the spur of his chum's orders and argued the situation afterwards. He could not understand how Kenneth had effected the capture without any previous warning. To him, a lad brought up in a country where law and order moves with slow and majestic deliberation, it looked like a case of illegal arrest. Nevertheless he found a length of packing-cord, and deftly secured the arms of the now exhausted spy, tying them at the wrists behind his back.

The two female assistants—Belgian girls—had fled screaming at the commencement of the struggle. Two or three customers at the other end of the long shop had watched the scene without attempting to interfere; but directly the shopkeeper was secured they rushed into the street, yelling that a spy had been captured.

The utterance of the word "Espion" was sufficient instantly to attract a huge crowd. Civil Guards and soldiers found their way through the press, and kept the curious onlookers from the door.

"Who denounces the accused?" demanded a sergeant of the Civil Guard.

"I do," promptly responded Kenneth, at the same time producing his identity papers.

The sergeant glanced at the documents, and entered Kenneth's name in a book.

"You must come with me," he added; "you and your witnesses."

"Sorry I cannot," said Kenneth.

The sergeant pricked up his ears.

"I order you," he declared.

"Tell me where you are taking the prisoner, and we will be there as soon as possible. At three

o'clock I have an appointment with Commandant Fleurus, and it is nearly that hour now."

The sergeant acquiesced, but took the precaution of discreetly sending a couple of men to watch the movements of the two corporals in Belgian uniform who were stated to be English. Experience had taught him that there were such things as forged documents, and that Germans had masqueraded as English officers and men.

"You are slightly after time," was Commandant Fleurus's remark as the dispatch-riders presented themselves.

"We arrested a spy, sir," announced Kenneth. "He gave himself away."

"How was that?" asked the Commandant.

Kenneth reported the details, and how Jules de la Paix had rashly declared that he was compelled to denounce the English lads to von Koenik at Brussels.

"Good!" ejaculated Commandant Fleurus. "It is indeed a fine service to trap such carrion. We have suffered greatly from these pests, but I fear one the less will make but little difference. Antwerp shelters a horde of them. But here is your dispatch. See, I have endorsed it: 'Bearers detained upon special service'."

By the time that Kenneth and Rollo arrived at the head-quarters of the Civil Guard a court martial had already been constituted. The presence of the principal witnesses made it possible for the trial to open.

The proceedings were brief, but with every semblance of fairness. The accused, having had time to consider his position, tried to deny his statements; but there were several witnesses who had overheard the prisoner's terrified confession to Kenneth.

Members of the Civil Guard reported that they had searched the accused's premises. In a garret with a well-concealed trap-door they discovered a powerful wireless installation, the aerials being hidden from outside view by being placed between two rows of chimney-pots. In the garret were also found plans and documents of great official value, besides a copy of a code, several flash-lights, and arms and ammunition. On the face of this evidence the prisoner was doomed.

In addition the Civil Guards discovered that at the end of the garden was a shed abutting on a canal that communicated with the Scheldt. In this shed was a large sea-going motor-boat, painted a dark-grey, and completely equipped for a voyage. It was presumed that, should the spy find himself compelled to leave Antwerp hurriedly, this craft would enable him to reach Dutch territory, whence he could easily regain the ground held by the invaders.

Within an hour from the opening of the Court the spy was condemned to be shot, and the sentence was put into execution forthwith.

"A rotten business," remarked Kenneth as the two lads rode towards Wavre Ste Catherine. "I feel as if I have that fellow's blood on my head."

"He jolly well deserved what he got," rejoined Rollo.

"Undoubtedly; but, all the same, I wish I hadn't a hand in it. Trapping spies is hardly a soldier's game. What I should like to have done would be to have given him a thundering good hiding."

CHAPTER XXVII

With the Naval Brigade at Antwerp

Fort de Wavre Ste Catherine had fallen. Unable to fire an effective shot in reply to the terrible bombardment of the formidable German 28-cm. shells, the strongest of the outer line of Antwerp defences suffered the same fate as the steel-clad cupolas of Liége.

Antwerp was doomed. The Belgians themselves realized the fact. Their one hope was that the German infantry would attempt to rush the trenches. Then it would be proved again that the Belgian infantryman was as good as or better than his Teutonic foe.

Nevertheless, driven from the outer forts on the southern side of the defences, the garrison was not dismayed. In spite of the fact that by their resistance Antwerp itself would presumably suffer at the hands of the Germanic hordes, the Belgians knew that their sacrifice would not be in vain. To take the city a huge force of Germans would be required—and that force was badly

needed elsewhere. Day by day, hour by hour, the British and French allied forces were extending their left wing from the Aisne to the Belgian frontier, circumventing all the efforts on the part of their foes to turn their flank. The "holding up" of the German besiegers of Antwerp was sufficient to enable the Allies firmly to establish their threatened left flank upon the coast of the North Sea.

One by one the outer forts fell. A shell demolished the waterworks and threatened the city's water supply. Back fell the Belgians, reluctantly relaxing their hold upon the trenches, in which they were subjected to a heavy fire without even so much as a glimpse of a hostile grey-coat.

During these momentous days Kenneth and Rollo were busily employed conveying important messages under fire. It was a matter of impossibility for them not to realize the hopelessness of the position, but they did not relax their efforts on that account. The Belgians were not fighting with their backs to a wall. Behind them lay the neutral territory of Holland. At any given time they could evacuate the city and allow themselves to be interned; but this they would not do until they received news that their allies were firmly established in their proposed position.

On the second day of October preparations were made for the Government to abandon Antwerp, when suddenly the exodus came to a standstill. The word flew from mouth to mouth that a strong British force was to be thrown into Antwerp, and, with the aid of the Belgian army, to raise the siege and turn the enemy's flank.

"That's good news," remarked Kenneth; but Rollo was far from optimistic.

"We've heard such a lot of this sort of talk before, old man," he said. "Until I see a British regiment in Antwerp I'll have my doubts."

Early on the morning of the 4th, the lads were roused from their slumbers by a roar of cheering. Emerging from their shell-proof shelter, they were surprised and delighted to find that rumour had merged into fact. Surging along towards the trenches in the direction of Lierre were hundreds of men dressed in the well-known British naval uniform. As yet they were not under shellfire, for the German guns were devoting their energies towards the works at Lierre, and the hostile air-craft had not noted the approach of British reinforcements.

Presently the bluejackets halted and piled arms. It was their last breathing-space before they dashed into the shell-swept trenches.

"Let's go and see them," suggested Rollo; and his companion agreeing, the two chums hurried towards the resting bluejackets, who were surrounded by hundreds of their Belgian allies, for the present off duty from the firing-line.

"I wonder how we manage to spare this crowd of sailors," remarked Kenneth as they made their way towards their fellow-countrymen. "I should have thought that every man would be wanted for service with the fleet."

"At any rate, they're here," said Rollo; "and there are fellows in khaki coming along the Lierre road, if I'm not much mistaken."

The lads stood watching the sailors for some time. Their insular reserve kept them from immediately entering into conversation, although they were filled with impatience to know what had happened.

For the most part the bluejackets were young men of good physique. They lacked the bronzed appearance of seamen who have braved the breezes of the five oceans. Many of them were pale, not with apprehension, but with a consciousness that they had before them a stern task that would tax their energies and courage, for they were going under fire for the first time.

Presently one of the bluejackets strolled up to the spot where Kenneth and his chum were standing.

"Est-ce—est-ce que vous—oh, hang it! what's the French for——" he began.

"Try English, old man; it will be a jolly sight easier for you," said Kenneth, laughing.

"Why, you're British, and in Belgian get-up!" exclaimed the bluejacket in surprise. "What are you doing here, I should like to know?"

"Exactly the same question we want to ask you," replied Kenneth. "We're dispatch-riders in the Belgian service. We heard that British troops were to be sent here, but we didn't expect sailors."

"Nor are we," replied the other. "Candidly we're not, although we are the Collingwood Battalion of the Naval Brigade."

"Never heard of it before," remarked Rollo.

"You haven't? Have you heard of Kitchener's army, then?"

The lads shook their heads.

"Then you are behind the times. Whatever have you been doing with yourselves? I'll tell you. As soon as war broke out Kitchener asked for half a million men. He got them right enough. In addition they started Naval Brigades. It was a good wheeze, for a lot of fellows joined for the sake of wearing a naval uniform instead of khaki, although there was no intention of using us at sea—at least, not at present. Two months ago I was an actor. To quote the words of the immortal *Pinafore*: 'I never was upon the sea'."

"'What, never?'" queried Rollo, continuing the words of the song.

"'Well—hardly ever'. Fact is that until I left Walmer to cross the Channel my longest trip was from Portsmouth to Ryde. I was beastly sea-sick crossing, but I'm jolly glad I'm here. We stand a chance of doing a bit before Kitchener's army gets a sniff of a look-in. We'll do our little bit, never fear. Well, so long; hope to see you again."

The division was falling in, preparatory to advancing in open order towards the trenches facing the River Nethe, close to the village of Lierre. Steadfastly, and with the quiet courage that distinguishes Britons under fire, the lads of the Naval Brigade marched into the zone of danger to attempt to stem the advance of the German hordes upon the city of Antwerp.

"Ah, messieurs!" exclaimed Major Planchenoît, as the dispatch-riders reported themselves for orders. He was in high spirits, for, like the rest of the Belgian troops, he was greatly cheered by the fact that the long-promised aid was at last forthcoming. "Ah, messieurs! to-day you will report yourselves at Lierre. You will be of service as interpreters, for your gallant fellow-countrymen do not seem particularly well acquainted with our language."

It was hot work making their way to the trenches, for already the Germans had renewed their destructive fire. Briton and Belgian, lying side by side in the hastily-constructed shelters, were subjected to a galling shrapnel fire without being able to make an adequate reply. From the rear, two British heavy naval guns were resolutely hurtling shells towards the invisible German battery; but of what use were two against so many?

Manfully the untried men of the Naval Brigade took their gruelling. It was one of the hardest tasks that men, going for the first time into action, had to endure: to be subjected to a tremendous bombardment without being able to fire a shot in return. Nevertheless they stuck it grimly, waiting and praying that they might have a chance of meeting the German infantry on anything like level terms.

That chance came at last. At night the German artillery-fire slackened. Pouring onwards in dense masses came the grey-uniformed legions, intent upon forcing the passage of the River Nethe in the neighbourhood of Lierre.

Already the British Marines had blown up the bridge, while across the main street of the shell-wrecked village a strong barricade of carts faced with sandbags had been constructed. Working desperately, the German engineers succeeded in throwing pontoons across the stagnant river. With shouts of "Deutschland über Alles" the infantry poured across, greeted by a withering fire from Briton and Belgian.

The Naval Brigade's rifle-firing was as steady as that of a veteran battalion. Maxims added to the general clatter. All along the trenches flashed the deadly spurts of fire from the small-arms. The German infantry, swept away like chaff, failed to make good the position: the Briton proved a better man than the vaunted Teuton. Then came the recurrence of the deadly shrapnel. The Belgian infantry on the right were compelled to retire, and into the position they vacated poured other German regiments, covered by a fierce artillery fire that was impartial as to whether it struck friend or foe.

It was now that the Naval Brigade failed to come up to the standard of thoroughly trained and seasoned troops. Having repelled the attack upon their immediate front, they could not easily be induced to retire. The desire to "stop and have another shot at the beggars" was uppermost in the minds of these stalwart youths. They failed to realize that with the Allied line pressed they were in danger of being enfiladed. But reluctantly and doggedly they eventually fell back within the shelter of the inner line of forts.

For the next two days the German heavy guns pounded the weak line of defence. Inexplicably, although the city was well within range, no projectiles fell in Antwerp. Perhaps it was because the invaders hoped to take a practically undamaged port.

Meanwhile the Belgian army, with the British Naval Brigade, was being withdrawn from Antwerp. Further resistance was hopeless, while by this time the Anglo-French armies were in their allotted positions according to General Joffre's plan. All that remained to be done in Antwerp was to destroy everything likely to be of military value to the enemy, and extricate the defenders from what promised to be a veritable trap.

In vain, during the night of the retirement, Kenneth and Rollo sought to regain their regiment. Whither the 9th of the Line had gone no one seemed to know. Some had it that the devoted regiment had perished almost to a man in the trenches; others that it was on its way to Ostend; others that it had crossed the frontier into Holland.

"Now what's to be done?" asked Rollo.

"Find the girls, if they haven't already left, and get them to a place of safety," replied Kenneth grimly. "We can do no more at present for Belgium; we must look after ourselves and our friends. Lead on: to the St. Nicholas Hospital."

CHAPTER XXVIII

When the City Fell

Shells were beginning to fall upon the roofs of the houses when the lads entered the devoted city. The bulk of the population had already fled. A seemingly never-ending procession of tired, hungry, and despondent refugees poured along the dusty road leading to Bergen-op-Zoom. Others, debarred from taking train owing to Germans having occupied St. Nicholas Station, were making their way by circuitous routes towards Ostend. More were embarking upon craft of all sorts and sizes, whose masters were only too willing to give their suffering countrymen a passage either to the nearest Dutch port or across the North Sea to the shores of hospitable England.

Night had now fallen. It was by no means cold, the frosty nights of mid-September having given place to an autumnal heat-wave. There was little or no wind. The dense smoke from the burning petrol-tanks, which the Belgians had fired rather than let the precious spirit fall into the hands of the enemy, rose straight in the air. Elsewhere other smaller columns of smoke marked the localities where the German incendiary shells had fired portions of the city.

In one of the principal squares, swarms of ragamuffins, acting under the orders of the military, were taking a hideous delight in their work of destruction; for they were busily engaged in smashing costly motor-cars and lorries to useless fragments. Nothing that could be of use to the enemy was permitted to be left intact.

From the direction of the river came the sounds of muffled explosions as the Belgians methodically proceeded to cripple the engines of a fleet of merchant shipping, and to sink lighters filled with stone and concrete to block up the entrances to the various docks.

The Germans were about to take Antwerp—but they were to find in it another Moscow, as Napoleon found it.

Keeping to the almost deserted side streets, Kenneth and Rollo hurried towards the Hospital of St. Nicholas. Their motor-cycles had gone, being destroyed in the retirement of the 9th Regiment of the Line from the fire-swept trenches.

"What's the programme?" asked Rollo. "What do you propose to do if we find the girls?"

"Clear out," replied Kenneth promptly. "The train service is done; I'm not anxious to enter Holland and cool my heels till the end of this business. We can't expect the girls to tramp twenty miles, with the possibility of being cut off by the enemy; and carts are apparently out of the question. There remains the sea."

"Yes, we may be able to get a passage on a fishing-boat."

"That's not my plan. Do you remember the motor-launch in the shed at the end of Jules de la Paix's garden?"

"Can't see how that can help us," objected Rollo. "We haven't a crew."

"If we can get the motor to start, the worst of the difficulty is over," declared Kenneth. "At the trial, you'll recollect, the sergeant of the Civil Guard reported that the craft was provisioned and ready for sea. He was ordered to refrain from damaging the vessel."

"She may have disappeared."

"We'll soon see."

Kenneth led the way along a dark, deserted alley, till he came to a wall on the top of which was a formidable array of broken glass. This wall marked the side boundary to the spy's premises.

"A tough nut to crack," remarked Rollo, as he noticed for the first time the jagged glass gleaming in the red glare of the burning houses.

"We'll come across a door, unless I'm much mistaken—— Hullo! that's a nasty one," said Kenneth.

A shower of shrapnel, rattling on the roofs and shattering the windows of some houses in the street they had just left, occasioned this exclamation; for the Germans were mostly using shells of this variety, to terrify the inhabitants rather than to cause great material damage.

"Quite near enough," rejoined Rollo coolly. "Here's the door."

The lads tried it. It was locked and bolted. The stout oaken framework resisted their efforts to burst it open with their shoulders.

Kenneth unslung his rifle. One shot amidst that chaos of terrific detonations would be practically inaudible, and even if it were heard there were none sufficiently curious to ascertain the reason.

The heavy lock was not proof against the high-velocity bullet. A second shot demolished the bolt. The gate creaked on its hinges.

Passing along the garden path amidst autumn flowers mown down by the explosion of shells, several of which had fallen close to the house, the lads arrived at the boat-house. The windows were shattered; there was a gaping hole in the roof. Kenneth began to entertain grave doubts as to whether the motor-boat had escaped damage.

"She's there, right enough," he announced, as he peered through one of the broken windows and saw the grey-painted outlines of the craft within. "The door's locked. I'll try another shot."

"Steady on, man!" cautioned his companion. "Mind you don't bore a hole through the boat as well. See, here is a crowbar, or something like it. We'll prise the door open."

They seized the bar and forced the pointed end between the door and the jamb.

"Now!" exclaimed Kenneth.

At that very moment, before the lads could exert any pressure upon the crowbar, a blinding flash came from overhead, immediately followed by a terrific detonation. Splinters, broken glass, tiles, clods of earth and leaves flew in all directions, while a pungent cloud of smoke enveloped everything.

For nearly ten seconds the two chums held on to the crowbar, then Kenneth spoke.

"I'm hit, confound it!" he exclaimed. "It's not much, though."

He relaxed his grasp of the iron bar as he spoke, and reeled slightly. Rollo held out his hand to steady him, and perceived for the first time that it was wet with blood and practically devoid of the sense of feeling.

"What! You hit too?" asked Kenneth, pulling himself together on seeing the dark stain on his companion's wrist.

"Yes; a shrapnel ball clean through my right wrist," announced Rollo, "It doesn't hurt much."

"And I've a bullet through the palm of my left hand," added Kenneth, displaying a small punctured wound about two inches from the base of the little finger. "It might have been worse. We'll tie our handkerchiefs over the wounds; that will do all right for the time. Now for the door. The sooner we open it the better. Buck up, man; the girls must be terribly anxious."

Thus exhorted, although feeling giddy from the effects of the shock, Rollo grasped the crowbar with his unwounded hand. Kenneth bore against the lever with all his might, and with a crash the door flew open.

The motor-boat was on a cradle, just clear of the water. It was now half-tide and on the ebb. A hasty examination failed to reveal signs of structural damage to the little craft, although the scuttle-glasses of the cabin were all either cracked or completely demolished. The craft was fully equipped, but the provisions had vanished. Doubtless they had been removed by the Civil Guards at or after the arrest of the spy.

"Let's launch her, then we can see if she leaks," exclaimed Kenneth. He was feverishly working against time. His energy seemed inexhaustible. "There's the windlass; let her go gently."

Down glided the boat into the sullen waters of the canal. Kenneth leapt on board and secured her along-side, then lifted the floor-boards over the well.

"She's making a few drops," he announced. "I think it's only because she has been hauled up in the dry for some time. By the time we get the girls down she'll take up."

Rollo offered no remark. In his mind there were doubts as to whether Thelma Everest and Yvonne Résimont were still in the hospital; if they were, would they abandon their duties? But he followed his chum, nursing his wounded hand, wincing at every step he took as the pain shot through the nerves of his arm.

Kenneth strode on, indifferent to his injuries. Hardly a word passed between them as they hurried along the alley and into the smoke-filled streets. There were still a few persons about, mostly men of the criminal class, who seized the opportunity for indiscriminate looting. Here and there were the corpses of fugitives, stricken down in their final mad rush for the safety that was denied them. The air was filled with the crash of exploding shells and the clatter of broken glass, to the accompaniment of the distant booming of the hostile guns.

Closely followed by his companion, Kenneth dashed up the steps of the hospital. The door was wide open. A portion of the facade of the portico had been shattered by a shell. Hardly a window remained intact in the building.

A nurse, her face serenely peaceful in spite of the scene of destruction around her, came forward.

"You men are wounded? Come this way; we will speedily attend to your hurts."

Kenneth shook his head.

"Our wounds are slight," he protested. "I have come for my sister, Thelma Everest, and her friend, Mademoiselle Résimont—if they can be spared," he added, for the sight of this woman calmly on duty caused him to take a different view of the reason lot his sister's presence in the hospital.

"They can be spared," replied the nurse. "Already we have sent the least serious cases away, and have dismissed the younger nurses. Mademoiselle Everest and her friend refused to take advantage of the permission. They were expecting you, and you have not failed them, I see. I will inform them."

Quickly Thelma and Yvonne appeared, heavily cloaked, and carrying handbags, in readiness for their flight.

"We would not have gone, Kenneth," said his sister, "only there is no more work for us to do. But is it not already too late to leave the city? We were told that the bridge of boats had been destroyed, and that all communication with outside is interrupted. Four of our nurses left by the last train that got away from here."

"We'll manage that all right," declared Kenneth stoutly, although in his mind he dreaded taking the girls on the journey along the shell-endangered streets.

"We are ready," said Thelma simply; then, having taken a hasty yet tender farewell of the head nursing sister, the girls accompanied the two lads into the now deserted thoroughfare.

Unhurt, although several highly-charged projectiles burst above the roofs on either side of the road, the four refugees gained the boat-house of the late spy. No more shells had fallen there in the interval. The boat had made but half an inch of water, and this could easily be got under by means of the pump. The fuel tanks were filled with petrol; there were a dozen intact tins in the after locker.

For provisions each lad had a couple of long rolls of bread in his haversack. Thelma had brought biscuits and butter; Yvonne had provided a tin of ground coffee and condensed milk—a meagre fare on which to essay a voyage across the North Sea, but enough to hazard the journey without fear of actual starvation.

Kenneth was by no means a novice in seamanship, On more than one vacation he had spent part of the time in motor-boating in Southampton Water, where a cousin of his kept a high-powered craft. After very little delay he succeeded in finding the position of the various switches and taps. At the third attempt the engine fired. The propeller blades, set at the neutral, churned the water. The motor purred rhythmically, as a well-conducted motor should.

"Cast off there, for'ard!" ordered Kenneth, addressing Rollo, who had taken up his post in the bows. "Thelma, undo that rope, quickly now!"

It was no time for courtesies. Kenneth was skipper, and his crew had to be told peremptorily; it was his notion of showing authority.

Swiftly gathering stern-way the boat glided away from the staging; then, with a jerk as the propeller began to churn ahead, the little craft headed towards the Scheldt and the North Sea.

Kenneth's was by no means an easy task. Having the use of only one arm, he was severely handicapped. Steering by means of a wheel is far from satisfactory when literally "single-handed", while the intricacies of the canal required a certain amount of quickness with the helm. Twice the boat nearly collided with the partly submerged hulls of destroyed barges. The canal was now little better than a ditch, for the tide had already fallen twelve feet out of sixteen. One satisfaction Kenneth had: there were no lock-gates to negotiate. The falling tide told him that.

"Something ahead!" shouted Rollo. "Wreckage, I think."

His chum immediately throttled down, keeping his unwounded hand on the reversing lever.

By the lurid glare in the sky he could discern the obstruction: the shattered timbers of the lock-gates. Would there be enough water to clear the sill of the basin? If not, they would have to remain for hours, in danger of the falling shells, until the tide rose sufficiently to float the boat over the barrier.

Kenneth prudently stopped the engine. He would not risk losing the blades of the propeller. Slowly and with bare steerage-way the boat glided towards the ruined gates. Her bows passed the gaunt timbers, then, with a horrid grinding noise, she hung up by the stern.

"Get for'ard, all hands!" shouted Kenneth. "We may be able to jump her over."

The four members of the crew made their way to the bows. Regardless of their injuries the two lads heaved and pushed with the boat-hooks. They could hear the keel grate on the stone-work. The tide was still falling.

A shell, fortunately without exploding, dropped into the water twenty yards astern, throwing a shower of spray over the boat and her crew.

Kenneth glanced at the girls. By the glare of the burning city he could see that their faces were calm. Either they were ignorant of their narrow escape or quite unperturbed by their hazardous position.

"All together; push for all you are worth!" exclaimed Kenneth desperately.

Inch by inch the boat was urged onwards, till with a sudden jerk it dropped across the sill into deep water. Rollo, faint with pain, sat limply in the for'ard well; then, concealing his injuries, he assisted the girls to the doubtful shelter of the cabin.

Kenneth, too, was in a sorry plight. Setting his teeth tightly he restarted the engine; then, taking up his post at the wheel, he guided the swift little craft towards the centre of the River Scheldt.

In spite of the still pressing danger the crew were enthralled by the scene that presented itself to their gaze. Antwerp was in the throes of its death-struggle. Dominating the houses on the river bank rose the spire of the cathedral, its delicate tracery silhouetted clearly against the dull red glare of the burning oil-tanks. Overhead the thick pall of smoke had spread far and wide, its lower edges tinted blood-red by the blaze of the numerous fires. High above the roofs were the rapid, seemingly interminable brilliant flashes of the exploding shells, while away to the southward the sky was stabbed by the incessant lightning-like glare of the bombarding guns.

Antwerp had fallen. Belgium as a country had practically ceased to exist; Belgium as a nation, still undaunted, had made a supreme sacrifice. She had saved Europe—and Europe's task was clear. Not until the brave little nation was rehabilitated, and the German menace crushed once and for all time, could the Allies hope to lay down the sword that they had been reluctantly compelled to unsheathe.

CHAPTER XXIX

On the North Sea

The crew of the motor-boat had no great difficulty in finding their way down the river. The glare on the water, and on the underside of the enormous expanse of smoke overhead, enabled them to see objects ahead with comparative ease. The actual channel was well defined, at first by several barges still at anchor in the stream, and later by hundreds of small craft making their way to safety.

Those who depended mainly upon sail to propel them were quickly overtaken, for the night was particularly windless and their brown canvas hung idly from the yards. Satisfied with having got beyond the danger zone, the crews of these fishing-vessels were content to drift, save for the occasional assistance of their heavy sweeps. The decks were literally packed with refugees, who, glad to have escaped with their lives, exhibited an uncanny calmness.

Reach after reach of the river was passed, as the motor-boat, gradually working up power, increased her speed. Astern, the funereal pile of Antwerp glowed red; it seemed as if the crew could never get beyond sight of it. The spire of the cathedral had vanished beneath the horizon, but the smoke from the burning city still hung overhead.

The four occupants of the motor-boat had made their way aft. The girls, refusing to go into the cabin, sat on one side of the cockpit, their eyes fixed upon the glare of the fallen port. Rollo, holding his wounded wrist, shut his jaw tightly and endured the pain. Since his chum made no complaint of his injuries, Rollo grimly decided to keep the fact that he was wounded from the

others. Kenneth, steadying the steering-wheel with his right hand, had almost forgotten the unpleasant attention of the shrapnel bullet. The sense of responsibility outweighed all other considerations.

"We're across the frontier now," he announced, as the little craft curtsied to the slight undulations of the comparatively wide expanse of the West Scheldt. "Now, girls, which shall it be? Shall I land you on Dutch territory, or will you risk crossing the North Sea?"

Thelma's was a prompt answer.

"We'll stay with you, boys."

"Will it be very rough?" asked Yvonne. She had faced the dangers of the bombardment bravely, but the perils of a voyage upon the open sea in a small, partly-decked craft gave her misgivings that the presence of her companions failed to keep in check.

"Smooth as a mill-pond," declared Kenneth optimistically. "There's no wind. We'll have plenty of company on the way, I fancy; and what is more, the British navy has complete control of this part of the North Sea. We are doing fifteen knots, I think; that's a little over seventeen miles an hour. We ought to be in sight of the Kentish coast a couple of hours after sunrise."

"Then I am satisfied," declared Yvonne.

"That's good! Now, girls, how about a cup of coffee? I can't make it, so perhaps you'll do a good turn. Rollo will light the cabin light and show you where the fresh water is stored."

As soon as his three companions had withdrawn to the cabin Kenneth closed the door. The gleam from within dazzled his eyes, and, with so much traffic about, that would never do. The motor-boat was running without navigation lights. If there were any "steaming" lamps on board he had failed to notice them. But the rule of the road seemed to be sadly neglected that fateful night. There were vessels of all sizes and rigs making for safety, and not one-tenth of their number showed the regulation red and green lights.

Left to himself, Kenneth began to realize once more that his hand was throbbing. The flow of blood had entirely ceased, and a dry, burning pain succeeded the comparative ease of the wound while it bled freely. He was desperately hungry and thirsty. For forty-eight hours he had been on short commons. The reaction of the days and nights of strenuous activity was beginning to tell.

The motor-boat, gliding swiftly through the water, had now outstripped all the fishing luggers. Ahead were three or four steamers making to the westward. Others, shaping a course for Ostend, had swung away to the port hand.

"Rollo!" sang out his chum sharply. "Come and take the helm for a minute."

"I was just coming," answered Rollo as he emerged from the cabin. "There's coffee waiting for you. And the girls have made a rattling good job of my wrist," he added, pointing to a neatly-bandaged arm in a sling.

"Follow that vessel," ordered Kenneth, pointing to a steamer a couple of miles ahead, her stern-light showing brightly in the clear starlit night. "If you overhaul her, or if there's anything likely to be dangerous, give me the word."

"One minute," protested Rollo. "The spray's dashing in through the broken scuttles. I'll try and fix up the strip of canvas. It's long enough to go right round."

Kenneth waited until his chum had completed the necessary and self-imposed task. Being able to use only one hand, it was a difficult, not to say dangerous, business securing the canvas round the raised cabin-top, for the boat was now jumping considerably.

"That's done it!" ejaculated Rollo. "Now, old man, down you go. I'll keep her going somehow."

"You have been a time, Kenneth," exclaimed his sister reproachfully. "Your coffee is getting cold. Why, what's the matter?"

She broke off her reproaches in alarm, for Kenneth's face was grey and drawn in the light of the cabin-lamp.

"Only my hand," announced her brother, with a feeble, ill-disguised attempt at unconcern as he withdrew the badly-bandaged member from the flap of his coat.

"What! Are we still under fire?"

"No; this occurred five or six hours ago. It's a clean wound."

Gently the two girls attended to the injury. The handkerchief had to be soaked before it could be withdrawn from the wound. In five minutes the now experienced young nurses had washed the place with antiseptic and had bound it with lint.

"Right as anything now," declared Kenneth. "I'll have my coffee and get on deck again."

"You had far better rest," replied his sister; "and Rollo, too, is steering; in spite of his wounded wrist. I'll go and take the wheel; it won't be the first time."

Kenneth gave in without a protest. He was "about done". Obediently he stretched himself upon one of the cushions of the bunk and closed his eyes.

Bidding Yvonne keep a watch on the patient, Thelma donned her cloak and went out into the cockpit.

Rollo, too, offered no objections to being relieved of his duty. The vibration of the wheel, almost unnoticeable under ordinary circumstances, was causing his wrist intense pain. He handed Thelma the charge of the helm, told her what course to take, and sat down, admiring, in spite of his physical anguish, the alert, self-possessed girl as she toyed with the spokes of the wheel with the ease of a practised helmsman.

"We're up to that vessel, Rollo," she reported, after an hour had passed. Owing to her superior speed the motor-boat had rapidly gained upon the lumbering ten-knot tramp which was now a couple of cables distant on the port hand.

Her companion bestirred himself and went into the cabin.

"I wouldn't wake Kenneth," he said as he reappeared. "Yvonne tells me he's quite done up."

"I wonder you're not, too."

"I'll make up for it when we get ashore, never fear," declared Rollo. "But the point is, we've got to steer a course. Here's the compass, but it's almost like Greek to me. I suppose if we keep due west we'll do something? There are such things as variation and deviation, but, although I did have a chance, I never troubled to understand them. I wish I had, now."

Providentially, for it was now close on high water, the little craft crossed the dangerous sand-banks that encumber the Scheldt entrance without any of her crew realizing the risk they were running. Once they encountered "overfalls" of rather broken water on the tail of a bank; but, with nothing worse than a couple of waves breaking inboard, the motor-boat gained the comparatively smooth water beyond.

Grey dawn was now breaking. All around was an unbroken expanse of sea and sky. Not a vessel or a buoy of any description was in sight. For the first time Rollo was able to form some idea of the vastness of the North Sea.

Bestirring himself, he examined the petrol-gauge and the quantity of oil in the automatic lubricator reservoirs. The consumption of both had not been excessive, and the motor was running like clockwork.

"It's getting very misty," said Thelma.

"By Jove, it is!" assented her companion. "I hope it won't come on any thicker. Are you cold? Let me take the wheel again."

The girl shook her head.

"I'm quite all right," she declared. "I am enjoying it. How much farther is it, do you think?"

It was Rollo's turn to shake his head. He did not know, and he was too candid to pretend that he did.

"We ought to be meeting shipping in and out of the Thames estuary shortly," he said. "I suppose our merchant vessels sail as freely as they did before the war? Hello! There's something coming up astern."

He pointed to a faint blurr of smoke about three miles away and dead in the wake of the motor-boat.

"Something fairly fast to be able to overtake us," remarked Thelma. "Is there a telescope on board?"

"I'll see," answered Rollo.

Again he entered the cabin. Kenneth was still sound asleep. Yvonne was seated on the opposite bunk, watching him as zealously as a vigilant sentry.

"What are you looking for, Rollo?" she whispered.

"A telescope."

She arose and, steadying herself by means of the cabin table, made her way to the for'ard bulkhead. Drawing back a curtain, she took down the required article from a rack.

"It is a nurse's duty to become quickly acquainted with her surroundings," she said with a smile, as she handed Rollo the telescope.

The lad returned to the cockpit. Standing with his back against the after bulkhead of the cabin he raised the telescope. It was some time, owing to the motion of the boat, before he could get the instrument to bear.

"I must rouse Kenneth," he said calmly.

"Why?" asked Thelma. "Tell me: is there anything wrong? I will not be frightened."

"There is, I fear," he answered. "Unless I am very much mistaken, yonder craft is a German torpedo-boat, and she is standing in pursuit of us."

CHAPTER XXX

The Victorious White Ensign

"Kenneth, old man, wake up!"

Everest opened his eyes listlessly. Aroused in the midst of the sleep of utter exhaustion, he did not at once realize his surroundings.

"What's up?" he asked drowsily, with a suspicion of resentment in his voice.

"Come out into the cockpit," said Rollo. "I want you to see if we are on the right course. We passed the tramp steamer some time ago."

"Then why didn't you call me?" demanded Kenneth, displaying considerable alacrity, and making a dash for the cabin door.

"Stay here a little longer, Yvonne," said Rollo to the Belgian girl as she began to follow her patient. The lad's chief anxiety was to keep her in ignorance of the new danger that threatened them.

"Right as rain," announced Kenneth, glancing at the compass.

"Look astern, old man," said his chum in a low voice. "I didn't want to alarm Yvonne. Thelma knows, though. That torpedo-boat coming up hand over fist is a German."

"Never!" ejaculated Kenneth. The idea of a war vessel flying the Kaiser's black-cross ensign on the high seas seemed incredible.

"Fact," rejoined Rollo. "Take this telescope."

"You're right, by Jove!" exclaimed Kenneth after a brief survey. "We must carry on as long as we can. If they fire at us we must stop, for the sake of the girls."

The motor was running at its utmost possible number of revolutions, yet the boat was no match for the grey-painted craft now a mile and a half astern.

The German torpedo-boat made no sign of firing; she merely hung on doggedly in the wake of the motor-craft, slowly yet surely diminishing the distance between them. The haze had now lifted considerably, so that the range of vision extended for quite five miles. All around, save for the pursuing craft, the horizon was unbroken.

"Perhaps those chaps think that their rotten spy, Jules de la Paix, is on board," suggested Rollo. "They may have a prearranged plan to pick him up at sea."

"Should hardly think so," replied Kenneth. "It would have been easier for him to have run across to Dutch territory, if he hadn't the heart to remain at Antwerp during the bombardment. If that's whom they're after they'll be jolly disappointed."

"They'll spot our uniforms, if they haven't already done so," said Rollo. "I wish the beggars would be stopped by a submarine."

Kenneth did not reply. Seized by an inspiration, he grasped one of the two boat-hooks on deck, released it from its lashings, and tossed it overboard.

"What have you done that for?" asked his chum.

Kenneth pointed to the staff of the boat-hook. Weighted down by the gun-metal head, it was bobbing up and down in a vertical position some yards astern.

"That may give them a bit of a shock," he explained. "They may think it's a periscope of a submarine."

"It's much too small."

"Not when there are no means of comparing it with anything else. Look at it now. You couldn't say with certainty within a hundred yards how far it is away. Anyhow, we'll chance it."

The German torpedo-boat had hoisted four signal-flags to her cross-yards. They were blowing out in a fore-and-aft direction.

"Can't make them out," declared Kenneth, "and wouldn't understand them if I did. Now, watch."

Suddenly two spurts of flame burst from the deck of the pursuing boat. Shells from her three-pounder quick-firers pitched a short distance on her starboard side. Simultaneously the torpedo-boat swung round. Travelling at twenty-seven knots, the sudden porting of her helm caused her to heel outwards till her deck was almost awash.

"By Jove, she's rammed our boat-hook!" shouted Kenneth enthusiastically. "If ever she gets back to port, won't she pitch a yarn about ramming and sinking a British submarine!"

The lad was not wrong in his surmise, for the torpedo-boat slowed down and made a complete circle, steaming over the spot where she imagined the periscope to have been. Luckily the ruse was not discovered, for a chance shot had shattered the boat-hook staff and had sent the weighted end to the bottom; while, on the other hand, the motor-boat had gained at least two miles on her pursuer.

"It's worth while throwing our remaining boat-hook overboard," said Rollo. "I don't suppose we'll want it in any case."

The German torpedo-boat had now resumed the pursuit. Obviously fearing the presence of other submarines she kept a zigzag course, altering her helm every five minutes in order to confuse the aim of a possible torpedo-gunner. Consequently, although she still overhauled her quarry, the distance between them lessened with perceptible slowness.

Ten minutes from the time of resuming her course the torpedo-boat fired her bow gun. The plugged shell, purposely aimed wide, threw up a column of spray a hundred yards from the motor-boat's port quarter.

The lads exchanged glances. Kenneth leant forward and switched off the ignition.

"Hard lines!" he ejaculated. "If it weren't for the girls——"

While the boat still carried way he put the helm hard over, until her bows pointed in the direction of her captor. Dejectedly the crew awaited the arrival of the torpedo-boat, wondering what course the Germans would pursue.

"Look!" exclaimed Thelma, excitedly pointing to the hostile craft.

The sight that met their gaze was an inspiring one. From somewhere at a great distance away a shell had hurtled through the air. Striking the water within twenty yards of its objective, the missile had ricochetted, and had shattered the torpedo-boat's foremost funnel.

Another and another followed in quick succession, both bursting over the deck of the doomed vessel.

The Germans replied, firing with great vigour, but the crew of the motor-boat could form no idea of what they were firing at or the result of their efforts. In five minutes the torpedo-boat was badly holed for'ard and making water fast.

"The cowardly skunks!" exclaimed Kenneth, frantically restarting the motor. The epithet was justifiable, for the commander of the torpedo-boat was endeavouring to use the little motor-boat as a screen from her enemy's fire.

Owing to the already crippled condition of the German craft, Kenneth could easily out-manoeuvre her. In spite of the risk of a shell from the exasperated Teuton, he kept his vessel about half a mile from the torpedo-boat and awaited the inevitable ending.

It was not long in coming. Torn by the well-aimed shells, her mast, funnels, and deck fittings swept clean away, the torpedo-boat settled down. From amidships a cloud of black smoke, tinged with lurid flames, soared skywards. Men were pouring up from the engine-room and throwing themselves into the sea.

The other craft had ceased firing. She was coming up quickly, and could now be

distinguished as a British E-class destroyer.

Suddenly the doomed vessel gave a roll to starboard, flung her stern in the air, and with her triple propellers racing madly, disappeared from sight, leaving a heavy pall of smoke to mark the spot when she sank.

"We must pick up those fellows," announced Kenneth, pointing to about twenty heads bobbing in the water. "I'll slow down as close as I can. Mind your wrist, Rollo."

Three minutes later all the crew of the motor-boat were busily engaged in hauling half-drowned, and for the most part wounded, German seamen into their craft, till eleven men, the sole survivors of the luckless torpedo-boat, were rescued.

"You Belgians?" asked one, in broken French, when he saw the lads' uniforms. "Good! We surrender to you."

"You'll be transferred to that vessel," said Kenneth, pointing to the now close British destroyer.

"No, they will shoot us," exclaimed the terrified man.

"Nonsense!" replied Kenneth. "British seamen are not like——" He was on the point of saying "Germans", but pulled himself up and added "pirates".

Nevertheless the German seamen were not easily reassured. Their officers had impressed upon them that the British navy took no prisoners, and they firmly believed it.

"Motor-boat ahoy! What craft is that?" sang out a lieutenant, as the British destroyer reversed her engines and came to a standstill at her own length from the little vessel. It was a grand, inspiring sight to the refugees to see the White Ensign floating proudly from the mast-heads of the destroyer. Practically untouched in her duel with her antagonist, she looked as spick and span as when she first commissioned at Chatham Dockyard, only a week previously.

"We're British in the Belgian service: refugees from Antwerp," replied Kenneth.

"We thought you were one of our Motor-boat Reserve craft in difficulties," said the officer. "Luckily we heard the firing, and closed to investigate. We'll take charge of your prisoners; can you run alongside?"

Stalwart bluejackets, stripped to their singlets, and grimy stokers crowded to the stanchion rails to watch the transhipment of the captured Germans.

"Do you want a passage back to Sheerness?" asked the lieutenant.

"If you wouldn't mind taking my sister and her friend," replied Kenneth, "we'll stick to the motor-boat."

"But you're both wounded," exclaimed the officer. "Come aboard, all of you. We'll make you as comfortable as we can, considering we are cleared for action."

"But the boat?" protested Kenneth; for, having carried them so far, it seemed hard lines that she would have to be abandoned.

"Don't worry about that," said the lieutenant. "I'll put an artificer and a couple of men aboard, and let them run her into the Medway."

The genial officer courteously assisted Thelma and Yvonne over the side. Rollo followed with a fair amount of agility, considering his disabled wrist. Lastly Kenneth left his first command.

As he gained the corticened decks of the destroyer he pulled himself up and thankfully saluted the diminutive quarter-deck, on which floated the White Ensign—the emblem of freedom. Then a grey mist swam before his eyes and he felt himself falling.

* * * * *

Two days later there was a happy reunion at an hotel at Sheerness. Summoned by telegraph, all the members of the Barrington and Everest families who were not employed on active service hastened to welcome home their young heroes. With them came Major Résimont, now well on the road to recovery, and for the time being a guest of Mr. Everest.

"I should think you lads have had enough of this terrible war," remarked Mrs. Everest at the conclusion of their narrative.

"We've only seen the beginning," declared Kenneth gravely. "As soon as this little hurt of mine has healed, I want to go back."

"And I too," added Rollo.

Colonel Barrington flushed with pride.

"Of course," he said, "it ought to be a fairly simple matter, considering your experience, to get a commission. It is merely a case of applying to the War Office."

"And undergoing six months' training at home, pater?"

"Presumably."

"By that time the war may be over," said Kenneth. "In any case we will be out of it for six months. What do you say, Rollo?"

"We've put our hand to the plough, old man. I vote, as soon as we are able, we rejoin our old regiment. The 9th of the Line is now between Ostend and Nieuport, sir?"

"I believe so," replied Major Résimont.

"Then that settles it, unless our people raise serious objection," declared Kenneth resolutely. "As long as we have health and strength we will take our places with our comrades of the 9th, until Belgium is freed from the grey-clad troops of Germany."

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