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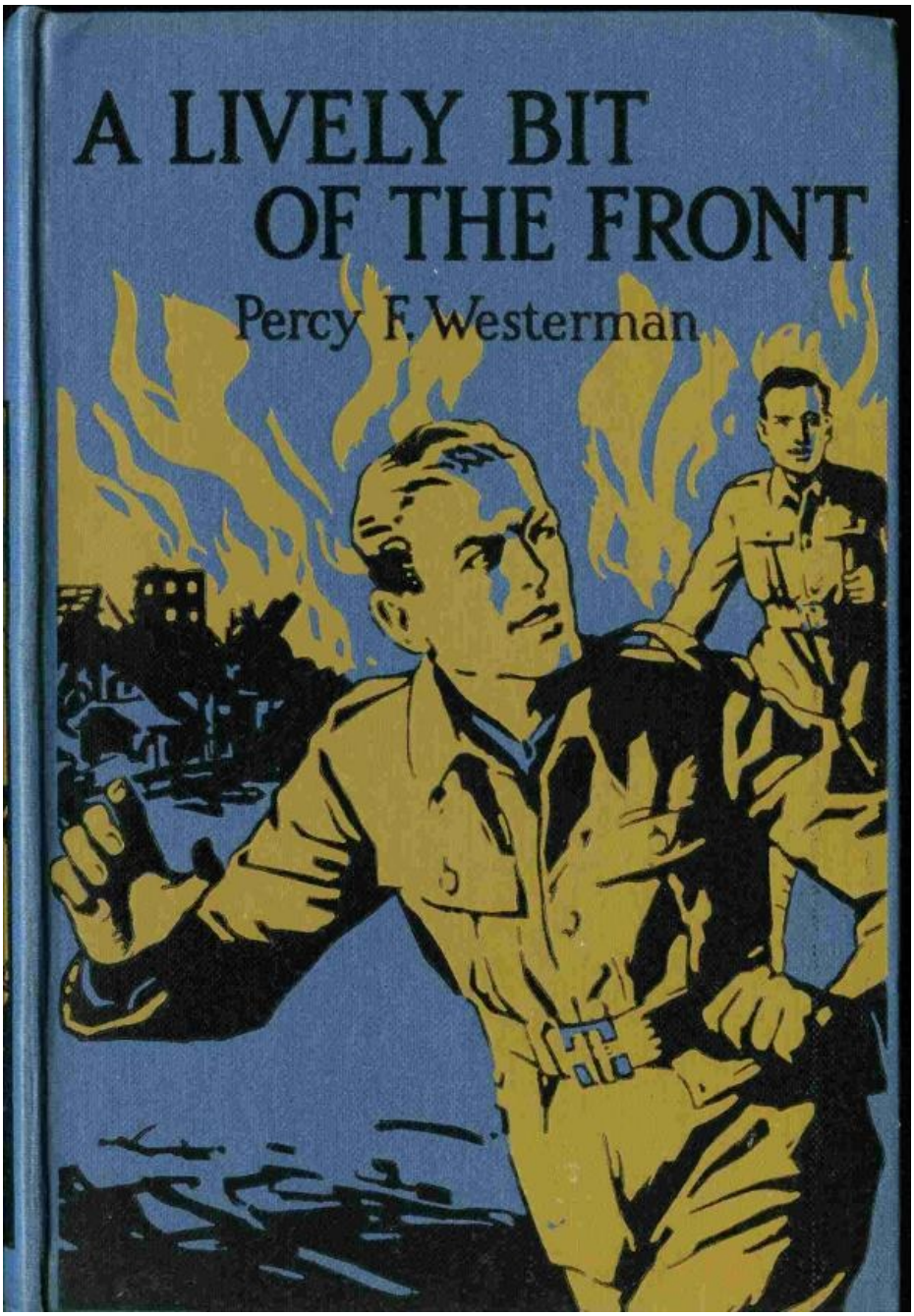

[Illustration: cover art]

A LIVELY

BIT OF THE FRONT

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[Frontispiece: HE HAD BLUNDERED RIGHT INTO A PARTY OF HUNS]

A LIVELY BIT OF THE FRONT

A Tale of the New Zealand Rifles on the Western Front

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

Illustrated by Wal Paget

BLACKIE & SON LIMITED

LONDON AND GLASGOW

By Percy F. Westerman
Captain Fosdyke's Gold.
In Defiance of the Ban.
Captain Sang.
The Senior Cadet.
The Amir's Ruby.
The Secret of the Plateau.
Leslie Dexter, Cadet.
All Hands to the Boats.
A Mystery of the Broads.
Rivals of the Reef.
A Shanghai Adventure.
Pat Stobart in the "Golden Dawn".
The Junior Cadet.

Captain Starlight.
The Sea-Girt Fortress.
On the Wings of the Wind.
Captured at Tripoli.
Captain Blundell's Treasure.
The Third Officer.
Unconquered Wings.
The Riddle of the Air.
Chums of the "Golden Vanity".
Clipped Wings.

The Luck of the "Golden Dawn ".
The Salving of the "Fusi Yama".
Winning his Wings.
A Lively Bit of the Front.
A Cadet of the Mercantile Marine.
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.
A Sub and a Submarine.
Under the White Ensign.
The Fight for Constantinople.
With Beatty off Jutland.
The Dispatch Riders.

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A LIVELY BIT OF THE FRONT

CHAPTER I

Malcolm Carr's Decision

"Post in yet, Dick?" enquired Malcolm Carr, as he stood in the open doorway of a "tin" hut that formed part of the Wairakato Camp.

"Give the man a chance, Malcolm," was the reply. "You'll get your letters before we start. Expecting anything important?"

Malcolm Carr was a typical specimen of the youthful New Zealander. Although only seventeen years of age, he was a full inch over six feet in height, and, although broad across the shoulders, was sparely built yet supple of frame. His features were clear-cut and slightly elongated. A massive chin betokened force of character. His deep-set, grey eyes gave promise of an alertness and keenness of vision that are the attributes of a healthy, open-air life.

He was dressed in a soft flannel shirt open at the neck, buckskin riding-breeches, leggings, and strong laced boots, the latter provided with spurs. On his left wrist he wore a watch in a leather case that bore signs of hard usage and exposure to the weather. Attached to his belt was a sheath-knife, while in contrast to his up-country appearance he carried in the breast-pocket of his shirt a canvas-covered notebook, a couple of pencils, and a fountain-pen.

His companion, Dick Selwyn, differed little from him in appearance and attire. He was barely half an inch shorter than Malcolm--they raise tall youths in New Zealand--of greater girth, and slightly heavier. His large, muscular hands, however, were a marked contrast to the slim, supple, well-kept pair on which young Carr prided himself.

Both lads were pupils under the State Railways Department of the Dominion. Their college course completed, they were assisting in the survey of the Wairakato valley, where a projected

line was about to be commenced to link up the east and west coasts of South Island.

It was an ideal existence, under perfect climatic conditions. The month was November--late spring. For three weeks no rain had fallen, yet on the breezy uplands the ground was green with verdure. Away to the west could be discerned the lofty ridges of the Southern Alps, some of the loftier peaks still retaining their garb of snow. To the eastward the ground sloped irregularly until the hilly country merged into the fertile plains that terminated upon the shores of Pegasus Bay.

Beyond the small collection of corrugated-iron huts and tents there were no signs of other human habitation. Farmsteads were few and far between in the Wairakato valley. Thirty miles of indifferent road separated the camp from the nearest village, while another forty miles had to be covered before the town of Christchurch--Malcolm's home--was reached.

"Hope the post will arrive before we start," remarked Carr as he turned to enter the hut, from which wafted the appetizing odour of frying eggs and bacon, the fumes of cheap kerosene notwithstanding. "Tell Kaitiu to take the large theodolite down to No. 4, and to be a jolly sight more careful than he was yesterday. Any signs of the Boss yet?"

Receiving a negative reply, Malcolm set to work to lay the table for breakfast--the two lads shared the same hut and meals. The interior of the hut was plainly yet substantially furnished. Table and chairs occupied a considerable portion of the floor space. Against the walls were cupboards and lockers, the latter mostly filled with plans and drawings. At one end was an oil stove, with a meagre supply of crockery and ironware above. Immediately opposite was a door leading into the sleeping-room. In one corner were a couple of sporting rifles and some fishing-rods, against which was leaning one of those ubiquitous objects of modern civilization--a motor tyre.

It was mainly on account of that motor tyre that Malcolm was anxious for the arrival of the camp postman. A new inner tube was wanted--badly. Without it there were long odds against juggernaut making the seventy-odd-mile run into Christchurch on the coming Saturday.

Juggernaut, minus one tyre, stood without, sheltering under a rick-cloth that did duty for a garage. A car of ancient and composite design--partly Daimler, partly Darracq, and with a suspicion of half a dozen makers' parts in the *tout ensemble*--the wondrous, once-discarded vehicle had been given to Peter and Malcolm Carr by a cousin of theirs. Being of a mechanical turn of mind, the two brothers soon reduced the motor to a state of servile tractability, although there was hardly a thoroughfare in Christchurch whose buildings did not bear a more or less permanent record of Juggernaut's frailties.

Peter Carr--big, easy-going, generous Peter--had gone two years previously. Enlisting in the first contingent, he had taken part in the repulse of the first Turkish invasion of Egypt and the heroic yet ill-starred Gallipoli campaign without receiving as much as a scratch, and having hardly spent a day in hospital. From Gallipoli Peter went to France, and up to the present his luck still held. But before going on active service Peter had disposed of his share of juggernaut to his young brother, thus, in a manner, helping to mitigate Malcolm's regret that he was not at least two years older, and thus able to share with his brother the honour, glory, and vicissitudes of fighting the Boche.

"Grub!" announced Malcolm laconically.

"Right-o!" was the muffled response as Dick "barracked" into the hut, still scrubbing his face vigorously with a towel. "Kaitiu's taken the gear down to No. 4, and the Boss wants to see you in his office at nine."

Breakfast over, and the empty cups and plates subjected to a thorough washing and drying, Malcolm prepared for his day's work.

"Post!" shouted Dick, as a dust-smothered vehicle known as a buggy, driven by an equally dusty man, appeared in sight down the dusty road.

Malcolm Carr knew his man. A large pannikin of tea awaited the postman, for the jaded animal a bucketful of water. While the representative of the Dominion State Post was refreshing, the lad could obtain his mails without having to go down to the works office.

"Now we're all right, Dick," remarked Malcolm as the postman handed him a parcel containing the anxiously-awaited inner tube. "I'll be able to give you a lift down to Springfield on Saturday. What! More of them? A regular budget, Mike!"

Mike the postman grinned approvingly as he handed over four newspaper packets and half a dozen letters, while Dick's consignment showed that that worthy was by no means forgotten.

The first letter Malcolm opened was from his brother Peter--"Somewhere in France".

"DEAR MALCOLM (it ran),

"U-boats and other noxious German insects permitting, I hope this will reach

you. I cannot say much beyond that we are very busy on our sector of the Front. I'm afraid you'll be too late to join me out here, unless the war goes on for another two or three years. Our chaps are of the opinion that it won't. We are having a thundering good time, with plenty of excitement. I have a Hun helmet for you. I gained it properly, after a tough scrap in a mine gallery, but cannot give details. It's no more risky out here than it is driving juggernaut through the market-square on a Saturday night. By the by, how goes the old chariot? Must knock off now, as I have to write to the guv'nor. It is now a quarter to five, and we parade at half-past for (*words deleted with blue pencil*).

"Your loving brother,

"PETER S. CARR."

The next letter was from Malcolm's father, above referred to as the "guv'nor".

"DEAR MALCOLM,

"Just received a cablegram: 'No. 04452, Sergeant P. Carr, reported wounded and missing.' There are no further details, but as several of our Christchurch friends have received similar news, it is evident that the Nth reinforcements have been in the thick of it. Just what Peter wanted, dear lad! Cannot write more, as I can hardly realize the import of the cablegram. Hope to see you on Saturday.

"Your loving father,

"FRANK CARR."

Malcolm deliberately folded the letter and replaced it in its envelope. The rest of the correspondence remained unopened. "Wounded and missing"--he knew pretty well what that meant. The odds were greatly against the chance of seeing Peter again. Somewhere in the mud of Flanders--what a mockery that bright sunlit morning in New Zealand seemed--somewhere in that hideous No-Man's-Land his brother had fallen. A raid in the hostile trenches; Peter wounded and left behind unnoticed by his comrades. A man in that predicament stood less than a dog's chance. He must have been too badly hit to be able to crawl in--and the boys back from the front told grim tales of Hun brutality to the wounded who were unfortunate enough to fall into the enemy's hands. So far the Carrs had been lucky. Peter was the only member of the family of military age. Several of their intimate friends and scores of mere acquaintances had made the great sacrifice, but for the first time Malcolm realized the closeness of the Great War. Its ravages had touched him through his elder brother----

"By Jove!" exclaimed Dick Selwyn, deep in a newspaper, "there are two of my cousins, Jim and Laurence Selwyn--you know, they had a farm just out of Ashburton--done in; and Tom Selwyn of Oamaru dangerously wounded. That looks as if----Hallo! What's up, old man?"

"Peter's wounded and missing," replied Malcolm briefly.

For some minutes silence fell upon the pair. The postman, gulping his tea outside the hut, was shouting unheeded witticisms to the lads within.

Presently Malcolm glanced at the clock.

"Ten to eight," he remarked calmly. "I'll fix up that tyre. There's plenty of time before I see the Boss. I'm going to chuck my hand in and join up."

CHAPTER II

No. 99,109, R/M Carr

"You can't," said Dick. "For one thing, you are tied to your job; for another, you are not old enough."

"I'll have a jolly good shot at it anyhow," declared Malcolm resolutely. "Plenty of chaps have gone to the front at sixteen or seventeen. Ted Mostyn, for example; he's only eighteen, and he's back with two buckshees (wounds) already."

"*Kia ora*, then, old chap," exclaimed Selwyn. "I hope you'll pull it off."

Both lads set to work to fit the new inner tube and replace juggernaut's front off-side wheel. This task completed, Malcolm washed the dirt and grease from his hands, saddled his horse, and set off for the office of Mr. Hughes, the Head of the Wairakato Survey.

"Morning, Malcolm!" was that worthy's genial greeting. "Where's Selwyn? Coming along, is he? That's good. I wanted to see you about that section of pipe-line that has been giving trouble. Did you bring your rough book?"

Not until the matter of the survey had been gone thoroughly into did young Carr tackle his principal.

"I want to know," he began, straight to the point, "I if you could release me at noon."

"Certainly!" was the ready response. "The work is well in hand, and I believe you haven't had leave for some months."

"For the duration of the war, I mean," continued Malcolm.

"For the duration of the what?" exclaimed the astonished Hughes. "Dash it all, what's the war to do with you? They haven't put you in the ballot by mistake?"

"No," replied the lad. "It's like this. But perhaps I'd better show you the governor's letter."

Mr. Hughes read the proffered document.

"I see," he said gravely. "And you wish to avenge your brother?"

"Not avenge--it's duty," corrected Malcolm. "I can't exactly explain---- Now Peter's gone----"

"You have no positive information on that point, Malcolm."

"Wounded and missing--that means that there is no longer a member of our family in the firing-line. I'm seventeen, I'm a sergeant in the cadet corps, physically fit, and all that sort of thing. And I don't suppose they'll be too particular as to my age if I forget to say that I was born somewhere about the year 1900."

The Boss considered for some moments.

"I won't stand in your way, my boy," he said kindly. "After all, the actual work here won't start until after the war. The preliminary surveys can still go on. All right, Malcolm! jolly good luck and all that sort of thing, you know. Come and lunch with me before you start."

The morning passed ever so slowly. Contrary to his usual manner, Malcolm found his thoughts wandering from his work. The desire to be up and doing, to push on with his share in the great adventure, gripped his mind to the exclusion of all other topics. In the ranks of the Dominion lads there was one of many gaps waiting specially for him to fill, and he meant to fill it worthily.

On his way back to the hut, after having lunched with Mr. Hughes, Malcolm encountered a sturdy Maori.

"Hallo, Te Paheka!" he exclaimed. "You're just the man I want to see. You want another motor-car? All right, come with me to Christchurch, and you can have my blessed car. That's a bargain."

Te Paheka was a typical specimen of a twentieth-century Maori. He was a tall, heavily-built, muscular man of about forty-five years of age, and lived at a *whare* about three miles from the camp. In his youth he had been given a thoroughly sound college education, and had gone to England in order to graduate. As a scholar he shone; as a business man he was a failure, owing to the fatal and all too common trait amongst Maoris of the educated class of pleasure in the spending of money, and, oddly enough, to an inherent tendency to relapse, if only temporarily, to an aboriginal existence.

Te Paheka owned a considerable amount of land. Frequently he sold tracts of ground to settlers, displaying much shrewdness in the various transactions. He never went back on his word. To those who dealt fairly and squarely with him he was a stanch friend, but it was his boast that no white man would have the opportunity of letting him down a second time.

With the proceeds of the sales Te Paheka would come into the nearest large town, and have a right royal time while funds lasted. Usually his weakness in that direction was a motor-car. He had been known to go to the largest dealers in Christ-church and purchase the swiftest car procurable, drive it at breakneck speed until he collided with something, and then sell the remains and retire to his *pah* until he found an opportunity for another exuberance of pecuniary extravagance. But of late Te Paheka had fallen on hard times. The war had hit him badly. With the heavy drain upon New Zealand's man power and the sudden and marked diminution in the stream of immigrants, the opportunities to sell land vanished, and with them the prospects of buying another motor-car.

Malcolm knew this. He also had found the Maori ready to do him a good turn. On one occasion Te Paheka had extricated the lad from a dangerous position during a landslide on the Wairakato Ridge; and now the chance had arrived to repay the courteous native by making him a present of the ancient but still active Juggernaut.

"Would I not?" was Te Paheka's reply to the lad's offer. "Yes, I'll take great care of her for your

sake, Mr. Malcolm. What can I knock out of her--a good fifty?"

"Hardly," replied Malcolm, laughing. The idea of juggernaut ambling along at nearly a modest mile a minute was too funny. "Come along. I am starting for home at three o'clock."

"I suppose you'll let me drive?" enquired Te Paheka.

Mental visions of seeing juggernaut toppling over the edge of Horseshoe Bend, and crashing upon the rock four or five hundred feet below, prompted Malcolm to a discreet reply.

"It's my last chance of driving a car for a very long time, Te Paheka," he said diplomatically. "You'll be able to do what you like with her after I get home."

"You lucky bounder!" was Dick Selwyn's greeting when the chums met at the hut. "The Boss is a decent sort. He might very well have put the tin hat on your suggestion. Shall I lend a hand with your gear?"

"Packed already," announced Malcolm. "All except my .303 rifle and the greenheart rod. Thought they might come in useful for you, and I don't suppose I'll need them in a hurry."

With hardly anyone to see him off, excepting a couple of Maori lads who were employed as messengers, Malcolm, accompanied by Te Paheka, set off on the momentous journey that was to end--where? Perhaps in France, perhaps on the high seas. He found himself counting the chances of getting back to New Zealand. Would it be as a wounded, perhaps crippled man, or as a hale and hearty veteran after that still remote day when peace is to be declared, and German militarism crushed once and for all time?

Without incident the lad brought the car to a standstill in the market-place of Christchurch. Te Paheka, torn between the desire to run away with his new gift and to wish his white friend farewell and *kia ora* in a manner worthy of a dignified and old-standing Maori gentleman, looked like prolonging the leave-taking ceremony indefinitely, until he leave-taking happened to see the tail-end of a Napier racing car disappearing round the corner.

"There's Tom Kaiwarawara with his new motor, Malcolm!" he exclaimed, making a dash for juggernaut's steering-wheel. "Golly, I'll catch him up or bust. *Kia ora*, Malcolm."

And the last the lad saw of juggernaut was the car cutting round a sharp corner at a good twenty-five miles an hour, whilst pedestrians scattered right and left to avoid being run down.

"I'll see Te Paheka's name in the papers before a week's up," mused juggernaut's late owner. "Either in the police-court intelligence or in the inquest reports."

"I am not at all surprised at your decision, Malcolm," said his father, when the lad had reported the progress of his quick yet carefully considered project. "I can see that you are resolved, and on that account I won't stand in your way. After all's said and done, you are likely to make a far more efficient soldier than some men I know who have had to go. And the old adage 'a volunteer is worth two pressed men' still holds good. Unless a man has his heart in his work he's not likely to shine at his job."

Two hours later Malcolm Carr duly enlisted, and for many a day his official designation was to be No. 99,109, Rifleman Carr, N.Z. Rifle Brigade.

CHAPTER III

The First Trek

"Cheer-oh, Malcolm!"

Carr gave an involuntary gasp of astonishment; then, recovering himself, grasped Dick Selwyn's outstretched hand.

"Bless my soul, Dick, what brings you here?"

"Same job as yours," replied Selwyn. "Do you think I am going to let you have *all* the fun? You *impshied* without even asking me to chip in. Enough to make a fellow cut up rough with his joining chum. So I rode down, and now I'm up."

"And Hughes?"

"He's great--absolutely! Never even murmured when he had two fellows chucking their hands in on the same day. Told me he could get along very well without us. I doubt it though. Smithers

is an ass with the theodolite, and Hedger's 'trig' is rotten. By the by, on my way down last night I passed Te Paheka."

"Going strong?"

"Very," replied Selwyn, grinning. "He was sitting on a pine-trunk half-way up the Horseshoe. There were a few disintegrated remains of Juggernaut on the track, the bulk of the wreckage was down the valley."

Early in the afternoon a batch of recruits, amongst them Malcolm and Dick, left Christchurch for Port Lyttelton to embark for Wellington, and thence to Featherston Camp.

With a very few exceptions the men, although still in civilian clothes, bore themselves erect, and marched in a way that would have evoked praise from an English drill sergeant. The exceptions were those men who for some reason had not undergone military training while at school. Now they had cause to regret the omission. They were mere beginners at the great game of war, while others, younger in years, were already their seniors in the profession of arms.

At Featherston Malcolm worked harder than ever he did before, but it was interesting work. Drills and parades, from early morn till late in the afternoon, soon brought the detachment up to a state bordering upon perfection, and the word went round that the Thirty-somethingth reinforcements would be sent to France some weeks earlier than the usual time, thanks to the efficiency of all ranks.

There was one man, however, who proved a sort of stumbling-block--Rifleman Dowit. It was soon a standing joke that Dowit never could "do it" properly, except to grouse. Yet he was justified in his boast that he had put the Brigade Staff to ignominious flight.

It was on the bombing-instruction ground. The preliminary course with dummy bombs had been completed, and now came the exciting part of this particular branch of training--hurling live Mills' bombs.

A squad, including Carr and Selwyn, had been marched down to the bombing-trench, where each man had to throw three bombs over the parapet at a target twenty yards away. It was a bright moonlit night, which perhaps accounted for the good attendance on the part of the Brigade Staff to witness the operations.

"I wonder how Dowit will manage," remarked Dick to his chum. "The man can't throw straight, or anything like it. He'll be hitting the top of the parapet, and letting the bombs tumble back into the trench. I vote we *impshie* round a traverse when he starts."

"It wouldn't be a bad move to warn the sergeant," rejoined Malcolm.

The order to commence was given. Most of the men acquitted themselves well, including Carr and Selwyn. Then came Rifleman Dowit's turn.

"Here you are, Dowit," said the sergeant, handing him the three dangerous missiles. "Do you want me to say it *all* over again? 'Hold the bomb firmly in the right hand, at the same time gripping the lever. Withdraw the safety-pin, and----' Here, you idiot, what *are* you doing?"

Rifleman Dowit had removed the safety-pin, and was whirling the missile round and round at arm's length. At every complete circle the head of the bomb missed the edge of the parapet by a hair-breadth. If the wielder had omitted to grip the lever, then in four seconds----!

Already, in anticipation of the rifleman's awkwardness, the rest of the squad were either flat on their faces or else disappearing round the traverse into the adjoining bays. The sergeant alone stood his ground.

Describing a magnificent parabola, the released bomb hurtled through the air; but instead of towards the target it was whizzing in the opposite direction--straight for the group of officers standing a dozen yards from the rear of the trench. They promptly and precipitately scattered, some taking to their heels, others throwing themselves flat upon their faces in momentary expectation of a terrific explosion. A subaltern, however, did his best to avert the threatened catastrophe. Picking up a conveniently-placed sandbag, he hurled it at the now motionless bomb, missed it, but caught the recumbent form of a portly major squarely between the shoulders.

Pluckily the subaltern did the next best thing. At imminent danger he placed his foot upon the latent missile of destruction and waited.

"It's all right, sir," exclaimed the sergeant, who had clambered over the parados and run to the extended group of officers. "It's only a dummy. I had my doubts about Rifleman Dowit, and a thundering good job I did," he added grimly.

"Bring the man here," ordered the major breathlessly, for the blow from the sandbag had shaken him considerably.

Thereupon Rifleman Dowit was given a good dressing down and promptly transferred to the bearer section. For the time being he passes out of this story, but we shall hear of him again.

Malcolm and Dick found bayonet exercise exciting work--thrusting at suspended sacks stuffed with straw called for strength and strenuous activity--while at the ranges both lads gained a high percentage of bulls, and in a very short while the "crossed rifles ", denoting marksmanship, ornamented the sleeves of their uniforms.

Before the training course at Featherston was completed, Malcolm won his sergeant's stripes, while Dick was made full corporal. Both the lads knew that it was but a temporary step, all non-coms. reverting to riflemen on arrival in England, before proceeding across to France. Nevertheless the rank conferred certain privileges upon the holders, besides giving them valuable experience in the duties of non-commissioned officers.

During their leisure hours there was plenty to amuse the men in camp. A battalion picture-theatre, billiard rooms, voluntary swimming parades, boxing, and a variety of other indoor and outdoor games contributed to the men's enjoyment; and, although discipline was well enforced, there was a total absence of irritating petty restrictions that form a constant source of annoyance to the men of the New Armies of the Motherland.

At last came the welcome news of a parade at midnight in full marching order. Every man of the Thirty-somethingth reinforcements knew what that meant: a move to Trentham--the final camp before embarkation. It was a point of honour that no man should fall out during the arduous fourteen-hours' march over The Summit. Malcolm would never forget that midnight trek. It was a perfectly still evening. The Southern Cross was blazing in the sky. The air was warm but bracing.

Out of the lines of tin huts the two thousand five hundred men comprising the draft poured forth like bees. They made plenty of noise, "barracking" each other like boys out of school. The utmost enthusiasm prevailed, yet despite the turmoil the sense of discipline made itself felt.

In full marching order the men set out briskly to the strains of the band that was to play them for the first few miles of the route. Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, crowds of civilian friends of the departing troops accompanied them--in motor-cars, horsed vehicles, mounted, and on foot. New Zealand knew how to bid her sons a fitting farewell.

Once clear of the camp (the band having carried out its part of the business) the men burst into song. It was an unwritten law that each draft should attempt to sing all the way to The Summit, and the Thirty-somethingth was not going to be outdone.

Mile after mile of the steep ascent the men toiled gamely. Backs began to ache under the drag of the packs; entrenching tools began to make their presence aggressively known as they chafed the men's legs; rifles were being constantly shifted from shoulder to shoulder or carried at the trail, as the weapons seemingly increased in weight at each step. Yet not a man fell out, nor did the singing cease until the order was given to halt at The Summit.

"A smart bit of work. The boys are in fine fettle," remarked Platoon-sergeant Fortescue to Malcolm. "I had my doubts about Tosher Phillips. He is the weak link in the chain, so to speak."

"As a matter of fact," rejoined Malcolm, "the man has galls on his heels to the size of half-crowns, and one boot is almost full of blood. He wouldn't take advantage of a lift in one of the wagons--said he'd rather stick it."

"By Jove!" ejaculated Fortescue. "Is that so? Then I think I must call back all I said concerning Tosher. All the same, I'll speak to the Company Officer and get him to order the man to fall out. The boy's shown his grit; that's the main thing."

Sergeant Fortescue was a man of about thirty years of age, and a seasoned veteran. English born and bred, he had gained a degree at Cambridge, and, failing to turn it to any good account, had been sent to New Zealand by his disappointed father.

In the Dominion he found that he was "up against something" in which an ornate classical education did not count. Down on his luck, he tried for a clerical post in a Wellington lawyer's office.

"Any qualifications?" enquired the lawyer.

"Er--well, I'm considered good at Greek Iambics and Latin Prose, don't you know."

"'Fraid you've come to the wrong shop," rejoined the man of law bluntly. "This is a live country, not a dead one. Good morning!"

So Fortescue drifted up-country and found employment on a farm. It was hard work. The polished 'Varsity man, who hardly knew how to use a saw or to drive a nail in straight, found it particularly so. He had grit. He got on well with his fellow farm hands, who promptly dubbed him "Fortyscrews", a name that was eventually cut down to "Screws". He accepted the nickname cheerfully, stuck to his job, and in five years saved enough to start sheep-farming on his own account.

Then came the war. Fortescue promptly "sold out" and enlisted. At Gallipoli he acquitted

himself manfully, was mentioned for gallantry in an affair at Quinn's Post, and was brought back to Alexandria in a hospital ship, with a wound sufficiently dangerous to smash many a man up completely.

Given the chance of being sent either to England or to New Zealand, he chose the latter alternative. In six months he was himself again. Re-enlisting, he was offered a staff job at Featherston, but declined it, preferring to see more fun at the Front. For the second time Trevor Fortescue had marched over The Summit on the long trail that ended within sight and sound of hostile guns.

Dusty, tired, footsore, but in high spirits, the Thirty-somethingth marched into camp at Trentham. Their stay was but a short one, for three days later the reinforcement embarked at Wellington on Transport 99 for England--and France.

CHAPTER IV

The Interrupted Concert

Transport 99, otherwise the S.S. *Awarua*, was a single-screw vessel of 8000 tons. Originally a combined passenger and cargo boat, she had been ruthlessly converted into a troop-conveying ship, and the internal rearrangements were not by any means suitable for her new rôle. Nevertheless, after the first few days, when many of the men were prostrate with sea-sickness, the troops soon accustomed themselves to their new conditions, and settled down with the fixed determination to make the voyage a sort of maritime picnic.

"Say, Quarter," began Fortescue, addressing the Quartermaster-sergeant, "how about a sing-song on the mess deck this evening? Most of the boys have found their sea-legs, and there's no lack of talent."

"Good idea!" replied the Q.M.S. "We'll form ourselves into an entertainment committee. Let me see: there's Sergeant Thomson, he's a bit of a vocalist."

"Unfortunately he shot his false teeth over the side last night," reported Malcolm. "He was so jolly bad that he never realized his loss till this morning. He's out of it, I fancy."

"We'll put him down anyway," declared Fortescue. "There's M'Kie and Macdonald: they'll open with a duet on the bagpipes."

Other names were submitted and approved, not-withstanding the fact that their owners were not consulted on the matter.

"How about the officers?" enquired Selwyn. "They are to be invited, I suppose?"

"Rather," replied Fortescue. "By the way, what has Lieutenant Nicholson been doing to get his left optic in a sling? He wasn't looking skywards out of one of the ports when Thomson jettisoned his ivories?"

"Dunno," replied the M. S. "He was all right when he went the rounds last night."

"I know," chipped in another N.C.O. "It was the Padre."

"The Padre!" exclaimed half a dozen voices. "Our Padre been scrapping?"

"Hardly!" was the reply. "He shares a two-bunk berth with the Lieutenant. Padre has, or had, the upper bunk, and he tops the scale at sixteen stone. I don't insinuate, mind you, that any of the fellows tampered with the ironwork, but all the same the bunk collapsed, and our Padre subsided heavily upon poor little Nicholson."

"We'll get the company poet to write up a special stanza and recite it at the concert," declared Fortescue. "Sort of object lesson on the way our Padre tackles sin."

The men, remembering that the Lieutenant's initials were S.I.N., laughed uproariously. These impromptu concerts gave them poetic licence to joke at the expense of their officers. The latter, too, were quite used to that sort of thing. In fact they enjoyed it. Even the popular Padre found these entertainments a welcome antidote to the dull business of censoring letters.

The concert--as far as it went--was a huge success. According to *The Deep Sea Roll*, the Thirty-somethingth's magazine, the opening items and the honorary reporter's notes were as follows:--

"A duet by the brothers Mac. I thought they would never finish, due mainly to Macdonald, who had his Scotch blood up and his bagpipes in good wind."

"Sergeant Thomson next stepped into the ring and gave 'Thora' a slap up. It was a pity he lost his teeth, but, thank goodness, he has not lost his voice."

"Tiny Anderson's voice was like his size--tremendous. 'Asleep in the Deep' was his song. I thought he *was* asleep at one part of it."

There was no lack of enthusiasm on the part of the audience. The men, packed like sardines in a barrel, filled the mess-deck almost to suffocation, their boisterous applause increasing in volume as item succeeded item in quick succession.

"Item seven--Cornet Competition," announced Sergeant Fortescue. "Sisters Howard and O'Dowd have kindly consented to act as judges."

Prolonged sounds of cheering greeted the two Red Cross nurses as they stepped upon the platform with marked timidity. They would perhaps--and did--unhesitatingly and calmly assist the medical officers in their work of mercy and within range of hostile shells, but their present task was an ordeal.

Four strapping young fellows, each armed with a highly-polished cornet, appeared and stood facing their critical audience, receiving their caustic comments with a studied indifference.

"Rifleman Gilway."

Rifleman Gilway advanced two paces, lifted the instrument to his lips, and distended his cheeks. Beyond an eerie gurgle ("the last gasp of a dying flounder", according to the above-quoted honorary reporter) not a sound came from the cornet. The audience, rocking with laughter, threw shouts of encouragement and advice to the would-be musician, but all in vain. Rifleman Gilway's eyes were riveted upon the half of a cut, juicy lemon displayed within six inches of his face by a waggish subaltern. The sight of the acid fruit effectually prevented the man getting a single note out of the instrument. He puffed and blew like a grampus, the tears ran down his distended cheeks, and the perspiration oozed from his forehead, till in disgust he retired from the contest.

Cornet No. 2 shared the same fate, after a gallant struggle. By this time the audience was almost silent. The men could laugh no longer. They were almost on the verge of hysterical tears of excessive merriment.

The third competitor withdrew without an effort, but the fourth was something of a strategist. He used his music-card as a screen to shut out the sight of the tantalizing lemon. By so doing he had to lean forward slightly. His cheeks were bulging, but again silence--mysterious silence.

Compared with Rifleman Gilway's efforts those Of Corporal Jephson were simply terrific. His whole frame shook under the tremendous force of lung power. The doctor began to shift uneasily in his chair, anticipating a case of apoplexy. Jephson's face gradually changed in colour fro light bronze to a deep purple. Something had to go----

Something did! From the interior of the instrument a wad of paper was ejected with the velocity of a stone from a catapult. In its wake followed, a compact mass of viscous substance. Both struck the waggish subaltern full in the face, and then the nature of the "main charge" became apparent. It was treacle. A practical joker had primed Jephson's cornet with the sticky stuff, plugging it with a wad. Amidst renewed outbursts of cheering the subaltern retired for repairs and renewals, while the lady judges were fortunately spared the task of bestowing the palm upon the cornet champion of the Thirty-somethingths.

More songs followed, then a series of recitations bearing upon incidents and characters on board Transport No. 99. Many of the references were pointedly personal; the victims enjoyed them as much as anyone, for it is difficult to raise a New Zealander's "dander" by means of a practical joke. And when the reciter commenced a string of verses portraying the catastrophe in the cabin shared by Lieutenant Nicholson and the Padre, the former's "Hear, hear!" and the latter's deep bass laugh were heard above the roars of hilarity.

The composer of the verses had turned the accident into a work of intent on the Padre's part, representing the latter combating the evil influence of sin. The reciter began with slight hesitation; then, finding that he was receiving unstinted approval, he warmed up to his task.

> "Sin turned in, and soon was heard the music of his snore,
> And then the Padre set to work as none had worked before.
> He got a large belaying-pin, he got the vessel's lead,
> And everything that weighed at all he piled upon the bed.
> He took the screws out, one by one, that held the fixing frail,
> Till all that stood 'twixt him and Sin was but a single nail.
> Then with a fierce look in his eye, as one who thirsts for blood,
> He hurled his weight upon the bunk--there came a sickening thud----"

Crash!

The old *Awarua* shook under the terrific impact of an unseen force, listed to starboard, and

then slowly recovered, to heel to port. Simultaneously every electric light on the ship was extinguished, while above the noise of escaping steam arose the babel of hundreds of voices as the swarm of humanity slithered in a struggling mass along the sloping floor of the mess deck.

"Torpedoed, by Jupiter!" shouted a voice. The ominous words were taken up by others, and in the darkness an ugly rush was made for the upper deck.

CHAPTER V

Broken down in Mid-ocean

"It's all right, boys!" came a deep voice. "It's only the Padre fallen out of his bunk again."

The men recognized the voice.

"Good old Padre!" they shouted, and then silence fell upon the crowd. Someone struck a match, and held it so that the feeble glimmer shone upon his face. It was the C.O.

"File out in an orderly manner, lads," he ordered. "Fall in on the upper deck. I'll *follow* you out. We are not going over the top this time; when we do I'll take good care to *lead* you."

On the upper deck a bugle rang out shrilly. The seamen, assisted by some troops, who, detailed for duty, had not attended the sing-song, were "standing by" ready to lower away the boats.

Rapidly yet without confusion the mess deck was cleared. The first signs of panic nipped in the bud, the men were now as cool as cucumbers.

"How far is it to the nearest land?" enquired one as he ascended the ladder.

"Less'n half a mile underneath your feet," was the grim answer.

True to his word, the Colonel was the last to leave the mess deck. As he emerged into the open air he remarked to the Chaplain: "My word, Padre, heaven forgive you for that lie, but you saved the situation."

Like most of his comrades, Malcolm Carr was under the impression that he would soon have to swim for it, unless he was one of the lucky ones to get told off to the boats. If anyone had suggested that he was afraid, he would have stoutly repudiated the statement; but he was conscious of a peculiar sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. To a man not a sailor by profession the knowledge that only a comparatively thin steel plate, and fractured at that, is between him and death by drowning is apt to be decidedly disconcerting. He had voluntarily contracted to risk his life by fighting the Boche, but to be "downed" without the chance of seeing a shot fired in earnest was hardly playing the game.

"Hallo, Malcolm!"

Carr turned his head and peered into the face of his right-hand man. It was Dick Selwyn.

"Hallo, Dick! I didn't recognize your voice. How goes it?"

"So, so!" replied Dick. "Look here, I vote we stick together. Why aren't they lowering the boats? They don't seem in any sort of a hurry."

"Perhaps it is as well. You know----"

Again a bugle rang out. The ranks stiffened.

"Boys!" exclaimed the Colonel; "the Captain has just sent word that there is no immediate danger. There has been a slight explosion in a bunker. One compartment--the for'ard stokehold--is flooded. For the present the men will remain on deck. The cooks will issue a hot ration. Stand at ease!"

Out came pipes and cigarettes. The men began chatting and yarning, discussing the possibilities and chances of the catastrophe. The explosion had been an internal one, sufficient to cripple the vessel's engines. The question naturally arose as to whether it was the work of a Hun agent.

"I'd like to know who the idiot was who yelled out something about being torpedoed," remarked a rifleman.

"I did," owned up the man in question. "What about it?"

"If you were in C Company they'd give you poison," declared the first speaker contemptuously.

"And," retorted the other, "if I were in C Company I'd take it. As for----"

"Stop that!" ordered Sergeant Fortescue; then, turning to Malcolm, he added: "It shows the boys are settling down again. Sort of psychologic phenomenon; I've noticed it before. While there's danger they are as well-behaved as kids in a drawing-room; directly it's over they let themselves go and start treading on each other's corns. Well, here we are, midway between New Zealand and Cape Horn, with our engines broken down. A fine old jamboree!"

"We've wirelessed for assistance, I've been told," observed Malcolm.

"Aye," agreed Fortescue, "and received a reply. No. 101, which left Wellington two days after we did, sends a reassuring message. She's a faster boat, you know. But I might add," he said, lowering his voice, "that we've been warned that the *See Adler* is somewhere knocking around, and we have to take due precaution. Ah! There you are. They're serving out small-arms and ammunition to C Company."

The situation was a grave one. Lying helpless on the water was Transport 99, unescorted and with no other friendly vessel within ten hours' steaming of her. She was armed with two 4.7 guns both mounted aft. These were of little use against a swift hostile craft should the latter approach on a bearing three degrees on either side of the *Awarua's* bows. On the other hand there were half a dozen Maxims and nearly two thousand rifles on board, although these would be of little use if the raider kept beyond 200 yards' range.

Against an armed and mobile vessel the *See Adler* would stand but little chance. She was a sailing craft provided with a powerful motor installation. Earlier in the year she had caused a certain amount of sensation by her depredations in the Atlantic, until British cruisers made that locality too hot for her. She vanished mysteriously. There were vague rumours that she had been sent to the bottom by one of the Allied warships. It was now evident that she had rounded the Horn, making use of her sails only and keeping her motors for cases of emergency, and at the present was within a few miles of the transport *Awarua*.

Throughout the rest of the night the transport's crew manned the two stern-chasers. The Maxims, protected by coal-sacks and mealie-bags, were kept ready for instant action, while each company took duty in turn to man the side, ready to supplement the machine- and quick-firing guns with a fusillade of small arms.

Daybreak came, but with it no signs of the expected raider. Viewed from the deck, the *Awarua* showed no trace of the explosion beyond a slight list to starboard. The steam had been raised from the auxiliary engines, and the pumps were continuously ejecting water that made its way from the flooded stokehold to the adjoining compartments. The ship's artificers were busily engaged in repairing the fractured main steam-pipe. It was just possible that the vessel might be able to proceed under her own steam, either back to Wellington or else to Port Stanley, in the Falkland Islands. Meanwhile there was no line of churned water extending from under the vessel's quarter as far as the eye could reach, no dull reverberations of the "screw". The *Awarua*, lying helpless, rolled sullenly in the swell at the mercy of wind and ocean current.

Meanwhile the troops were kept fully occupied. Ennui was at all costs to be banished, and the best antidote for that was plenty of hard work. Parades, boat drill, physical exercises, almost filled the bill; but even then there were plenty of enthusiasts to take part in strenuous games on deck, in which the C.O. and most of the officers took a personal interest and prominent part.

Just before sunset a blurr of smoke was detected on the horizon. Transport 101 was arriving upon the scene. Two hours later, in the starry night, the new arrival came within hailing distance, and preparations were made to take the *Awarua* in tow.

By midnight Transport 99 was moving slowly through the water in the wake of the towing vessel, three hearty cheers from the boys showing their relief at the thought that the tedious period of immobility was at an end. The repairs to the steam-pipe were almost completed, and with reasonable luck the *Awarua* might be able to proceed under her own steam before daybreak.

At réveillé Malcolm Carr heard the welcome thud of the propeller. Going on deck, he found that Transport 101 was hull down to the west'ard, while a couple of cable-lengths on the *Awarua's* star-board quarter was a long grey cruiser flying the White Ensign.

Just then one of the crew came aft. Malcolm knew him by sight. He was a loquacious Welsh-man, always "in the know", and one of the recognized media between the ship's officers and the rank and file.

"Hallo, Sergeant!" he exclaimed, jerking his thumb in the direction of the cruiser. "How's that, eh? Sorter objec' lesson on the great silent navy I'll allow. She's our escort as far as the Falklands."

"She's turned up at just the right moment," remarked Malcolm.

"She's what?" enquired the seaman. "My eye, you don't know nuffink, Sergeant. She's been

hoppin' about us for the last three days. I 'eard our Old Man tell the First Officer so. Got our wireless, but wouldn't reply."

"Why not?" asked Carr curiously.

"'Cause she was waitin' to mop up that *See Adler*. Kept out of sight, hoping, in a manner o' speaking, that the Dutchy would have a smack at us, and then she'd butt in. Howsomever, they say as a jap cruiser 'as got the hang of the 'Un, an' you chaps 'ave been done out of a visit to Davy Jones this time."

CHAPTER VI

Man Overboard

"Party, fall in! Sergeant, march the men aft report to the Second Mate for boat drill. Until you are dismissed you will take your orders from him."

Sergeant Carr saluted, and then devoted his attention to the squad fallen in on the upper deck. They were a set of stalwarts, but without exception were up-country farmers and sheep-shearers before they left New Zealand for the still distant Front. Until they joined the S.S. *Awarua* at Wellington, very few of them had ever seen a ship's boat.

Transport 99 was forging ahead at a modest 10 or 11 knots. The 21-knot cruiser, although steaming under natural draught, was cutting rings round her charge, as if reproaching her for her tardiness. The wind was abeam and fairly fresh, making the old *Awarua* roll heavily.

Aft on the port side of the poop stood the Second Mate, a short, bull-necked, burly man, whose attitude, suggested a bored interest in the work in hand. He had the old salt's pitying contempt for "flat-footed landlubbers". Very many times since the outbreak of war had he been called upon to instruct troops in boat drill, and never had he seen any practical result of his labours. The monotony of imparting boat knowledge into the heads of men who possessed not the slightest inclination towards things nautical irritated him. Forgetting that his instruction classes were composed of men who were not seamen, he was apt to give orders without explaining the precise nature of the various terms he employed, and failure on the part of his audience to follow his deep-sea phrases reduced him to a state of profanity.

The boat selected for the drill was a "double-ender" life-boat hanging in the old-fashioned style of davits. The davits were swung inboard, the boat resting on "chocks" or hinged pieces of wood shaped to fit the lower strakes of the boat.

"Now then," began the Second Officer. "In the event of this craft being torpedoed, you men will form the crew of this boat. At a prolonged blast on the syren all hands will come to attention and await orders. At the bugle-call you will throw off coats and boots, put on life-belts--suppose you know by this time *how* to put 'em on?--and fall in by numbers, facing outboard. We'll take the life-belts for granted."

The men received this part of the instruction without emotion. They had heard it many times before.

"You are bow, and you are stroke," continued the Second Mate, addressing two of the men.

"Stroke the bow-wow, Tommy," whispered a wag in an audible aside. "Now we are getting on. We'll finish up with a bloomin' menagerie."

"Silence, there!" snapped the instructor. "Bow and stroke will jump into the boat, see that the plug is inserted, and hook the falls--four hands to man each of the falls. You," addressing the would-be humorist, "will attend to the gripes----"

"Should have thought that was a job for the doctor," remarked the man *sotto voce*, at which several of the men within hearing began to laugh.

"This is no laughing matter, you pack of jackanapes," bawled the now infuriated ship's officer. "You'd feel a bit sick if you found yourselves in the ditch through not knowing how to lower away. Now, then, together."

Out swung the davits, the task rendered difficult by the roll of the ship, until the boat was ready for lowering.

The Second Mate looked at the surging water, and considered the erratic rolling motion of the lofty hull. To lower away with a practised crew manning the falls would entail a certain amount of risk should the boat surge against the ship's side; with a crowd of raw amateurs the danger was

magnified threefold.

"Good enough!" he ordered. "We'll suppose the lowering and hoisting part is done. I'll put you through that another day when there's less sea. Now, stand by."

A shrill rasping of chain and an involuntary cry of mingled surprise and apprehension from the two in the boat interrupted the Second Officer's explanation. Accidentally the "stroke" had released the after disengaging-gear. The next instant the boat was hanging vertically, held only by the for'ard tackle.

The bowman, making a frantic grab at the upper block of the davit, hung on like grim death until his feet found a hold on the edge of the foremost thwart. The boat, swinging like a gigantic pendulum, was doing her best to stave in her quarter against the ship's side.

The "stroke" was not so fortunate. With the release of the gear the lower block dealt him a numbing blow on the shoulder. Unable to grasp any object that might afford security, he fell with considerable force into the sea.

"Man overboard!" shouted the Second Officer, and picking up a life-belt he hurled it close to the spot where the luckless fellow had disappeared. Almost at the same time the sentry let fall the patent life-buoy.

For some minutes the rest of the squad were too taken aback by the suddenness of the catastrophe to grasp the situation. The bowman, more scared than hurt, although considerably shaken, clambered out of the boat and gained the deck.

"Good heavens," ejaculated Malcolm, "the man overboard can't swim a stroke!" Heedless of the fact that of all the party he was the only one who had not removed his boots, Malcolm ran aft. With a bound he cleared the rail and dived overboard.

Fortunately for him, the *Awarua* was moving at a comparatively low speed. As it was, in spite of the momentum of his leap, he struck the water obliquely, and with a thud that temporarily winded him.

Coming to the surface, he took in a deep breath of salt-laden air, rubbed the water from his eyes, and looked for the missing man.

On the crest of a roller he espied the rifleman's head and shoulders and outstretched arms. In the interval that had elapsed between the accident and Malcolm's dive the ship had travelled a good hundred yards. Midway between the would-be rescuer and the object of his attentions floated the life-buoy, its position clearly indicated by a cloud of calcium smoke. He could see no sign of the life-belt.

Using a powerful trudgeon stroke, Malcolm started and swam towards the spot where he had caught a momentary glimpse of the man. In less than two dozen strokes he found that his saturated sleeves hampered his arms. His boots, too, were acting as a drag, yet there was no time to tread water and kick them off.

On the crest of the third roller Malcolm again caught sight of the man. He had ceased to struggle and was floating without any apparent motion, his head and shoulders clear of the water.

Changing to breast stroke, Carr slid down the slope of the long roller. Then, as he rose on the succeeding crest, he found that he was within ten yards of the man.

"Hang it all!" thought Malcolm as he approached. "I might have saved myself a job. He's better off than I am. The bounder's wearing a life-saving waistcoat."

"Hallo, Sergeant!" gurgled the rifleman. "Did that rotten boat sling you out too? When are they going to pick us up? The water's none too warm. I'm feeling nipped already."

"Oh, it's you, Macready!" exclaimed Malcolm, recognizing a Canterbury farmer, a fellow of magnificent physique. "When are they going to pick us up, you ask? Can't say. I rather fancy they'll have to reverse engines and stop before they lower a boat. That will take some time."

He waited until he found himself on the crest of a long roller, and then looked in the direction of the *Awarua*. The transport was now nearly two miles away. Whether she had slowed down or was still steaming ahead he could not determine. As far as he could see there were no signs of a boat being lowered.

Macready was certainly right about the low temperature of the sea. Already Carr felt the numbing effect of the water. His fingers as he fumbled with the laces of his boots were practically devoid of feeling.

"I have one of those air waistcoats," explained the man. "It's only partly filled. Much as I could manage to do, that. I guess there's a tidy drop of water got in while I was blowing. If we can get more wind into the thing it'll support two; at least I hope so. The fellow at the stores said it would."

"Don't trouble on my account," said Malcolm. "I'll swim to the life-buoy and bring it back."

The patent life-saving device was still emitting dense clouds of calcium smoke. Provided the expected rescuing-boat made for that there was a good chance of Malcolm and the rifleman being picked up, unless in the meanwhile they were overcome by the acute coldness of the water.

"Any signs of a boat, Sergeant?" asked the man, as Malcolm, evidently exhausted by his exertions, pushed the life-buoy before him to within arm's length of his companion in peril.

Malcolm was reluctantly obliged to admit that the probability of rescue from that direction was of a diminishing nature. The *Awarua* was still holding on her course.

"Suppose they think that as we were a pair of fools to be slung overboard we aren't worth picking up," continued Macready.

Malcolm did not reply. He did not attempt to enlighten the man as to the reason why there were two "in the ditch" instead of one. He was also at a loss to explain the apparent callousness of the responsible officer of Transport 99 in not promptly lowering a boat and effecting a speedy rescue.

The two men were too intent upon the disappearing *Awarua* to notice the approach of the escorting cruiser. The latter was circling round the transport, and was on the point of turning at a distance of a mile astern, when the alert officer of the watch noticed the accident to the boat.

Bringing his telescope to bear upon the *Awarua*, he could see quite clearly the life-boat hanging by the bow tackle only. As he looked he was a distant witness of Sergeant Carr's leap into the sea.

Instinctively he grasped the situation and took prompt measures. At his orders a signalman on the fore bridge set the arms of the semaphore at "Attention". When the transport acknowledged the preparatory signal the semaphore began to spell out its message:

"Carry on; we'll pick up your man."

"Away sea-boat's crew," was the next order, and quickly the falls were manned, and the boat, containing her full complement, lowered until the keel was within a few feet of the water. Meanwhile the cruiser's engines had been reversed until her speed diminished five knots.

"Lower away!" was the next order.

With a resounding "smack" the boat "landed" on the crest of a wave. Dexterously the patent releasing-gear was operated, and, carried onward with the momentum imparted by the still-moving cruiser, the sea-boat shot away from the side of her parent.

The order, "Give way, lads, for all you're worth!" given by the midshipman in charge, was somewhat unnecessary. At the prospect of saving life every man was pulling his hardest. The sharp bows of the boat literally cleft the water.

"Way 'nough. In bow," ordered the midshipman, a youth of sixteen or seventeen with the assurance of a successful barrister.

As neatly as if he were bringing a picket-boat alongside the flagship under the super-critical eye of the admiral, the midshipman steered the boat close to the wellnigh exhausted men. Ready hands lifted Malcolm and Macready into the stern-sheets, and within seven minutes of the first order for the sea-boat to be manned, the two New Zealanders were standing upon the quarter-deck of H.M.S. *Gosport*.

CHAPTER VII

Quits!

"Take these men to the sick-bay," ordered the officer of the watch; "they both look pretty well knocked up. Semaphore the convoy and report that the men have been picked up. We'll see what's to be done with them later on."

After divisions the Commander reported the circumstances to the Captain. The latter, being a chartered humorist, signalled No. 99 to the effect that when boat-lowering practice was again resorted to it would be advisable to provide ring-bolts and securing lashings to prevent the soldiers falling overboard; meanwhile he would make sure of the two he *had* picked up by keeping them on board the *Gosport* until her arrival at Port Stanley with the transport under her charge.

Thus Sergeant Malcolm Carr found himself an honorary member of the C.P.O.'s mess on board the *Gosport*, one of the earlier type of "town" cruisers detailed for convoying duties in the South Pacific.

Malcolm thoroughly enjoyed the novelty of being on board a war-ship. What struck him most was the good order and discipline that prevailed; everything was "carried out at the double", yet there was a total absence of unnecessary noise. Compared with the somewhat boisterous conditions obtaining on board Transport 99, the *Gosport* was a floating model of smartness and efficiency.

"Do you know anything about a kangaroo, Sergeant?" enquired a burly armourer's mate.

It was Thursday--"make and mend" afternoon. The ship's company was allowed a period of comparative relaxation. Being fine weather, most of the "I watch below" were on deck, sunning themselves upon the raised fo'c'sle.

"A kangaroo?" repeated Malcolm cautiously, half suspecting that the man was trying to "pull his leg".

"Yes," replied the other, a proper kangaroo. "You ought to know a lot about them, since they come from down your way."

"I'm afraid you are mistaken," said Carr. "I have seen kangaroos in New Zealand, but they were looked upon as animal curiosities. Why do you ask?"

"We've got a kangaroo for a ship's mascot. Had it given us when we were coaling ship at Sydney. The brute is pining. He won't tackle ship's beef or condensed milk. His hay ration's expended, but the cook's keeping him going on biscuit mashed in 'bubbly'. Some of the men suggested cocoa as a change of diet. We thought perhaps, seeing that you were an Anzac, that you Could tell us what's the correct grub for the brute."

"It's want of exercise that's put Panjie off 'is feed, Bill," interposed a leading signalman. "That's what's done it."

"Maybe you're right," was the armourer's mate's grudging concession.

"And if," continued the "bunting-tosser", carried away by his brilliant brain-wave, "Panjie was to fall in with the physical-exercise party, an' skip round the ship 'arf a dozen times afore breakfast, I'll allow he'd scoff his 'ard tack without a murmur."

In the course of the afternoon a request was forwarded to the Commander that the kangaroo should be allowed on deck for exercise. The paper, marked "Approved, provided due precautions are taken", was returned to the members of the "Mascot Committee".

Without further delay preparations were made for the kangaroo's course of physical exercise. A space between two of the casemate guns of the starboard side was barricaded off, the officers' practice nets having been loaned for the event.

Practically all the ship's company crowded round to witness the show. Every coign of vantage was packed with interested lower-deck humanity, while from both the fore and after bridges the officers forgathered to watch the performance.

Panjie's cage, carried by half a dozen lusty blue-jackets, was deposited in close proximity to the only opening left in the extensive corral. Not since the eventful day when the *Gosport's* barbers close-clipped Bingo, the monkey, had such interest been shown in any unofficial incident. Bingo was Panjie's predecessor, a large Madagascar ape. Curiosity concerning a barrel of coal-tar led to Bingo's undoing. Cropping, and afterwards washing the animal with grease and paraffin, were the only remedies, and but temporary; for, shorn of its warm fur, the monkey caught pneumonia and succumbed.

Heralded by the chief keeper, a corporal of Red Marines, the kangaroo leapt lightly into the arena in an attitude reminiscent of a light-weight boxer. It was a half-grown animal of about four feet six inches in height. Apparently indifferent to the grant of limited freedom, it ambled to a recess formed by the side of the casemate and the raised coaming of a closed ammunition-hoist.

"Put a pair of boxing-gloves on him, Paddy," shouted one of the Corporal's shipmates. "Take him on for half a dozen rounds under the Marquis of Queensberry's rules."

"Enter him for the high jump," vociferated another.

"Take 'im on 'catch as catch can'," suggested a third.

To all these suggestions the marine turned a deaf ear. He had his own idea of the correct method of exercising the animal and at the same time contributing to his comrades' enjoyment.

"Now then, you concertina boys, give us a two-step," he called out. "Come on, my lady, let's see if I can span your slender waist."

Either the kangaroo objected to the marine's mistake in the matter of gender or else he was disinclined to be forced to perform, for, as the Corporal grasped the animal's short fore paws, Panjie let rip with one of his powerful hind legs. The kangaroo might have been off his feed, but his muscular powers seemed in no way impaired. The sharp claws, missing the man's face by a mere inch, sliced his forage jacket and trousers from shoulder to knee.

At the possibility of a scrap the ship's company cheered, some yelling encouragement to the kangaroo, others backing the representative of His Majesty's jollies.

The outburst of sound terrified the animal. With a stupendous bound Panjie leapt at the netting, ripping his way through as easily as a pantomime clown jumps through a paper hoop. Over the heads and shoulders of a tightly-packed throng of bluejackets the brute vaulted; then, viewing a comparatively clear space, it bounded towards the sacred precincts of the quarter-deck.

Here the Fleet-paymaster and the Engineer-commander, who were keeping aloof from the revels, were engaged in a strictly official conversation. Like a dart Panjie dived betwixt the bowed legs of the accountant officer, and, in blind desperation, butted the senior officer of the engineering branch full in the chest. Then with a terrific leap the kangaroo cleared the rail and disappeared overboard.

There was a rush to the side. Some of the men hastened to man the sea-boat, but the upheld hand of the Commander indicated that they were to "stand fast".

The sea was like glass. The usual Pacific roll was entirely absent. A quarter of a mile on the starboard quarter the *Awarua* was resolutely plugging along at 10 knots.

Bobbing in the wake of the cruiser was a darkbrown object. It was Panjie. The animal had escaped the suction of the propellers, but the fall from a vessel pelting along at 20 knots had evidently stunned it. At all events it made no effort to swim.

No order was given for the *Gosport* to reverse engines or even to slow down. She merely "carried on" describing a vast circle round the slow-moving Transport 99.

"By Jove, sir!" exclaimed the Commander, addressing the Captain. "The *Awarua's* starboarding helm."

"She is," admitted the Skipper grimly. "We've played into her hands this time, I fancy."

The "owner's" surmise was correct. Lining the side of the transport were hundreds of troops. Some of them, and several of the *Awarua's* crew, had provided themselves with running bowlines, and as the unfortunate Panjie drifted close to the ship he was saluted with a shower of lassos.

"They've hooked him, sir!" reported the Commander as the kangaroo's limp body, firmly encircled with three or four bowlines, was unceremoniously hauled on board the transport.

"By the powers they have," agreed the Skipper bitterly, and straightway he left the bridge and went below.

Five minutes later the *Awarua's* semaphore began working rapidly. On the *Gosport's* bridge a barefooted signalman wrote down the message on a pad. He was unable to conceal a broad grin as he handed the signal to the Commander.

No need for the latter to read the writing. He, in common with nearly all the officers and crew, had read the semaphore verbatim.

With the utmost temerity the skipper of the *Awarua* had sent the following report:--

"One of your crew has been picked up by Transport 99. In view of the heavy sea now running" (*it was a flat calm a regular "Paddy's hurricane"*) "I propose retaining the said member, in order to avoid a repetition of the accident. Do you concur?"

The message was sent to the captain of the cruiser. Sportsmanlike the skipper accepted the sarcastic signal with a good grace.

Back came the answer: "Now we are quits! Congratulations!"

CHAPTER VIII

Left Behind

Seven days behind scheduled time the *Awarua* crawled into Port Stanley harbour. Here

Sergeant Malcolm Carr and Rifleman Macready were received in exchange for Panjie, who, thanks to the store of fodder on board the transport, had been fed into a state of adiposity.

Meanwhile a reserve transport had been sent across from Simon's Bay, and orders were given to tranship the troops, stores, and baggage from No. 99 to No. 109. Within three days the task was accomplished, and, five other troopships having arrived from Australia, the convoy left for Table Bay, still under the care of H.M.S. *Gosport*.

Although the transports were still a considerable distance from the U-boat danger zone, every revolution of their propellers was bringing them nearer to that part of the South Atlantic where vessels had been known-to have been destroyed by mines.

On the evening of the third day Malcolm had to accompany Lieutenant Nicholson on the rounds. After visiting the various mess decks the upper deck had to be inspected. It was a pitch-dark night. The stars were obscured. Beyond the long undulations the sea was calm.

Transport 109, otherwise the S.S. *Pintail*, was leading vessel of the starboard column, the formation being that known as "double column ahead". The *Gosport* was two miles distant on the starboard bow, her position indicated solely by a feeble stern lantern. The vessels forming the convoy were steaming with all navigation-lamps screened, keeping station merely by means of the phosphorescent wake of the vessel next ahead.

"Hallo, what's the move?" exclaimed Mr. Nicholson as the six transports altered helm, swung round until they formed double column line abreast. "We're at right angles to our former course. What's the *Gosport* doing?"

The Lieutenant walked to the rail. Malcolm and the rest of the party halted and watched a masthead signalling-lamp that was blinking rapidly on the cruiser.

Suddenly the beams of two powerful search-lights from the *Gosport's* bridge pierced the darkness. The giant rays were directed full upon the hull of a large vessel steaming about five cable-lengths from, and on a parallel course to, that of the cruiser.

The stranger had been showing no steaminglights. She was a two-masted, double-funnelled craft of about four thousand tons. On her side, clearly shown up in the rays of the search-light, were painted the Dutch national colours, and the words *Waeszyl*, Holland in letters six feet in height.

Again the *Gosport's* flashing-lamp began signalling; but while the message, whatever it might mean, was still in progress, two tongues of flame leapt from the cruiser's side, and the simultaneous roar of a double report crashed through the night.

An instant later a stupendous blaze of light, followed by a detonation the volume of which completely drowned all other sounds, dazzled the eyes and burst upon the ears of the spectators. A pall of black smoke, tinted silvery in the rays of the search-lights, marked the spot where the so-called *Waeszyl* had been. For some seconds objects of varying sizes, hurled high in the air, dropped into the sea, some of them in perilous proximity to the convoy. After that--silence.

From the troop-decks of the transports crowds of men poured through the hatchways. It was an impossible task to try to keep the New Zealanders below. They simply had to see what there was to be seen; which, according to the general verdict, was precious little.

Presently boats were lowered from the cruiser, and a search was made over and around the spot where the mysterious vessel had disappeared. In less than half an hour the boats returned, the searchlights were switched off, and the cruiser and her charges resumed their interrupted course.

There was very little sleep that night for the men of the Thirty-somethingth reinforcements. The men sat up discussing the appalling incident, and forming ingenious theories as to the cause of the *Gosport's* speedy destruction of the supposed Dutchman. They had reckoned on entering the danger zone when they came within the normal radius of action of hostile U-boats. Already they had practical proof that at almost every knot of the twelve-thousand-miles voyage they were open to attack--Providence and the armed unit of Britain's fleet permitting.

Just before noon on the following day the *Pintail* passed close to a water-logged ship's boat. Kept under observation by means of telescopes and binoculars, the derelict told its own tale. There were evidences that it had been hastily lowered. A gaping hole on one side and a shattered gun-wale on the other, together with traces of fire, showed that the boat had been shelled. There were distinct signs that the perpetrators of the outrage had sought to obliterate all traces of their dastardly work: the name of the ship had been scraped off the boat's bows, her air-tight tanks had been stove in, yet in spite of this precaution the boat still remained awash. For once, at least, the policy of *Spurlos versenkt* had failed. Cold-blooded murder had undoubtedly been committed on the high seas. The *Gosport* was not in time to prevent this particular crime--but she had avenged it.

Slowly, but no less surely, the details of the previous night's engagement leaked out. It had not been, as Malcolm had surmised, a one-sided engagement. A commerce-raider and mine-layer

disguised as a Dutch cargo boat had sighted the *Gosport*, and, mistaking her in the darkness for a merchantman, turned and shaped a parallel course to that of the cruiser.

Detected by the war-ship's look-out, the suspicious vessel was promptly challenged by flashing signals. The raider's reply was a grim one. A torpedo fired from a submerged tube tore towards the *Gosport*, passing within a few feet of her stern. The phosphorescent swirl of the under-water missile told its own tale. The cruiser put two shells into the raider's quarter, in the hope that her steering-gear would be blown away and the vessel rendered unmanageable. Unfortunately for Hans, one of the projectiles burst in a compartment where a number of mines were stored--result, utter and swift annihilation!

As the transport approached the Cape, justifiable anxiety consumed those responsible for the navigation of the convoy. The *Pintail's* skipper never left the bridge for thirty-six hours. Two merchant-men had recently been sunk by mines in these waters. Although the vessel that had laid these sinister instruments of death and destruction had been destroyed, the results of her previous activities remained.

At last the convoy dropped anchor in Table Bay. The second stage of the long sea voyage was accomplished. The *Gosport* coaled and left for the Pacific, Until it was definitely established that German raiders no longer infested the route between Wellington and the Horn the presence of a few light cruisers was necessary, otherwise armed merchant-cruisers could effectually perform convoying duties, and release the "pukka" warships for other duties in home waters.

"Now I think of it," remarked Dick Selwyn, "I have a second cousin living at Muizenberg; I'll look him up. There's leave till six o'clock. Coming?"

"Looking up" even distant relations is a characteristic of the New Zealander. Wounded Anzacs, on receiving the ten-days' leave in England before rejoining their units, frequently make railway journeys running into hundreds of miles simply for the Purpose of "looking up" a remote blood relation in the Old Country, In Selwyn's case his relation lived at a small town on the shores of False Bay, a distance of about twenty miles from Cape Town.

"I'm on," replied Malcolm. "It will give us a chance of seeing something of South Africa. How about Fortescue?"

Sergeant Fortescue, when appealed to, promptly decided to accompany them; and as soon as leave was granted the three non-coms. hurried ashore.

The railway journey accomplished, Selwyn made the disappointing discovery that his cousin no longer lived at Muizenberg. He had moved to a farm near Slang Kop, a distance of about five miles across the peninsula that terminates in the world-renowned Cape of Good Hope.

"Game to foot it, you chaps?" asked Selwyn. "I don't like to be done."

The others agreed without enthusiasm, although loyalty to their chum left no plausible alternative; so at a steady pace they set out along an upland track that led to the farm.

Selwyn's cousin "did his visitors right down properly", to quote Malcolm's description of the reception. So much so that before either of the three realized the fact it was a question of whether they could return to Muizenberg station in time for the train. A springless Cape cart drove them at the maximum pace obtainable by the wiry horse and the vociferous exhortations of the native "boy". In spite of every effort the trio reached the outskirts of Muizenberg just in time to see the train steam out of the station.

Since Muizenberg is a popular seaside resort for the business folk at Cape Town, there is a fairly frequent train service. Enquiries of the railway officials elicited the information that a train would leave at 7.15 p.m.

Malcolm and his companions accepted the situation calmly. Mutual recriminations were absent, although they knew that it was a serious matter to overstay shore leave.

"It isn't as if the transport were lying alongside a wharf," remarked Selwyn. "Our best chance is to hire a boat and trust to luck to get on board without being observed by the officers. The corporal on the gangway wouldn't give the show away."

"The main point is to get on board," said Fortescue. "If there is an enquiry we must simply state plain facts and face the music. There's an officer's boat at nine-thirty."

"I'm afraid there isn't," corrected Malcolm. "I saw the announcement cancelled on the notice-board outside the orderly room."

"By gum, that looks fishy!" exclaimed Fortescue. "Supposing the *Pintail* sails to-night. That yarn about the convoy getting under way on Thursday night may be a blind. They say Cape Town swarms with pro-Germans."

When at length the train crawled out of Muizenberg station the three "Diggers" (as New Zealand infantrymen are commonly dubbed amongst themselves) had for company a sympathetic

fellow-passenger, who on hearing of their plight was quick to suggest a plan.

"I know your boat," he remarked. "No. 109 is lying nearest in-shore off Woodstock--that's a suburb of Cape Town, you know. I'm a transport officer, so I know a bit about it. Hop off the train at Woodstock and enquire for Van Hoek's boathouse. It's at the mouth of Salt River. Old Van will row you off for a matter of ten shillings."

The passenger seemed of a very communicative disposition. He evinced considerable interest in various incidents of the New Zealanders' voyage. Without much questioning he led the three Anzacs to give a fairly detailed account of what had happened.

"It's all news to me," he remarked. "Even in the Transport Office we hear but very little. Of course the heads know a lot, but the minor officials, such as myself, are not taken into their confidence."

The train slowing down as it approached Woodstock station terminated the conversation. With many thanks for the information, Malcolm and his chums left the carriage, and, in giving up their tickets, enquired of the Dutch ticket-collector the way to Van Hoek's establishment.

The official had never heard of the place; nor had three or four others to whom the enquiry was put.

"At any rate," said Fortescue in desperation, "I suppose there is such a show as Salt River?"

"Oh yes, we know where that is," was the chorused reply.

Declining offers to be shown the way, the three chums set out, and presently arrived at the low shore of the estuary. The opposite bank was invisible, as at the spot the mud-flats were covered at high tide. To all appearance it was open water right out to Table Bay.

The shore was deserted. The few buildings were evidently untenanted. On the beach half a dozen boats were hauled up above high-water mark. Farther out were others riding easily to moorings.

The night was calm. The brilliant starlight made it an easy matter to discern the double line of transports.

"By Jove," ejaculated Fortescue, "they're raising steam! They are sailing to-night after all!"

"No good cooling our heels here," said Selwyn. "Let's borrow a boat, since we can't find an owner. The wind's dead on shore, what there is of it; we can cast her adrift after we get on board."

"And put five shillings on one of the thwarts," added Malcolm. "The fellow who finds it will be repaid for his trouble."

Of the six boats all were without gear save one. In vain they attempted to launch it down the beach; their united efforts were unavailing. Nor was Fortescue's suggestion to transfer the gear to a lighter craft productive of better results.

"These boats are as heavy as lead," declared Malcolm, wiping his heated brow. "I believe they're bolted and riveted to the ground. How about it? Suppose we swim out to the nearest of those boats?"

This proposition was adopted. The three men stripped, secured their clothing on top of their heads by means of their belts, and, two of them taking an oar in case the moored craft was destitute If means of propulsion, they slipped boldly into the water.

Malcolm was the first to reach the moored boat. Holding on to the gunwale with one hand, he unbuckled his bundle and tossed it into the boat; then, clambering over the stern, proceeded to dress while his companions "got aboard". There were oars already, as well as mast, sails, and other gear.

On the strength of having stroked his college boat Fortescue took command. Under his directions the rudder was shipped, and an attempt made to raise the anchor. The three men heaving together very nearly put the boat's bows under, but the refractory mooring refused to come home. Did they but know it, they were vainly trying to raise an iron chain attached to a mass of stone weighing nearly half a ton.

"We're going the wrong way about the trick," declared Selwyn. "See that rope with a chunk of wood on the end of it? That's fastened to the chain, so if we chuck the lot overboard we'll be able to make a start."

The mooring dropped with a resounding splash. Fortescue and Malcolm manned the oars and gave way with a will.

"Jolly hard graft," muttered Malcolm breathlessly after a quarter of an hour's strenuous work. "Do you think we're getting any nearer? I don't."

Fortescue glanced over his shoulder.

"No, I don't," he admitted bluntly. "What's more, the transports are 'on the move. That's put the kybosh on the whole contraption."

CHAPTER IX

In the Ring

For a full minute silence reigned. The chums had light-heartedly discussed the possibility of the convoy sailing; but now, when the supposition merged into hard fact, they could hardly realize the gravity of the situation.

Mitigating circumstances or otherwise, reduced to rock-bottom level, the three non-coms, had overstayed their leave, and were actually deserters, from a military point of view. It was just possible that they might be sent back under arrest to New Zealand. The thought that they would be done Out of "having a slap at Fritz" almost stunned them.

"Let's get back," said Fortescue, as the grey-hulled vessels grew more and more indistinct in the starlit night. "We'll make for the transport office and report ourselves. If we hadn't taken that fellow's advice and wasted precious time looking for Van what's-his-name we might have caught the tender."

"I wonder whether that fellow in the train was all above board?" said Malcolm. "Now I come to think over the matter it looks rather fishy. And we told him a jolly lot, too. He might be a Boche."

"If he is a Boche, and I run across him, I'll bash him," said Selwyn vehemently.

"Set to, you Diggers!" ordered Fortescue. "Selwyn, you take an oar and relieve Carr. Now, then, you pull while I back."

Under the reverse action of the oars the boat turned towards the shore, then both men pulled their hardest.

"We don't seem to be moving," remarked Malcolm after five minutes had elapsed. "I've been watching those two lights, and they have been in line ever since we turned."

"Perhaps we're aground," suggested Fortescue, and thrusting his oar vertically into the water he sounded. The thirteen-foot oar failed to touch bottom.

"Plenty of water," he reported. "Carr, you must be making a mistake. Now, Selwyn, put your back into it. I've never had such a heavy old tub to pull in all my previous experience."

"We're not gaining an inch," reported Malcolm.

"Current out of the river, most likely," was Selwyn's theory.

For once Fortescue lost his temper.

"Currents, you young jackal!" he exclaimed. "Do you think this is a Bath-bun shop? We are a crowd of jackasses. We never unmoored the boat properly."

The craft was fitted with a short bowsprit, from the end of which a wire shroud or "bobstay" led to a shackle-plate in the stem. When the mooring-buoy had been thrown overboard, the rope had caught between the bobstay and the stem, with the result that for the last hour the three raw amateurs in salt-water seamanship had been simply keeping their craft straining at the end of the buoy-rope.

The tension was broken in a double sense. The mooring-rope was this time properly cast adrift, while the mercurial spirits of the three absentees rose to the occasion.

"We've been a crowd of mugs," declared Selwyn, laughing. "Swotting for an hour or more and fancying we were on the move. Now what's to be done?"

"I suggest that we sleep on board until daybreak," said Fortescue. "No good purpose is served by jogging into Cape Town at this hour of the night. I suppose neither of you thought to bring along any tommy?"

The others had to admit that they were unprovided with food.

"Then tighten your belts, boys," continued Fortescue. "We've been feeding like turkey-cocks; a few hours' fast won't do much harm."

With the first streaks of dawn they ran the boat ashore, secured her with a rope, and set off towards the town. When the transport office opened the three absentees reported themselves, and, after having had a stiff "dressing down" were placed under open arrest.

"One advantage of being a non-com.," remarked Fortescue. "We are lucky not to be in the 'clink'."

"That Tommy officer seems a good sort," declared Malcolm. "As you say, he might have made things hot for us. So we have to cool our heels here until we can proceed with the next draft."

Two days later the three chums received instructions to report on board the *Pomfret Castle*, which was due to sail with a mixed contingent on the following afternoon. The vessel was a Union Castle liner commandeered by the Government. Capable of doing twenty-two knots, compared with the *Pintail's* seventeen, it was more than likely, U-boats and mines excepted, that the *Pomfret Castle* would arrive at Plymouth days ahead of the convoy with the New Zealand reinforcements.

Taking no chances this time, Malcolm and his companions went on board a couple of hours before the authorized time. Baggage was still being stowed, while the decks teemed with troops of various nationalities. The bulk consisted of South Africans, mostly veterans of middle age, with a sprinkling of youths; detachments transferred from Mesopotamia to France; and Imperial troops from German South-East Africa. A draft of Maoris, and about twenty Australians who had overstayed their leave at Cape Town, completed the muster.

Instructed by the embarkation officer, the New Zealanders went below to their mess.

"Hallo, here are three Diggers!" exclaimed a strapping Queenslander. "Make them at home, you chaps. Now our mess is quite filled up. By Gum, I don't quite cotton on to those Dutchmen. I'm a believer in Australia for the Australians, and You fellows stand in with that crush."

The speaker introduced himself as Jack Kennedy, quartermaster-sergeant by rank, and sheep-farmer in civilian life. His left hand was in a sling, a strip of surgical plaster embellished his cheek. During his stay at Cape Town he had been forced into a squabble with a crowd of disloyal Cape Dutch. Words led to blows, with the result that three of his opponents were picked up insensible, while Kennedy was taken to the military hospital with a broken wrist and a nasty contusion of the forehead, caused by the nail-shod boot of an eighteen-stone antagonist.

"No kits?" continued Kennedy. "Your chaps went on and left you behind? We were much in the same sort of hole, only Buck-up Miller here knows the ropes. We'll soon see that you are comfortable. How about a pannikin of tea?"

Under the attentions of their new chums Malcolm and his companions soon adapted themselves to present conditions, and before the *Pomfret Castle* cleared Table Bay the Anzacs felt as if they had known each other for years.

Although the troops on board were going to fight a common foe--a foe that victorious would speedily prove more than a menace to Australia, to United South Africa, and to civilization in general--there was a certain amount of misunderstanding between the Afrikanders and their brothers-in-arms. In spite of the utmost endurance on the part of the Imperial officers, petty squabbles were frequent. The Boers, for instance, were prone to treat the Maoris in a similar manner to the Kaffir "boys". They could not understand how a white man could treat a Maori as an equal, being ignorant of the high moral and physical standard of the latter, that has justly earned the appreciation and admiration of the New Zealand colonists. For their part the Maoris accepted the Afrikanders' remarks with courteous equanimity, but there were others on board who championed them--with no uncertain voice.

Big Kennedy 'was as good as his word, and before nightfall each of the New Zealanders had a full kit, although they wisely refrained from asking questions as to the origin of the source of supplies. Already they were well advanced in the ways of the old campaigner. If they kept rigidly to the codes of civil life they would soon have found themselves very much out in the cold as far as personal comforts were concerned, although on board, in camp, and on active service, it was noticeable that personal property was rightly considered as inviolate.

One of the morning parades had Just ended, and Malcolm was hurrying down the accommodation-ladder to the mess deck when he was brought up sharply by a huge fist tapping him on the centre of his chest. Coming out of the brilliant sunshine to the comparative gloom 'tween decks, young Carr could not at first discern the features of the man who barred his progress.

It was a Maori. The man was grinning broadly, yet he did not say a single word.

"Te Paheka!" exclaimed Malcolm in astonishment. "You here?"

A few months previously, when Malcolm saw Te Paheka vanishing round a corner as he drove juggernaut at a furious rate, the lad had come to the conclusion that he had seen the last of his Maori friend for many a long day. And now, by one of the vagaries of fate, Te Paheka was on board the *Pomfret Castle*, rigged out in khaki, and bound for the goal of freedom--the Western

Front.

"Yes, I came along," explained Te Paheka. "Since you added a few years to your age I thought I would make a corresponding reduction in mine. Things were a bit dull. You heard about the car? Selwyn told you, then? I've cleared out. Sold every acre of land that I could legally dispose of. The rest the paternal Government prevents me getting rid of; but it's let, so I think I'm good for about four hundred a year. By the time I return--if I ever do see Wairakato again--I'll have enough to buy the out-and-out top-hole racing car in New Zealand."

Just then four men hurried along the alley-way. By the letters S.A.H.A. on their shoulder-straps, Malcolm knew that they belonged to the South African Heavy Artillery. As the foremost passed by he deliberately lurched against Te Paheka.

"Out of my way, Zwartnek!" he shouted, adding something in *Taal* which, fortunately for him, neither Malcolm nor the Maori understood.

As the last of the four men passed, Malcolm, seething with indignation, caught a glimpse of his features.

"Dash it all!" he soliloquized. "Where have I seen that fellow before?"

Te Paheka took no notice of the insult.

"I would have told that fellow to *impshie* pretty sharp if I'd been you, Te Paheka," observed the lad.

The Maori shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Manners, Malcolm, or the lack of them," he remarked. "This evening I hope to teach him a lesson. There's a boxing-match fixed up, and I hear that this fellow is the champion of his battery. I'll do my best to take him down a peg."

The two men separated, Te Paheka going to his mess, while Malcolm made his way to his quarters, where he informed Selwyn of his chance meeting with the Maori.

"And," he added, "although I'm not absolutely sure about it, I have an idea that the blighter who let us down on the train from Muizenberg is on board."

"A transport officer?" enquired Fortescue.

"No; in khaki--an Afrikander artilleryman."

Fortescue whistled softly.

"Sure?" he asked.

"No, I said I wasn't," declared Malcolm. "I only caught sight of him as he passed. The blighter looked a bit sheepish, and didn't want to catch my eye."

"Golly!" ejaculated Selwyn. "That's fishy! We'll keep a look-out for him. Wonder if he'll put in an appearance at the boxing-match?"

"We will, in any case," observed Kennedy. "All our boys will be there to give your Maori chum a buck up. I'll pass the word to some of the Tommy soldiers. They're good sports, and will shout with the rest of us."

With the laudable intention of keeping the men's minds fully occupied during the hours of leisure, the officers had arranged for the boxing-tournament at an early stage of the voyage. The contests were to take place on the promenade deck, a space having been roped off and seats provided for the officers. Every other available part of the deck which would command a view of the "ring" was packed. Men were clustered like flies in the boats on the boat deck, others swarmed up the shrouds, to the choleric but ineffectual protests of the ship's officers.

Several pairs of sparring-men having displayed their prowess and received indiscriminate praise and rebuffs from their respective supporters, the event of the evening was announced.

Gunner Jan van Eindhovengen was open to engage upon a ten-round contest with any non-commissioned officer or man amongst the troops on board.

Amidst the vociferous shouts of "Oom Jan" from his compatriots, the Afrikander stepped into the ring. Stripped to the waist, his huge bulk, bull neck, and massive limbs showed to their fullest advantage. Across his chest and back the muscles stood out like knots on a gnarled oak. His arms were as thick as the thigh of an ordinary man, while his seconds had considerable difficulty in placing the gloves on his enormous hands. With a supercilious and self-confident smile he folded his arms across his chest and surveyed the dense crowd of spectators.

Having summed up the formidable champion, Malcolm directed his attention towards the group of men from which van Eindhovengen had just emerged. From the other side of the ring the lad

scanned the faces of the Afrikander's comrades, but Without the desired result. In vain he looked for the man who, he felt confident, was the selfsame individual they had met on the Muizenberg train.

"A freak of the imagination, I suppose," decided the lad, whereupon he devoted his attention to the events in the ring.

A counter-blast of cheering announced the appearance of a challenger--Sergeant Smithers, of the 2nd Battalion West Othershires. The Sergeant was the best boxer of his regiment, but he had forgotten that a protracted sojourn in the reputed site of the Garden of Eden--where a boundless expanse of glaring sand, a total absence of verdure, millions of tormenting flies, and a meagre menu consisting chiefly of bully beef and tepid water, are the outstanding characteristics--is apt to undermine one's physical condition.

Severely punished, Sergeant Smithers held out for five rounds, while the gigantic Jan, disdaining the services of his seconds, grimly eyed the circle of spectators in the hope of meeting another antagonist.

Softly, then gradually increasing in volume until it rose to a tremendous roar, the Maori war-song greeted the appearance of Te Paheka. In wonderment, for, with few exceptions, none of the other troops had heard the chant-like chorus before, the white men relapsed into silence. For the moment all attention was shifted from van Eindhovengen to the new challenger.

Although middle-aged, Te Paheka displayed the figure of an athlete. His well-developed muscles rippled under his olivine skin. They lacked the gnarled appearance of those of his antagonist, but their easy, rhythmic undulations contrasted favourably with the jerky, bombastic movements of the Afrikander's muscles and sinews. In height van Eindhovengen exceeded him by two inches, and was a good two stone heavier. Standing alone, Te Paheka would have been regarded as a huge man. Confronting the artilleryman, he looked no more than of medium height and build.

Clad in a pair of shorts of a vivid orange hue--for Te Paheka shared with the rest of the Maoris a love of brilliant colour--and with a silk red ensign emblazoned with the New Zealand stars round his waist, Te Paheka grinned amicably at the Afrikander. The Maori's bare chest and back were covered with elaborate tattooing, but, according to modern custom, his face was unmarked.

"Allemachte!" exclaimed one of van Eindhovengen's supporters. "He is not nearly so big as Oom Jan. Oom Jan will wipe the floor with him."

"The presumptuous nigger!" said another. "He does not know Oom Jan!"

Even Malcolm felt doubtful concerning Te Paheka's chances. He knew the Maori to be a good boxer, as most natives are, but age, if only ten or fifteen years, together with inferior reach and weight, must assuredly handicap Te Paheka considerably. The two men advanced and shook hands, van Eindhovengen with obvious disdain, Te Paheka as naturally as the gentleman he was.

"Take your corners, men!"

Round No. 1 commenced. The Afrikander, confident of knocking out his opponent quickly and completely, led off with a tremendous blow with his left. Had the glove hit its mark Te Paheka would have been shot over the ropes like a stone from a catapult. Stepping smartly back a couple Of paces, he allowed the blow to fall on empty air.

"Jehoshaphat!" ejaculated Kennedy. "Why didn't the Maori take advantage of it? The Dutchy nearly overbalanced himself with the force of his blow."

Malcolm, to whom the remark was addressed, made no reply beyond a confident nod. Already he was tumbling to Te Paheka's tactics. The Maori was fighting a rear-guard action hoping that his staying powers and agility were greater than those of his ponderous opponent.

Round and round the ring the two men went, until the South Africans yelled to their man to hurry up and the Anzacs began to mutter impatiently.

Thud! Te Paheka had got one home on the face of the Afrikander. Outwardly it had little or no effect upon Jan's rugged figurehead.

The Maoris yelled with delight, but the next instant their hopes were dashed to the ground as Te Paheka, incautiously attempting to follow up his advantage, laid himself open to a terrific blow from the Afrikander's right. With a dull crash he landed heavily on the sanded floor.

Over him stood van Eindhovengen, ready to strike him down should he attempt to rise. The cool, deliberate voice of the timekeeper calling off the fateful ten seconds silenced all other sounds of approbation or encouragement to the fallen man. In the intervals between the numbers one could have heard a pin drop. For the first time since the tournament started could be heard the plash of the waves against the ship's sides and the gentle moan of the wind through the rigging.

Seven--eight--nine!

The Afrikander struck--but struck emptiness--where Te Paheka had been a fraction of a second before. With an agility so rapid that the spectators had not time to grasp its significance, the Maori regained his feet, dealt a numbing blow upon the biceps of his antagonist, and was off to the opposite corner of the ring.

Before the boxers could engage again "Time" sounded.

Te Paheka was glad of the respite. It was also remarked that Jan did not scorn the attentions of his second. A dull mark on the upper part of his brawny right arm promised trouble to him in the near future.

During the second round the Maori kept strictly on the defensive, while van Eindhovengen tired himself considerably in making blind and ineffectual rushes at his nimble opponent. His supporters no longer yelled to him to "hurry up and knock the black out", while the Maoris sung their choruses again and again every time Jan failed to drive Te Paheka over the ropes.

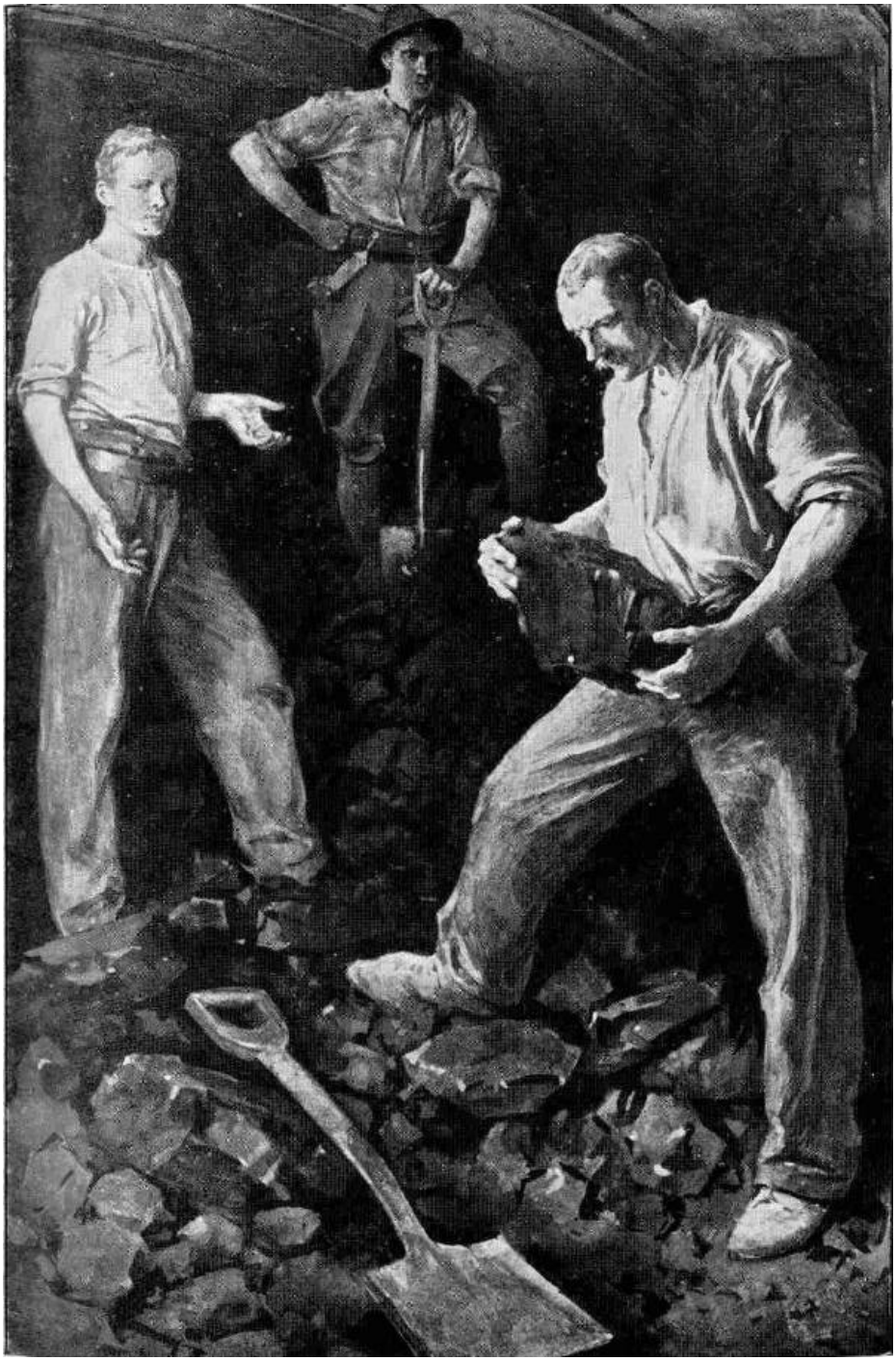
The third round was a slow one. The Afrikander, realizing that he was fatiguing himself with futile efforts, adopted semi-defensive tactics, in the hope that the Maori would close. It was not until the close of time that the latter succeeded in getting home a "body punch", which did not improve Jan's temper.

"Do something this time, you chaps!" shouted a Tommy as the men faced each other for the fourth round. "You're supposed to be sparring, not going in for a waltzing race."

"By Jove, he's cornered!" exclaimed Fortescue, as Te Paheka, stepping back to avoid a left-hander, came in contact with the ropes.

The Afrikander's glove rasped the Maori's ribs. So violent was the effort that again Jan was on the point of overbalancing. This time Te Paheka followed up the advantage. An upper cut caught van Eindhovengen full on the point of his chin, while almost simultaneously the Maori drove home a resounding blow on the Afrikander's solar plexus.

Down like a felled ox the huge South African dropped. In silence the spectators heard the fateful ten seconds called, then a vociferous cheer from Afrikanders, Anzacs, and Maoris alike greeted the victor. For that instant the sporting instincts of the men triumphed over racial prejudices, and for the rest of the voyage--and after--the Maoris and Afrikanders "hit it off" splendidly.



[Illustration: "BY GUM, THAT'S A MIGHTY QUEER CHUNK OF COAL!"]

CHAPTER X

Volunteers for the Stokehold

Day after day passed, and although the *Pomfret Castle* was pelting along at full speed there were no signs of the convoy of which the *Pintail* formed part. If the liner were in wireless touch with the transports the fact was never communicated to the troops on board. As far as they were concerned the South Atlantic was a desert, for not another vessel had been sighted since leaving Cape Town.

At Sierra Leone the *Pomfret Castle* found two more liners awaiting her. Having coaled, the three vessels, under the escort of a light cruiser, left for Plymouth.

The troops were now approaching the U-boat danger-zone. For four days a course due west was maintained, until the vessels ported helm and Stood north, it being the rule that no two convoys should shape the same course through the North Atlantic.

"You've been torpedoed already, have you?" enquired an Australian, addressing Jack Kennedy. "What did you do?"

"Do?" replied the Queenslander, with a laugh. "Why, simply put on my life-belt and made tracks for the boat. We only had ten minutes before the old hooker sank. The boys had a high old time. They actually put the ship up for auction as she was foundering. It was a calm----"

"Periscope on the starboard bow!" shouted a stentorian voice.

Already the 4.7-inch guns were manned. The Maxims began hurling nickel at the rate of 450 shots a minute, with the idea of either disabling the periscope or churning up the water in its vicinity, in order to make it impossible for the U-boat to discharge a torpedo with any degree of accuracy. Simultaneously the helm was starboarded, and the *Pomfret Castle* steered straight for the patch where the machine-gun bullets were ricochetting from the water.

The escorting cruiser, then two miles to wind'ard, also altered course, but, owing to the *Pomfret Castle* being in her line of fire, could not take an active part in the proceedings.

The "Cease fire" sounded as the liner approached the spot where the periscope had been observed.

Some of the troops began to cheer at the thought that a U-boat had been sent to the bed of the Atlantic, but their jubilation was quickly nipped in the bud.

In the centre of the patch, and torn by machinegun fire almost to a state of unrecognizability, was a bird known as a diver. The *Pomfret Castle* look-out had mistaken the unfortunate fowl for the periscope of a hostile submarine, at the cost of the bird's life and an extravagant waste of ammunition.

Although the three New Zealanders were keenly on the alert to renew the acquaintance with their supposed transport official, the man, if he were on board, had not come under their observation. At every available opportunity Malcolm and his chums were on deck when the South Africans paraded, but without satisfactory results.

"I am forced to come to the conclusion that you are the victim of an unaccountable hallucination, my lad," observed Fortescue to Malcolm, shortly after the diver incident. "I The fellow, if he is on board, couldn't lie doggo all this time. This morning I found an excuse to have a look round the sick quarters, and our Muizenberg pal isn't there."

"I am certain I spotted him when I first met Te Paheka on board," insisted Malcolm.

"Pardon me, laddie," said Fortescue firmly, "but you weren't at all sure about it at the time. An impression grows until you are certain of something that never occurred. I've known a fellow pitch an altogether impossible yarn before to-day. He also was aware of the fact, but in time he became firmly convinced that his statement was gospel truth."

That afternoon the course of the convoy was abruptly changed to due west again, in obedience to a signal from the escorting cruiser. It was quite a simple matter that resulted in the alteration of course. The cruiser found that she was in the track of an unknown vessel that, although invisible, left a tell-tale track by throwing overboard ashes and other debris. A keen-witted *kapitan-leutnant* of a U-boat would not fail to take advantage of these it "signs and portents", hence the advisability of giving the steamer's track a wide berth.

The vessels comprising the convoy were also cautioned when in the danger-zone to avoid "starting" ashes from the stokehold, and throwing garbage and refuse overboard, except at specified times, in order to baffle the hostile submarines' quest. Day and night a guard of riflemen stood to arms on deck, Maxims were ready for instant action, and the crews of the quick-firers slept at the guns. Hourly the game of U-boat dodging became more exciting.

The troops, however, were quite composed, beyond indulging in friendly bets as to their chances of arriving at Plymouth without being torpedoed. They ate heartily, and for the most part slept soundly.

"You were hard and fast in the land of dreams last night, Malcolm," remarked Dick Selwyn in the morning.

"Why do you mention the fact? I plead guilty to the indictment," rejoined his chum.

"There was a bit of a flutter in the night," explained Selwyn. "The cruiser reported that there was a light flashing through one of the scuttles. Our skipper sent for the C.O., and he turned out the guard. Every part of the ship was visited, but without success, for the dead-lights were in position over every scuttle. Then, almost as soon as the rounds were over, the cruiser complained about the same thing again. Twice a corporal's guard was in here, and yet you slept through it all."

Selwyn had not erred on the side of exaggeration. On the contrary, he had not attached the fullest importance to the incident. Not only was a light showing from the *Pomfret Castle*; it was blinking, sending a message in Morse, although the signalman of the cruiser was unable to decipher the code.

"Boys," exclaimed Kennedy, "there's a call for volunteers for the stokeholds! How about it?"

"Firemen on strike?" enquired an Australian, as he tumbled out of a comfortable attitude on a locker, and stretched his arms and gave a prodigious yawn.

"No, chum," replied Kennedy. "The convoy has to increase speed--we're about to cross the intensive zone--and the old tub requires a lot of whacking up."

"Then I'm on," said his questioner with alacrity.

Fortescue, Selwyn, and Carr were also amongst the volunteers, and after breakfast twenty men paraded in dungarees to take their "trick" below.

"Hanged if I'd like to do this for a living," remarked Malcolm, as the men gingerly made their way down the greasy and polished perpendicular ladder, one of many that gave access to No. 2 stokehold. "It's all right for the novelty of the thing. What with this pitching and rolling it reminds me of Point Elizabeth Colliery in an earthquake."

"If a blessed torpedo should----" began one of the Anzacs, but Kennedy promptly shut him up.

"Less chin-wag going; you'll want all your energy for elbow grease," he exclaimed. "Now then, chum, give the word and we'll do our best."

The last sentence was addressed to one of the regular hands, who, stripped to the waist like the rest of the *Pomfret Castle's* firemen and greasers, was responsible for this particular stokehold.

"Just you wait till we've got shot of this crush," said the man, indicating a number of South Africans who had just completed their two-hours' voluntary task. "They've stuck it jolly well. If you chaps do as good we'll make the old boat hop it like billy-oh."

A crowd of Afrikanders, black with coal dust and running with perspiration, filed along the narrow passage between the huge boilers. Amongst them was Jan van Eindhovengen, proud as a peacock at having broken all records in shovelling coal from the bunkers.

When the twenty South Africans had left the stokehold the relieving gang was set to work. Malcolm's task was to remove coal from a cavernous recess, the fuel being handled by Fortescue and Selwyn, who had to transport it to one of the furnaces. At other bunkers a similar operation was performed by their comrades, the "trimmers" being specially instructed to remove the coal in a methodical manner, so that there was slight possibility of the remaining contents being thrown out by the roll of the vessel. Others, armed with long-handled shovels, fed the capacious furnaces so frequently that the place reverberated to the clanging of the red-hot metal doors at the ends of the multi-tube boilers. At intervals the ash-hoists had to be supplied with still-smouldering embers, for so quickly did the heaps of ashes accumulate, that, unless removed constantly, they would seriously hamper the fireman at work in the already-congested space.

Before Malcolm had been twenty minutes at his task he began to realize the necessity for careful removal of the lumps of coal. In spite of every precaution, masses of black, shiny fuel would clatter down from the steadily-diminishing heap. Since he was wearing a pair of canvas shoes and no socks, he had to display considerable agility in avoiding the miniature avalanches.

Presently he came to a tight "pack". The lumps were so closely wedged that the only way to attack the sloping wall of coal was by means of a long "fireman's rake".

Just as Malcolm was releasing the top tier, the vessel gave a heavier roll than usual, and a regular cataract of coal shot towards the mouth of the bunker. Back sprang the lad, crouching the while to prevent bringing his head in contact with a low girder. Even then he was too late. A huge lump, fully eighteen inches in diameter, trundled over his left foot and brought up against the sill of the bunker.

Fully expecting to find his foot crushed, Malcolm was agreeably surprised, and at the same time astonished, that nothing of the sort occurred. Beyond a few slight grazes, he was uninjured. Desisting from his labours, he regarded the mass of coal with studied interest.

"Buck up, laddie!" exclaimed Fortescue. "Keep the pot boiling! Don't go to sleep!"

Disregarding the admonition, Malcolm stooped and grasped the huge mass. He could lift it with the utmost ease. At the very outside it weighed less than five pounds.

"What do you make of this?" he bawled, tossing the lump to Fortescue. The latter, prepared to receive a weighty object, was quite as surprised as Carr had been.

"By gum," he remarked, "that's a mighty queer chunk of coal!"

"Found a nugget?" enquired Selwyn, glad of an opportunity of a respite.

"It's hollow, and it's been filled with water," continued Fortescue. "The thing, whatever it is, is still leaking. Chuck it aside, and let's get on with the job. We'll examine it later."

"What's all this jawing about?" asked the leading hand. "Chauvin' yer fat won't empty this 'ere bunker."

"I agree," rejoined Fortescue complaisantly. "But cast your optics on this, my festive shoveller."

"Ain't you seen a lump of coal afore?" demanded the man.

"Not like this one," said Fortescue. "Handle it."

The man took the proffered object; then, muttering an unintelligible ejaculation, simply bolted with it to the nearest ladder.

"Hallo, here's another find!" exclaimed Selwyn. "This yours, Malcolm?"

He held up a small pocket-book, black with coal dust.

"Not mine," replied Carr. "Must have belonged to one of those fellows we relieved."

"Possibly," agreed Selwyn, throwing the book into the pocket of his overalls. "We'll soon find out if it is."

The interrupted task was resumed, but in less than ten minutes the leading hand returned, accompanied by three of the regular firemen.

"You three," he announced, indicating Carr and his chums, "are to knock off and report to the Quartermaster."

Going on deck they duly reported themselves, and were conducted to a cabin on the lower bridge, their protests about having to appear in a coal-grimed state being ignored.

Within were the Captain and the Chief Engineer of the ship, while in two pieces on the table lay the lump of "coal".

"Which of you found this?" enquired the "Old Man" brusquely, indicating Malcolm's find.

"I did, sir," replied the lad. "I It rolled on my foot, and, finding it was remarkably light, I examined it."

"A thundering good job you did," rejoined the Captain. "Look here, this is in confidence--you must not mention the affair to anyone--had that thing been thrown into the furnace, the chances are that the ship would have been blown up. No. 7 bunker---- Let me see, Jephson," he continued, addressing the engineer; "that was replenished at Sierra Leone, wasn't it?"

The officer addressed consulted a memorandum.

"No, sir," he replied; "7 and 8 of No. 2 stoke-hold were bunkered at Cape Town. They hadn't been touched when we arrived at Sierra Leone."

The infernal machine--for such it was--was an ingeniously-constructed piece of work. The hollow shell of papier-mâché was made to resemble a lump of coal. Within was a slab of wet gun-cotton, while to make up the deficiency of weight the hollow was filled with water. Fortunately the bomb must have been cracked in contact with lumps of genuine coal, for the water had escaped. The contrivance would have been thrown into the furnace, with disastrous results; but Malcolm's astuteness had saved the situation.

"Mind, not a word!" cautioned the Skipper again as the three New Zealanders were dismissed. "In due course your conduct will be reported to the proper authorities, and no doubt you will hear favourably on the matter."

CHAPTER XI

Cornered

"How about that notebook?" enquired Malcolm. The three chums were lounging in camp-chairs on the upper deck after their strenuous but interrupted "trick below". In consideration for their voluntary labours all men who had been in the stokehold were excused drills and parades for the rest of the day.

"Clean forgot all about it," replied Selwyn. "I left it in the pocket of my boiler suit. By this time I guess some other fellow is wearing the overalls. After all, the notebook may find its way to the rightful owner."

The three sat in silence for some minutes. Fortescue was puffing at his pipe, deep in thought; Selwyn was idly contemplating the unbroken expanse of horizon; while Malcolm devoted his attention to the examination of half a dozen large blisters on his hands. Already soldiering had hardened his hands considerably, but stoking, he decided, had proved to be far more strenuous than bayonet exercise, if an aching back, stiff muscles, and galls as big as half-crowns were any criterion.

Thus engaged, the chums hardly noticed the appearance of a corporal's guard--an N.C.O. and two privates with side-arms. Consequently they were surprised when the Corporal halted his men and asked abruptly:

"Are you Diggers the chaps what were doing stoking just now in No. 2 stokehold? You are? Well, you're bloomin' well under arrest."

"Under arrest--what for?" demanded Fortescue. For a moment he suspected a practical joke, but the fact that the men wore side-arms knocked that idea on the head.

"Dunno," replied the man shortly. "Fall in!"

Along the crowded troop deck the prisoners and their escort made their way, their presence occasioning little interest on the part of the spectators. Defaulters were common objects amongst the different Colonial troops who comprised the *Pomfret Castle's* passengers.

Outside the large cabin known as the orderly-room were a dozen Australians, also under guard. Presently their numbers were augmented by five more. Every man of the coaling squad in No. 2 stokehold had been arrested.

"What's this rotten farce all about?" demanded Kennedy, appealing to the New Zealanders.

Malcolm shook his head. His own impression was that it had something to do with the discovery of the explosive in the bunker.

"Silence!" ordered a sergeant-major, who was now in charge of the batch of prisoners.

The door was thrown open, and the Anzacs with their escort paced into the orderly-room. At one end was a green-baize-covered table, at which were seated four "Tommy" officers--a major, two captains, and a lieutenant of a British line regiment. In front of them were sheets of foolscap, a book on military law, and a small object wrapped in brown paper.

"You men," began the Major without any preliminaries, "volunteered for work in No. 2 stoke-hold. Twenty all told, I see. Were there any other men of the party, or do you comprise the whole squad? Very well, then. Now I mean to find out who is the owner of this article. It was found in one of the boiler suits supplied to the squad; it was not there when the suits were issued, consequently the article in question must belong to one of you men. The owner of this will step forward two paces."

The Major, unwrapping the paper coverings, held up for inspection the notebook that Selwyn had picked up in his bunker.

"Is this your property?" demanded the Major as Selwyn stepped forward.

"No, sir."

"Then why the deuce----" exclaimed the officer, raising his voice. "Here, remove the other prisoners."

For twenty minutes the ejected men cooled their heels in the alley-way until again summoned to the orderly room.

"You are released from arrest," declared the Major curtly; then, as an afterthought, he added: "It would be advisable that you maintain discretion over the matter."

"What happened, old man?" enquired Fortescue, as the three New Zealanders gained a secluded part of the mess deck.

"The pocket-book contained a secret code," explained Selwyn. "It has been partly deciphered, and is proved to be a means of communication between someone on board the ship and the U-boats. I explained how I found it, and offered to produce you chaps as witnesses, but the Major was awfully decent about it. He means to find the owner, and if necessary is going to interrogate every man who went into that stokehold. Hallo, they've rounded up our immediate predecessors already."

As he spoke twenty Afrikanders, headed by the gigantic Jan van Eindhovengen, marched along the mess deck under escort.

"By Golly!" exclaimed Fortescue. "That's the man!"

"Who--the boxer?" enquired Selwyn.

"No, the last but one. Our pal in the Muizenberg train."

"So it is," agreed Malcolm. "Don't let him twig us."

The Diggers waited until the batch of suspects vanished.

"Ought we to report what we know concerning that chap?" asked Malcolm.

"And possibly get choked off if we do," objected Fortescue. "Let's wait and see what happens. If the fellow is bowled out, there's no need for us to butt in. He'll face a firing-party without our assistance. Taken for granted that he is a spy, what was his object in bamboozling us?"

"Give it up," replied Selwyn. "Getting three men to miss their proper transport wouldn't affect the progress of the war sufficiently to warrant his action."

"We told him a lot--more than we ought to have done," remarked Malcolm. "Of course we didn't know."

"And then I suppose," added Fortescue, "he thought we might report the matter, and so he switched us off on a branch line, so to speak. We'll let it go at that, but it wouldn't be a bad move to wait outside the orderly-room after those fellows have gone in and play the eavesdropper. If our Muizenberg pal is marched off under escort, then we needn't trouble further in the matter. If he gets off, then we'll tackle him and ask him for an explanation."

Acting upon this suggestion, the three chums made their way along the alley-way until they came to the orderly-room door. The Afrikanders were already within. Outside stood a "Tommy" sergeant as part of the escort.

"Want to go through the hoop again, you chaps?" enquired the N.C.O., with a grin.

"Not much--only curious," replied Fortescue, who had met the non-com. before on several occasions. "We'll *impshie*--hook it, you know--when they clear the court."

Listening, the three chums could hear the stern tones of the Major and the bass voice of the interpreter, for several of the South Africans spoke nothing but Taal--a dialect comprised largely of Dutch, with a sprinkling of Zulu and Kaffir words.

"That's our man," whispered Malcolm.

"The blighter's yapping in Dutch," announced Fortescue, "and he can speak English perfectly. Hallo!"

A torrent of words, plainly indicating indignant denials, wafted through the closed door. Several of the Afrikanders were speaking at once. A revolver-shot rang out, a sharp exclamation of pain, and then a tremendous scuffling.

"Come on, boys!" ordered the Sergeant, addressing the men of the escort waiting without.

The door was thrown open. The Tommies rushed in, while at their heels came Fortescue, Selwyn, and Carr. Their resolution to remain passive and unseen witnesses had vanished into thin air.

Within all was confusion. The Major lay with his head and shoulders resting upon the table. Two of the other officers were endeavouring to stanch the blood that flowed from his forehead. In one corner of the room a crowd of Afrikanders swayed in a compact mass, as if eager to wreak their vengeance on someone, while held like a rat in the jaws of a terrier was the man from Muizenberg, his captor being Jan van Eindhovengen.

"Give him to us, Jan!" shouted a dozen angry voices. "We know what to do with the rogue."

With difficulty the furious Afrikanders were calmed. The spy, his features pale with terror, was removed under a strong guard, while the wounded officer was carried to the sick quarters.

It was not until the afternoon that Oom Jan told Fortescue of what had occurred. Already strange rumours of varying degrees of accuracy had floated round the ship, but it was unanimously agreed that van Eindhovengen was the hero of the hour.

The spy had contrived to join the draft at Cape Town under the name of Pieter Waas. The real Pieter Waas happened to be a stranger to the rest of the Afrikanders, and, induced to desert by spy, had considerately transferred his name to his doubtful benefactor.

At the court of enquiry the pseudo Waas denied all knowledge of the pocket-book, although van Eindhovengen had seen the man with it in his possession without knowing its sinister import. It was not until it was explained to the Afrikanders that the ownerless book was a means by which they might be sent to the bottom of the sea by a hostile submarine that Oom Jan "rounded" on the spy. At first the fellow strenuously contradicted van Eindhovengen's accusation, but the big Afrikander would not be gainsaid. Suddenly the suspect whipped out a small automatic pistol. Whether it was with the intention of taking his own life or that of his accuser he himself only

knew.

Like a flash van Eindhovengen's hand shot out. His powerful fingers gripped the spy's wrist as in a vice. As the pistol dropped from the fellow's limp hand the weapon went off, a bullet grazing the head of the president of the court of enquiry, and rendering him insensible.

"And now," concluded Oom Jan, "the spy is under lock and key. He is a slim *smous* = rascal (Cape Dutch), but, Allemachte, it is all over with him. Presently, after he has set foot on dry land, a dozen bullets will bid him *Hambla gachle*. It is a too fitting end to a spy."

"But he hasn't been tried and sentenced yet," remarked Fortescue.

The Afrikander's face fell.

"Surely he is guilty," he said. "Why then waste time over him?"

"It is the Englishman's proud boast that every prisoner shall be given a fair trial," explained Fortescue. "It will be general court martial, no doubt. Thank goodness we New Zealanders are not mixed up in the business. By the by, Malcolm, have you any idea when we arrive at Plymouth? It seems to me that we've been dodging across the Atlantic half a dozen times."

"This is the twenty-eighth day of the voyage," observed Malcolm. "I heard that when the *Pomfret Castle* was on the ordinary mail service she did the trip in fourteen as regular as clockwork."

"There's one thing, the boys will be snugly in camp by this time and waiting for us," added Selwyn. "We've missed the rotten 'shaking down' process. I wonder what sort of a show Codford is like?"

"You'll find out in due course," replied Fortescue grimly. "I've had some; enough of Salisbury Plain for me, thank you."

"We're not there yet," Malcolm reminded him.

Fortescue looked fixedly at the expanse of sea over which the twilight was spreading. Already the grey outline of the convoying cruiser was blending into invisibility against the gathering mantle of night.

"'That's so," he agreed solemnly.

CHAPTER XII

Running the Gauntlet

"Land in sight!"

The welcome announcement resulted in a rush on deck on the part of the motley throng of Anzacs, South Africans, English troops, and Maoris. Some men eager for a glimpse of the country of their birth, which they had not seen for many a long-drawn month of campaigning in the inhospitable waste of Mesopotamia; others for the first sight of the Mother Country; others out of mere curiosity; while the Maoris peered through the dim light to feast upon the prospects of speedily setting foot on dry land.

It was not much to look at, judged from a strictly optical point of view. Merely a slender lighthouse, rearing itself itself out of the sea, while miles beyond it, and just visible against the pale rosy tints of dawn, was a line of dark-grey cliffs, backed by higher ground that was totally destitute of trees.

The *Pomfret Castle* and the rest of the convoy had slowed down in the vicinity of the Wolf Rock Lighthouse. The attendant cruiser was circling round at top speed, as if to shepherd her flock before entrusting them to the care of another. Against the line of cliffs could be discerned a haze of smoke, Out of which appeared a number of indistinct dots that quickly resolved themselves into a flotilla of destroyers.

In double-column line ahead the greyhounds of the sea tore to meet the approaching troopships, then, at a signal from the senior officer, the destroyers "broke line", tearing hither and thither seemingly without order or reason--zigzagging, pirouetting, and crossing each others' bows as if participating in an intricate maritime dance.

"Putting the wind up any blessed U-boat that might be wanting to butt in," exclaimed Kennedy. "Hallo! There's our cruiser off. She's done with us."

The transports dipped ensigns; the cruiser returned the compliment in a similar manner as she swung round and retraced her course. Her mission accomplished, she set off on particular service to escort another convoy from somewhere to somewhere else, while the destroyers closed round the *Pomfret Castle* and her consorts as if to welcome them into port.

For the most part the men ignored the call to breakfast. They had a different feast on hand--to feast their eyes upon the varying outlines of the rugged Cornish coast; for as the distance decreased the monotonous aspect gave place to one of intense interest.

"There's Rame Head," exclaimed a delighted Tommy. "Many a time I've stood on top of it. I was born an' bred at Cawsand," he added, gratuitously. "Just round the corner you'll see Plymouth."

"I've seen it three times before," remarked another--the inevitable grouser of the company; "and, every time it's been raining cats and dogs. Proper wet 'ole, I calls it."

"Let it, and a jolly good job too," rejoined the first speaker. "After Mesopotamia you won't hear men grumbling about rain--not 'arf. It can rain every day in the year, an' good luck to it."

"Just you wait till you gets ter France," chipped in another. "Up to yer neck in mud an' slush. You'll jolly soon wish yourself grilling again."

"You've turned your back on Mesopotamia, boys," exclaimed the licensed jester of the company. "Now you've the Mess-up-at-homia, an' so make the best of it. Blimy, wot's this comin'; a bloomin' Zeppelin!"

"Where?" exclaimed a dozen voices.

Following the direction of the speaker's outstretched hand Malcolm had his first view of an airship. It was not a large craft as airships go. Underneath its silver-grey envelope hung a small car like the fuselage of an aeroplane. As it approached, the whirring circle of a single, two-bladed propeller could be discerned. It was a "Blimp", or dirigible observation balloon.

The airship was flying rapidly "down wind" at an altitude of about two hundred feet. As it passed almost overhead the fuselage appeared to scrape the *Pomfret Castle's* main truck by inches. Presently the Blimp swung round and faced the wind, keeping on a course slightly diverging from that of the convoy. Plugging away dead in the eye of the wind its progress was not more than twenty miles an hour "over the ground", which in reality was a portion of the English Channel.

Suddenly the *Pomfret Castle* starboarded helm and broke out of line. The alteration of course had the effect of causing the huge vessel to list outwards. As she did so a long trail of foam almost parallel to the starboard side of the ship shot ahead until it was lost to sight in the distance.

For some moments not a single man moved. Attention had been shifted from the Blimp to the milk-white track in the water--the wake of the torpedo.

Only by prompt use of her helm had the *Pomfret Castle* escaped destruction. Even in home waters she had to run the gauntlet, despite the encircling line of destroyers.

With the utmost audacity a U-boat had lain submerged across the track of the convoy, trusting to be able to launch her bolt and disappear before even the swift destroyers could take her bearings, and close upon the spot where the tips of her periscopes had appeared when the torpedo had been discharged.

She had seen the escorting vessels and had taken the risk, but she had reckoned without the far-seeing eyes of the Blimp.

Already the airship had spotted a dark elongated shape beneath the waves. Invisible when viewed at a narrow angle to the surface, the submarine stood out clearly against the grey waste of waters when seen from above.

Something, glittering in the dull light, shot from beneath the fuselage of the alert Blimp. With a mighty splash the missile struck the surface of the sea and disappeared.

For five long-drawn seconds nothing appeared to happen. Unseen by the watchers on the troop-ship, a deadly aerial torpedo was worming its way through the water until it reached a depth of sixty feet.

Before the spray cast up by the impact of the missile had subsided, another and far greater column of water leapt a hundred feet or more into the air. A cloud of smoke hid the Blimp from view, while, out of the breaking spout of upheaved water, appeared a solid, dark-grey substance--the after part of a U-boat!

For a brief instant the wreckage was revealed to view. Even the horizontal and vertical rudders and the twin propellers were visible. Then, as if reluctant to sink into obscurity, the strafed U-boat disappeared from mortal ken for all time.

No need for the destroyers to tear at full speed across the ever-widening circle of oil; no need for explosive grapnels to trail over the downward path of the vertically-descending pirate craft. The diabolical *Spurlos versenkt* policy had recoiled with a vengeance upon yet another of the Kaiser's *Unterseebooten*.

A hoarse roar of cheering broke from the throats of the men. Tommies, Anzacs, South Africans, and Maoris vied with each other as to who could produce the greatest and most prolonged volume Of sound. Other vessels of the convoy took up the hearty "Hip, hip, hurrah!" until the watchers on the distant Cornish cliffs must have heard the strenuous demonstrations of exultation.

Meanwhile the destroyers, their crews grimly silent, merely "carried on". The men whose lives they were guarding might well let themselves go, but these units of the great silent navy meant business. Time for shouting when the German navy ceased to exist as a fighting force--and "The Day" was yet to come.

The Blimp, also scorning to display any indications of its triumphant success, turned and flew serenely over the convoy, outwardly indifferent to the work of destruction it had accomplished. Not until the last of the convoy passed the western end of the breakwater, and gained the security of Plymouth Sound, did the modern counterpart of the

> "Little cherub that sits up aloft,
> To keep guard o'er the life of poor Jack"

relinquish its task. Then, amid a farewell outburst of cheering, the Blimp flew eastwards, to disappear from view behind the lofty Staddon Heights.

CHAPTER XIII

News of Peter

Malcolm's first impressions on landing in Old England were far from agreeable. A drizzling rain was falling. It was yet early, and beyond a few dock hands Millbay Pier was deserted. No crowds of enthusiastic spectators waited to welcome the men who had made a perilous voyage of thousands of miles to take part in the fight for freedom. In almost complete silence the securing-ropes were made fast and the gangways run out by apathetic workmen, while with the utmost dispatch the disembarkation of men and stores began.

Wearing grey Balaclava helmets instead of their smart uniform hats, and without their accoutrements, the three New Zealanders found themselves drawn up in the rear of their Australian comrades.

"Who are these men?" enquired an embarkation Officer of the Anzac major who accompanied him.

"Three New Zealanders who missed their transport at Cape Town, sir," replied the latter.

"What regiment?"

The Australian turned to Fortescue and repeated the question.

The embarkation officer consulted a document.

"Thirty-somethingth reinforcements, eh? Dash it all, you men! You've arrived before they have. I don't know what to do with them, Major."

He spoke wearily. Dealing with absentees and men who had "got adrift" had occupied a good part of his time during the last two years. It was getting decidedly monotonous.

"Let them entrain with our boys, sir," suggested the kindly Anzac major. "I'll be responsible for them as far as Salisbury. They're for Codford, I suppose?"

"Very well," acceded the embarkation officer, glad to find an easy solution to the difficulty. "You are the senior non-com., I suppose," he asked, addressing Fortescue. "Here, take this, and when you arrive in camp report yourselves."

He handed Fortescue a yellow paper, and hurried off to find shelter from the downpour. The entrainment was a slow process. The men were hungry. They wished in vain for the breakfast that the majority had forgone when the *Pomfret Castle* sighted land. There were rumours that tea and coffee were to be served out at a way-side station, but promises, Fortescue observed, do not fill an empty stomach.

In vain Malcolm looked for Te Paheka. Already the Maori contingent had been spirited away--to what immediate destination he knew not.

Handcuffed and under a strong escort, the spy arrested under the name of Pieter Waas was hurried along the slippery quay--the bent, dejected figure of a man who, although uncondemned, knows that his life is forfeit. Who and what he was yet remained to be proved, unless, like many a nameless spy, he went to his death preferring that the mystery that surrounded his life should accompany him to the Great Beyond.

Packed like sardines in a tin, the Anzacs filled the long train to overflowing. Again under cover, their mercurial spirits rose, and when at length the rain ceased, and the train rumbled betwixt the red-earthed, verdant coombes of Devon, bathed in brilliant sunshine, the Anzacs unanimously voted that there were worse places on earth than the Old Country.

It was late in the afternoon when Malcolm and his two chums alighted at Codford station, and, making their way by a roundabout route along the main street of the village, where old-time cottages and hideous wooden shanties stood cheek by jowl, arrived at the vast array of tin huts that comprised the camp.

Things turned out better than either of the three chums had expected. They were reprimanded, but for the time being they were not deprived of their stripes. Until the arrival of the Thirty-somethingth reinforcements they were given light duties and a generous amount of leisure time.

"Malcolm Carr, by all that's blue and pink!"

This was the greeting hurled at Malcolm a few hours after his arrival in camp. At that time there were comparatively few troops at Codford. Heavy drafts had just been sent to Sling Camp, preparatory to proceeding to France, while the expected reinforcements had not yet put in an appearance. Yet one of the first men young Carr met that evening was a Christchurch acquaintance who lived but a few doors away from Malcolm's parents.

"By Jove, this is great, Tommy!" exclaimed Malcolm. "Never thought I'd run against you here. You know Selwyn, of course? This is Fortescue, one of the boys--and one of the best. An old Christchurch chum, Tommy Travers."

"When did you blow in?" enquired Travers, as the four made their way along a narrow plank gangway between the lines of huts--the only means of preventing men sinking above their ankles in mud.

"Arrived at Plymouth this morning," replied Malcolm. "And you? Been across yet?"

Travers touched his coat-sleeve, on which was a faded gold stripe.

"Yes," he answered; "five months of it. I got this buckshie in that scrap in Delville Wood, when our brigade captured Flers. Shrap," he added laconically. "It was hell let loose, and our boys copped it. Six weeks in hospital, and then I came here. Managed to get dropped when the last draft went to Sling, so I suppose I'll be off with the next crush. Any news Christchurch way?"

"Did you hear that my brother Peter is wounded and missing?" asked Malcolm, after a flow of conversation on strictly personal subjects.

"Yes," replied Travers. "He was sergeant of my platoon. I think I was one of the last of our chaps to see him. It was like this: our battalion cleared the southern portion of Delville Wood in grand style. We fairly put the wind up Fritz. Bombs and bayonets all the time. We had a lot of casualties, though. When we rushed our objective your brother Peter was senior non-com. There were two subalterns left, but they weren't fit for much. Both hit, but too plucky to chuck their hands in. Well, we began digging ourselves in on the edge of the wood when the Boches started to pump in high-explosive, shrap, and gas shells. There was precious little left of the wood. Not a leaf to be seen, and at most a crowd of charred tree-trunks, many of 'em still blazing."

"Why Fritz treated us to an extra special dose goodness only knows. The battalion lying on our right barely copped it at all, and the Tommy regiment on our left came off lightly until the Huns had finished with us. We had little or no cover. The ground was chock-full of big roots, and we hadn't time to remove them. The trees were flying in big and little chunks all over the show, and all the cover we could get were a few shell-holes."

"Although it was night, the place was lit up as brightly as anything; a continuous slap-up of bursting shells and streams of liquid fire. I heard afterwards that our battalion was given orders to fall back and adjust the line, but certain it was that we never had any commands to retire."

"Then I got it properly. Shrap in the left arm and both legs. Went down like a felled ox, and lay there until my puttees--which I started to unroll but didn't finish--began smouldering. Things were looking and feeling bit warmer than usual when your brother nipped up. Remember, none of the boys were firing. There was nothing to let rip at. The Boche guns simply let us have it, and their counter-attack hadn't developed. If they were about to counter-attack we couldn't see them. The smoke was too thick for that, although, as I said before, we could see everything within twenty yards or so. Our only indication of the Huns trying to rush us was when their guns lifted

and put up a barrage behind us.".

"Peter never said a word. For one thing, there was such a terrific din going on that you'd have had to shout close to a fellow's ear to make him understand; for another, your brother had got it in the jaw. Nothing much, I should say, as buckshies go nowadays, but still it was enough to look unpleasant."

"He finished unwinding my puttees and threw them away. I can smell them now, smouldering under my nose. Then he began hauling me towards a shell-hole, when down he went, all of a heap, shot through the ankle."

"After a bit he raised himself and pointed towards the crater we were making for, and we both started to crawl for it. By Jingo, didn't that journey give me gee-up while it lasted! Then, just as we were close to the shell-hole, a 'crump' burst somewhere close, and I remembered nothing more until I found myself in the advance dressing-station. Two men of C Company, Pat O'Connor and Sandy Anderson--both from Taranaki--brought me in, I was told afterwards, and I met them while I was in hospital at Brockenhurst. They were certain they never saw Sergeant Peter Carr."

"The Germans drove us in with their counter-attack, didn't they?" asked Fortescue.

"Aye, but we ousted them next morning," replied Travers, "and out of Flers as well. That's when Pat O'Connor copped it; but he swears that none of our fellows were left alive during the retirement in the woods."

"Then you think that Peter was killed?" asked Malcolm.

Travers squared his shoulders.

"Speaking as man to man," he replied, "I don't think there can be the faintest doubt about it. And Peter Carr was a downright good sort. . . . How about it, you fellows? Good for a game of a 'hundred up'?"

CHAPTER XIV

The Anzacs' Hoax

For the next few weeks events moved rapidly. With the belated arrival of the Thirty-somethingth reinforcement, Malcolm Carr and Dick Selwyn found themselves reverted to the ranks. Fortescue, by virtue of having seen active service, still retained his stripes. Rumours of something great in the nature of a stunt about to take place gained credence from the fact that the men were put through their final training as quickly as possible. The "Diggers" accepted the "speeding up" with alacrity. They realized that the sooner they completed their arduous "field exercises" the sooner they would attain their ambition to "put it across Fritz".

The spring gave place to early summer, a spell of beautifully fine weather, so much so that the mud of Salisbury Plain vanished, and the green grass of the rolling downs turned russet for lack of rain. Yet, in spite of the heat, bayonet practice, bombing instruction, and long route marches kept the men lean, active, and in the very pink of condition.

"*Ehoa!* It's Sling."

The announcement ran like wildfire along the line of huts. It meant that the transfer of the brigade to Sling Camp was another milestone in the long trek to the Front.

It is futile to attempt to find Sling on the pre-war maps of Salisbury Plain. A large town of mushroom growth, it had been one of the places inseparably associated with New Zealand's part in the Great War. To the man who had yet to undergo his baptism of fire, Sling meant proficiency for the firing-line. To the wounded New Zealander recovering from wounds, being ordered to Sling meant that he was considered fit to "I get one back on Fritz". In brief, Sling Camp was a piece of New Zealand soil planted in England, where the pick of the manhood of the Southern Dominion forgathered for the final polishing touches of the noble profession of arms.

Before June was far advanced word went round that the brigade was to cross the Channel and go into camp at "Etaps"--as Étaples is almost uniformly designated by the khaki lads. Again rumour spoke truthfully, for at four o'clock the next afternoon the "Diggers" were ordered to entrain for Southampton.

"Wonder if there's any chance of looking round Southampton?" asked Selwyn. "I've a second cousin there."

Fortescue smiled grimly.

"No, you don't, my dinky lad," he replied. "After Muizenberg we steer clear of your relations. As a matter of fact, they'll push us straight on board a transport, and she'll sail as soon as it gets dark."

The train, upon arrival at the place of embarkation, ran straight into the docks, and brought up close to one of the many transports that were berthed there with banked fires ready to sail at any hour of the day or night.

In full marching order the men trooped up the gangways, divested themselves of their packs, and made themselves as comfortable as possible for their twelve or fourteen hours' voyage. Within the space of two hours twelve hundred troops, both Australians and New Zealanders, were embarked.

"Good-bye, Blighty!" shouted an Anzac. "Shan't see you again for many a long day."

"Stow your jaw and get your life-belt," ordered a non-com. "You'll be in the soup if the platoon commander finds you without it."

The wire hawsers were cast off. A couple of tugs began straining at their huge charge, and slowly the transport drew away from the side of the dock. Then, gathering speed, she slipped down the land-locked expanse of Southampton Water, through the fort-guarded Spithead, and gained the English Channel.

"We'll be airing our French by this time tomorrow," declared Malcolm.

"For the preservation of the Entente we would be wise to keep our mouths shut," said Selwyn. "From what I remember, Malcolm, you were last but one in French at the Coll."

"And you?"

"Absolutely the last," admitted Selwyn.

"Talking of French," began Fortescue, "reminds me of something that happened to me at Plug Street. Hallo, what's the move now?"

Fortescue's narrative, or rather attempted narrative, of what occurred at Plug Street was somewhat remarkable. On three previous occasions Malcolm and Selwyn had heard him commencing the tale, and each time something had occurred to "switch him off."

It was no ordinary interruption on this occasion. The transport had altered helm and was turning to starboard, with her bows pointing towards the Foreland end of The Wight. Still porting helm, she swung round until she reversed her former direction, then, standing on her course, began to make for Spithead once more.

"What's up now?" was the enquiry on the lips of hundreds of men.

"One of the brass hats' has dropped his toothbrush overboard and we're going back to look for it," declared a South Australian. "Corker, my boy, you were too sharp on your bead when you chortled, 'Good-bye, Blighty!'"

Presently it transpired that the transport had received a wireless message ordering her to return to Southampton, as four German submarines had been reported lying in wait at a distance of ten Miles south of the Nab Lightship. Since the night was pitch dark, the escorting ships could not carry out their protective duties with the same degree of efficiency as usual. In the circumstances prudence directed the temporary abandonment of the cross-channel voyage.

It was one o'clock in the morning when the transport berthed in the Empress Dock. Orders were given for the troops to disembark and proceed to the large rest camp on the outskirts of Southampton. Disappointed though they were, the men maintained their cheerfulness, and before the long column was clear of the dock gates they were cheering, laughing, and shouting frantically, despite all attempts on the part of their officers to enforce silence.

Up the long High Street the khaki-clad troops marched boisterously. The inhabitants, roused from their sleep by the unusual clamour, flocked to the windows. Many a time had they seen troops fully equipped proceeding *towards* the docks; never since the outbreak of hostilities had they seen soldiers in heavy marching order tramping in column of fours away from the place of embarkation.

"What's up?" was the oft-repeated enquiry from the invisible heights of many a darkened window in the High Street.

"Haven't you heard?" shouted a bull-voiced Anzac. "Peace is declared, and we're the first troops home from the Front."

At the prospect of a gigantic hoax others took up the mendacious parable, and long before the men reached their destination for the night the startling news had spread far and wide. It was not until the arrival of the morning papers that the good folk of Southampton realized that they had been "properly had".

The enforced detention at Southampton, was, however, not without certain compensations. The men were allowed out of camp during the following afternoon, a boon they thoroughly appreciated.

Selwyn had seized upon the opportunity to visit his relations, but when fie again invited Malcolm and Fortescue to accompany him they begged to be excused, and wandered round the town instead.

Old Southampton was both a surprise and a revelation to Malcolm Carr. Coming from a country where a fifty-year-old building is considered to be old, the sight of the fourteenth-century walls and fortified gates filled him with enthusiasm, while Fortescue was able to explain the nature of the various architectural features.

Wandering down a narrow and far from clean street they came face to face with an ancient stone building flung athwart the road. On the side of the archway a notice board announced it to be the old Westgate, through which the armies of Edward III and Henry V marched to embark upon the expedition that ended respectively in the victories of Crécy and Agincourt.

"One can imagine the throng of mailed knights leathern-jerkined archers pouring under the double portcullis," remarked Fortescue. "Those armies left this place as enemies of France; to-day ours also leave Southampton, but with a different purpose, to rid French soil of the Hun and all his works."

"And it shows," added Malcolm, "in another way how times change. Unless I'm mistaken, Henry V's army consisted of thirty thousand troops--not a third of the number of men raised in New Zealand alone."

"To carry the comparison still further," continued his companion, "our quota is roughly a fiftieth of the fighting forces of the Empire. For every man who levelled lance or drew bow at Agincourt against the French, one hundred and fifty are to-day fighting side by side with their former enemies. Those chaps--'island carrions, desperate of their bones', as Will Shakespeare aptly puts it--are our ancestors, Malcolm, whether we are New Zealanders, Australians, or Canadians, and although we are up against a big thing I haven't the faintest doubt that blood will tell, as it did in those days. But, by Jove, it's close on four o'clock. We'll have to get back as sharp as we can, or we may have the Muizenberg business all over again."

That evening the troops re-embarked. By this time the lurking U-boats had been dealt with in a most effective way. Their shattered hulls lay on the bed of the English Channel. The route was now clear, and the transport's voyage was practically devoid of incident.

Without the loss of a single man, thanks to the mysterious yet effective means of protection afforded by the British navy, the Thirty-somethingth reinforcement had completed yet another stage of their Odyssey. At last they were upon the soil of La Belle France, and within sound of the hostile guns.

CHAPTER XV

The Eve of Messines

"Now then, you chaps, if you aren't hungry your pals are. Look slippy and get those rations up. You'll tumble across the wagons at La Tuille Farm."

"Right oh, Sergeant!" responded a youthful corporal. "Come along, chapses! Best foot forward!"

The Sergeant, having seen that a start was about to be made, backed out of the dug-out, dropped the tapestried curtain--it was a ragged and soiled ground-sheet--over the entrance, and disappeared along the narrow trench.

Crowded into the small dug-out were seven New Zealand riflemen. Three of them are old acquaintances: Carr, Selwyn, and Macready, all looking lean, dirty, and unkempt, while their uniforms were caked in dried mud and frayed with hard usage. The final touches at Staples were a thing of the past. For four long days the men had been in the first-line trenches facing the formidable Messines Ridge.

The dug-out was comparatively dry. For one thing, the weather had been propitious, and the loathsome mud had almost disappeared. The roof was composed of untrimmed tree trunks on which were piled sand-bags sufficiently thick to stop shells of medium calibre. The walls were likewise timbered, while along three sides ran a narrow shelf on which were bundles of straw to serve as beds. Hanging from nails driven into the rough-and-ready wainscot were the men's haversacks and other equipment, while ranged alongside the door were their rifles. Those were the only objects upon which any great care had been bestowed. In spite of rain, mud,

discolouring fumes of shells, hard usage, and a dozen other difficulties, the rifles were kept well-oiled and in perfect condition.

In the centre of the dug-out stood a cylindrical piece of perforated iron in which a fire was burning dully. The fumes filled the confined space to such an extent that it was difficult for any of the occupants to distinguish their companions' features, but that was a detail to be endured with equanimity in the trenches. As it was the month of June, and warm, the men were lucky to be able to have a fire, considering the scarcity of fuel and the difficulty of conveying wood and charcoal up to the firing-line.

During the day Fritz had been actively engaged in "watering" the line with high-explosive shells. Not only did the advance and support trenches get it hot, but for miles behind the lines hostile shells were dropping promiscuously, on the chance of blowing up one or more of the numerous dumps and otherwise hampering the supply columns. But as night fell the "strafe" became desultory, and under cover of darkness the fatigue and foraging parties were able to set to work with a reasonable chance of getting through without being "done in".

"Come along, boys," exclaimed the young corporal--Billy Preston from Timaru--a veteran of Egypt and Gallipoli notwithstanding the fact that he was within a month of his twenty-first birthday. "The sooner we get the job done the better."

The men were dog-tired. A couple of hostile raids had kept them on the qui vive the previous night, while throughout the day they had had but few opportunities for sleep. And now, just as they were preparing to snatch a few hours' rest, they had been told off to bring up the rations.

"We've got to assemble at two, haven't we?" enquired Rifleman Joliffe--commonly known as Grouser Joliffe. "They say our chaps are to attempt to take Messines Ridge. Attempt, I say, mind you, and our guns haven't hardly touched the job. There's uncut wire, you can see that for Yourselves, and machine-guns every yard of the way. 'Struth! I'm for swinging the lead. You don't catch me hurrying when the whistle goes."

His remarks fell on unheeding ears. The men were used to Grouser Joliffe's complaints by this time, They knew that when the critical moment arrived Joliffe would be amongst the first to mount the fire-step and clamber over the parapet. Yet there were grounds for belief in what the rifleman had said. The formidable ridge was to be attempted. The British knew it; the Huns knew it. With its labyrinths of wire and nests of skilfully-hidden machine-guns Messines Ridge was far more difficult to assault than in the earlier stages of the war, when French won and lost the important position.

Meanwhile Malcolm had rolled out of his narrow uncomfortable perch and was stretching his cramped limbs. Selwyn was fumbling with his puttees.

"Hang it," he exclaimed. "A rat has been gnawing at them. Anyone got a piece of string?"

The deficiency remedied, and the scanty toilet operations performed (the inhabitants of the dug-out had turned in "all standing", even to their boots), the men put on their shrapnel helmets, seized their rifles, and sallied forth into the night.

For some moments Malcolm could see nothing. The transition from the smoky, ill-lighted dug-out to the darkness of the open air confused his sight. All he could do was to keep in touch with the man preceding him until he grew accustomed to the change of venue.

Fresh air--is there such a thing anywhere within miles of No Man's Land? Malcolm doubted it. The atmosphere reeked of numerous and distinct odours. Traces of poison gas lurked in the traverses, pungent fumes from bursting shells wafted over parapet and parados, while the report, passed on from various successive occupants of this section of the line, that a dozen dead Huns had been buried under the floor of the support trench--the old first-line trench of a Prussian regiment--seemed to find definite confirmation.

A low whine and a terrific *wump* as a high-explosive shell arrived and burst fifty yards in the rear of the trench showed that Fritz was still strafing. A fortnight previously Malcolm's heart would have been in his boots. Now he scarcely heeded the messenger of death and destruction, although showers of dust and calcined wood flew over the parados amongst the ration party. Familiarity with missiles of that description had quickly bred contempt.

At frequent intervals lurid star-shells lit up the sky. The Huns were getting decidedly jumpy of late. Expecting a strong attack, yet not knowing the actual time, they were massing their men on the ridge under the protection of their artillery. Away to the left machine-guns were delivering a *staccato obbligato*.

"Our heavies are quiet to-night," remarked Selwyn, who was trudging along the duck-boards literally on Malcolm's heels. "Why to blazes don't they give Fritz half a dozen for every one he throws over? Hanged if I can make things out."

Malcolm pulled tip suddenly, to avoid charging into the back of the man immediately preceding him. Those behind bunched up and halted, while from the front of the single file came a very strong exclamation of pain and anger.

"What's wrong?" enquired the Corporal "Someone buckshied?"

"Yes," replied the voice of Grouser Joliffe. "Copped it in my blessed arm."

"Then foot it to the dressing-station," ordered Corporal Preston.

"Me?" enquired the rifleman. "Me? Not much. Wait till we've brought in the grub, and then--you don't catch me going over the top tonight."

For another hundred and fifty yards the party proceeded before the men turned into the zigzag communication-trench. This ran backwards for nearly a mile. In places it was eight feet deep, with sand-bags on either side in addition, In others, in marshy spots, where the high-explosive shells had spitefully disturbed the tranquillity of meandering streams and carried the sluggish water to overflow and swamp the surrounding ground, the "trench" was above normal ground-level, with a lofty and broad wall of sand-bags to right and left. Here and there the trench was roofed in, where, from experience, men had learnt it was unhealthy owing to being exposed to machine-gun fire. The Huns had got to know the weak spots. Aerial observation during daylight had enabled them to train machine-guns upon certain points of the communication-trenches. The lethal weapons would be ominously silent until after dark; then, on the off-chance of receiving a good bag, they would let loose a hail of bullets.

The men hastened across the more-exposed sections generally on their hands and knees. Even the bravest heaved a sigh of relief when the danger-spot was safely crossed. Going over the top they would unhesitatingly rush a machine-gun emplacement, but crawling away from the enemy, never knowing when a hail of bullets would sweep the ground, was enough to try the nerves of the case-hardened campaigner.

Presently the communication-trench ended, and the ration-party stumbled across a double line of narrow-gauge rails, part of the intricate system behind the lines. The track ran diagonally to the direction of the trench. To the left it led to and beyond the Army Service Corps dump at La Tuille. In the opposite direction it disappeared in the bowels of the earth, while a network of branch lines complicated the system. All through the hours of darkness, for several months past, heavily-laden trucks carefully covered with camouflaged canvas rumbled away from the lines to return empty ere dawn. Latterly the reverse conditions prevailed. Full trucks, each propelled singly by manual labour and with long intervals between the vehicles, proceeded towards the trenches but never reached them.

Subterranean works of an extensive nature were on the point of being completed. Every load of excavation was carefully taken miles to the rear in the dead of night, in order to baffle the enemy's aerial observers. So well guarded were these operations that even the men in the trenches were unaware of their nature, although many shrewd conjectures were not far out.

"Hallo, chums!" called out one of the ration-party as a truck hauled by three sappers rattled along. "How's your Channel Tunnel scheme getting along?"

"Fine!" was the reply. "Are you taking up any shares in the concern? There'll be a sharp rise very shortly, you know."

Another fifty yards and a word of command from Corporal Preston brought the squad to a halt. Out of the darkness came the sound of a hundred marching feet; then, almost invisible in their khaki uniform, a battalion of Australian infantry passed. It was significant that the men were in light marching order.

"By Gum! There's something up," whispered Selwyn. "Crowds of bombers and a whole crush of Lewis guns. Hallo! Here's more of them."

The progress of the ration-party was slow. A constant stream of infantry, swarms of transport of all conditions, clearly denoted that operations of more than minor importance were impending.

"There's enough to swamp our trenches," declared Malcolm. "Where on earth are they going to assemble?"

"That Sapper fellow evidently knew something when he talked about a sharp rise," said Selwyn. "And look! Tanks--crowds of them!"

Ambling along by the side of the tramway came a long line of armoured mastodons. The ground shook under the relentless pressure of the tractor bands, the air reeked with petrol fumes. Viewed in broad daylight the Tanks looked formidable enough; in the darkness, their weird outlines distorted by the misty atmosphere, they appeared like huge, grotesque monsters from another world.

"If I were Fritz I'd think twice before standing up to one of those brutes," soliloquized Malcolm. "Twenty-two of them. This will be a big stunt, and no mistake."

At length, after many delays, the ration-party arrived at the farm--or, rather, the pile of rubble that was known as La Tuille Farm before a nest of German machine-guns had attracted the notice of an observant battery-commander. That was three months ago. Already nettles and briers were

covering the blackened debris, as if Nature were doing her best to disguise the destructive handiwork of Man.

At the rear of the mound was the A.S.C. advanced depot. Piles of bully-beef tins, tiers of barrels and cases, small mountains of loaves covered with tarpaulins, were diminishing rapidly under the heavy calls made upon them by deputations from the men in the trenches. Although within range of hostile guns, the "dump" had so far escaped serious damage, To bring the supplies nearer the lines by mechanical transfer would be to court disaster, so every ounce of food had to be carried by squads detailed for that purpose. Every scrap of provisions the men in the trenches received had to be brought at the risk of life and limb. The task was a hazardous one, but there was never any lack of men willing and eager to run the risk of being strafed for the sake of feeding their comrades in the firing-line.

Corporal Preston went off to find the non-com. who had to issue the rations to his section, leaving his men to stand easy until he returned.

Someone touched Malcolm on the shoulder.

"Bear a hand, chum, and help me turn off the tap," said a husky voice.

Malcolm turned, and found that the speaker was Grouser Joliffe.

"Turn off what tap?" he asked.

"S--sh! Not so loud!" continued the rifleman. "It's my arm, I mean. Bleeding like anything. Help me off with my coat and clap a first-aid dressing on it, and I'll be all right. No dressing-station for me, I'll miss this stunt. Think we'll be back in time?" he added anxiously. "Corporal's a long time about it."

The two men withdrew a few paces, and Carr helped Joliffe to remove his coat. Already the sleeve was moist and clammy. On the left arm, just below the shoulder, was a nasty gash, caused by a fragment of a shell.

"It's good enough for Blighty, old lad!" exclaimed Malcolm.

"No dinkum Blighty for me!" expostulated Joliffe vehemently. "Never had a chance to fire a round yet--nor to use my blinkin' bay'net. But I mean to," he added. "If the boys go over the top without me there'll be trouble!" Malcolm bound up the wound, adjusting the bandages tightly. Although the dressing operation was a painful one, Grouser Joliffe never uttered a sound, although Malcolm could see beads of perspiration glistening on the rifleman's wrinkled forehead.

"How's that?" he asked.

Joliffe lifted his left arm with an effort.

"Feels a bit stiff," he admitted. "Maybe you've tied those bandages a bit too tight. Still, 'tisn't your fault. When we get back I'll have a few swings with my rifle and bay'net; then if the dressing wants altering you'll bear a hand?"

"Certainly!" said Malcolm, as he helped the man on with his coat.

"You'll be lucky if you don't fall out before we get back," he soliloquized.

Having drawn the stores, the ration-party set out on the return journey. Until they reached the commencement of the communication-trench they were able to make use of a couple of empty trucks which were lying on a siding close to the dump.

The vehicles each had four flanged wheels. The bodies were made of wood, originally painted grey, but little of the paint was left. Caked mud still stuck to the bottom of the trucks, but men in the firing-line cannot be fastidious. Loaves, bags of sugar, tea, and tins of bully beef were thrown in indiscriminately. The water-carriers lifted their heavy burdens--every drop of water had to be taken into the trenches, for, although there are springs and water-holes in abundance close to the firing-line, the risk of contamination had to be carefully guarded against--and the "homeward" trek began.

Beyond a few desultory shells the British artillery was practically inactive. Fritz had already been used to a furious bombardment as a preliminary of a "big stunt". For change, he was not being warned in this fashion, and, consequently, although expecting an attack within the next few days, the absence of a downright strafe put him off his guard. Nevertheless, the German guns on the spur of Messines Ridge, and miles beyond the heights, were persistently "watering" the ground behind the British lines.

Stumbling over the sleepers, the ration-party kept their groaning vehicles rumbling along the hastily-laid track. Grouser Joliffe was silent now, but Malcolm noticed that, although he used only one hand to help propel the truck, he was not lacking in energy.

"He won't last out at that rate," thought the lad; but when he offered to take the place of the wounded man, Joliffe turned upon him almost savagely.

"I'm all right," he persisted. "You keep your mouth shut and let me alone, or the other fellows will tumble to it. I was a blamed fool to holler when I copped it!"

A shrieking, tearing sound had the effect of making every man throw himself upon the ground. With a terrific crash an 8-inch shell exploded within fifty yards of the track, sending showers of dirt over the trucks and upon the prostrate party.

"All right there?" enquired the Corporal, as the men regained their feet. "Good! Carry on."

A short distance farther on the party came to an abrupt halt. The rails had vanished. Across the track was a crater twenty feet in diameter, from which acrid fumes were still slowly emanating from the pulverized earth. Already a fatigue-party was at work diverting the lines round the edge of the yawning pit. At all costs communication must be maintained, in order to leave no hitch in the arrangements for the morning's attack.

"You'll have to unload, mate," said the sergeant in charge of the Engineers. "Thank your lucky stars you weren't here twenty minutes ago. The Jocks copped it. They've carted fifteen of 'em off. There's been two of 'em already to-night, so look out for a third for luck."

The Diggers set to work to negotiate the obstacle. The idea of unloading did not appeal to them in the slightest. Leaving a man in charge of one truck--experience had taught them the necessity for that, where unguarded stores are anyone's property--all hands lifted the second vehicle clear of the rails.

The flanged wheels sank deeply into the soft ground, but by sheer hard work the truck was propelled round the crater to the spot where the lines resumed their-sphere of usefulness.

On the way back to the other track Malcolm glanced at the luminous face of his wristlet watch. It was nearly midnight.

Suddenly a blinding flash appeared to leap from the g round at the lad's feet. With a tremendous roar ringing in his ears, Malcolm found himself being hurtled through the air, and amidst a shower of debris he fell, a limp mass, into the smoking crater.

CHAPTER XVI

Konrad von Feldoffer

Slowly Malcolm raised himself into a sitting position. Breathless from the violent shock, blinded by the shower of dust, deafened by the terrific concussion, and with his sense of smell deadened to everything but the acrid fumes of the burst shell, he was at a loss to know what had happened.

"Am I still No. 99,109, Rifleman Carr, or have I gone west?" he asked himself aloud. Beyond a faint hollow rumble, he failed to detect the sound of his own voice. Almost afraid to make the experiment, he flexed his limbs. Nothing much wrong there, anyway.

He was beginning to see, despite the darkness and the nauseating, pungent fumes. He looked at his watch. The glass had vanished. The hands told him that it was three minutes past twelve. Unless the watch had stopped, only five or six minutes had elapsed since the catastrophe took place. He held the timepiece close to his ear, but could hear nothing. Anxiously he watched the big hand, until after a seemingly interminable interval he had conclusive evidence that the watch was still going.

Satisfied on that point, Malcolm took stock of his surroundings. The outlook was limited to the sloping walls of the crater and the vault of black night overhead. Except for a direct hit, he was in a place of comparative safety. Enough for to-night; he would stay where he was until dawn, and then----

"I'm all right," he thought, "but what of my chums?"

Filled with new-born resolution, Malcolm regained his feet and commenced to climb the steep, yielding side of the shell crater. At the third step the soft soil gave way, and he fell on his face. As he did so he heard a loud popping sound, as if his ear-drums were bursting, and the next instant he could hear the distant rumble of the guns and the voices of men in his proximity.

"I'm from Timaru, but I'm not timorous," shouted a voice. "Buck up, lads!"

"That's the Corporal," decided Malcolm. "At all events we haven't all been done in."

"Hallo there!" exclaimed Corporal Preston, as Malcolm gained the lip of the crater. "Who are you?"

"Carr."

"Shouldn't have recognized you," continued the non-com., for Malcolm was hatless, his coat was partly torn away, while his face was black with grime. "Got a buckshie? No--good!"

"Cheer-o, Malcolm!"

This from Selwyn, who was engaged in binding a first-aid dressing round the ribs of the prophetic sergeant of engineers. Four other men lay on the ground, killed outright. Two of them belonged to the ration-party, and the others were Tommies who had been engaged in relaying the uptorn line.

"No use waiting here," declared Preston. "Bring that other truck along."

The first truck lay on its side, the woodwork shattered, and the rations scattered in all directions. The two men on the side nearest the exploding shell had been instantly killed, but the others, sheltered to a certain extent by the vehicle, had got off at the expense of a severe shaking. Nevertheless, all available hands set to work to retrieve the rations, and to set the second truck upon the uninterrupted stretch of rails.

High-explosives were still bursting at varying distances as the ration-party continued their perilous way across the open. It was with feelings of relief that Malcolm heard the Corporal give the word to unload once more. The men had reached the beginning of the communication-trench.

From this point progress was slow. The ramification of trenches was chock-a-block with troops under arms--Australians and New Zealanders, making ready for the task of going over the top.

"You've been a precious long time about it," was the Sergeant's ungracious comment when the ration-party found their own section of trench. "Set to, lads; here's your grub."

Eagerly the men of the platoon threw themselves upon the dearly-bought food. So hungry were they that they made no complaint about the gritty state of the loaves. Perhaps it was as well that they asked no questions. After all, they were able to feed, and in a short space of time pannikins of tea were boiling over the biscuit-tin stoves in the dug-out.

Having fed, Malcolm turned in on his straw bed. He was not sleepy, only stiff, and since it wanted less than an hour to the time fixed for the New Zealanders to turn out under arms, he employed the interval in writing. The other occupants of the dug-out were similarly engaged, knowing that, confronted by the problem of an impending battle, there was a possibility that this might be their last opportunity to communicate with their relatives and friends.

"This is the rottenest part of the whole business," remarked Selwyn. "It gives a fellow time to think about going over, and the prospect isn't a cheerful one."

"You're right," assented a Digger who had taken part in four big engagements. "I quite understand; but mark my words, you'll forget you ever had cold feet the moment the whistle goes."

"It's that plaguey uncut wire and those machineguns I don't like," grumbled Joliffe. "What the brass-hats are thinking about to send the boys against that lot beats me. Why, back in Delville Wood----"

"Rifleman Carr here?" enquired a voice.

The ground-sheet hanging over the entrance to the dug-out was thrust aside, and Sergeant Fortescue, his head partly hidden in his steel helmet, appeared in view.

"Thought I'd drop in for a little chin-wagging," continued Fortescue. "I've some news that might interest you--and Selwyn too."

He pulled a creased and folded newspaper from his pocket, and, holding it up to the guttering light, pointed a shapely yet begrimed forefinger at a certain paragraph.

"Our Muizenberg pal has dodged the firing-party," continued Fortescue. "The blighter is a bit of a wily fox, and judging by his history he's badly wanted."

The paragraph was to the effect that Konrad von Feldoffer, a German convicted of espionage by a general court martial, had made a daring and successful attempt to escape. How, the report did not say, but the fact remained that a dangerous spy was still at large. It went on to say that Konrad von Feldoffer was known to be a German naval officer. Upon the outbreak of hostilities he was in Canada. After various attempts, successful and otherwise, to cripple the internal communications of the Dominion, he fled across the border to the United States. Too late he was traced to Australia, where he enlisted in a Victoria regiment, deserting when the Anzacs were under fire in Gallipoli. Shortly afterwards he turned up in India, joined a volunteer regiment under orders for Mesopotamia, and mysteriously vanished during the retreat from Ctesiphon. Proceeding to England, and posing as a mercantile marine officer, forged documents and an engaging manner procured him an introduction to Whitehall, with the result that he was given a commission in the Royal Naval Reserve and appointed to an armed merchant cruiser. One of his

first exploits in that capacity was to board a supposed Norwegian tramp, whose decks were piled high with timber. The vessel was allowed to proceed--a wolf in sheep's clothing, as a dozen or more Allied ships learned to their cost. Three weeks after commissioning, the merchant-cruiser was torpedoed and sunk in broad daylight by a U-boat. While the crew were taking to the boats, the submarine appeared on the surface. To the surprise of the British officer and crew, the hitherto unsuspected spy swam across to the hostile craft. Having picked him up, the U-boat submerged and disappeared from the scene. Too late it was discovered that the renegade was one and the same with the now notorious Konrad von Feldoffer. For several months nothing was heard of the spy's activities. As a matter of fact, the cosmopolitan rogue was particularly busy in South Africa, drifting thence into German South-West Africa, where he played a conspicuous part in a daring gun-running expedition under the nose of a British cruiser.

On the principle that it is advisable to desert a sinking ship in time, von Feldoffer drifted via Johannesburg to Cape Town, where his efforts to get into communication with German mine-layers operating off the Cape met with slight success. He was now anxious to return to the Fatherland. Accordingly he joined an Afrikander regiment of heavy artillery under the name of Pieter Waas, only to be apprehended on board the transport at Selwyn's instigation.

From the date of the paper--it was ten days old already--Malcolm gathered that the spy had been at liberty for nearly a month. Unless he were already recaptured it was pretty certain to conclude that von Feldoffer was clear of the British Isles. Would his experiences and narrow escape deter him from further enterprises or merely whet his appetite for other surprising adventures?

"One thing is pretty clear," declared Fortescue; "he won't risk showing up with the New Zealand boys. But, by Jove, it's close on two o'clock. Our fellows have to assemble at that hour. S'long, chums; I'll look out for you when we fall in. We may as well keep together in this stunt."

Fortescue was barely gone when the Platoon Sergeant entered the dug-out.

"Turn out, boys," he ordered. "Don't forget your gas-masks. Fritz will be letting loose a few gallons of stink, I reckon."

"What time do we go over, Sergeant?" enquired one of the riflemen.

"When the whistles go, sonny," replied the non-com., with a prodigious wink, "and not before."

"Can we go over after?" persisted the questioner.

The Sergeant eyed the man with mock severity.

"Take my tip and hop it sharp," he replied darkly. "The men who remain in the trenches fifteen seconds after the order to advance will be sorry for themselves. If there are any slight casualties, Corporal," he added, addressing Billy Preston, "turn 'em out. It won't be healthy for them to stop in the dug-out."

"Wonder why?" asked several of the men after the Sergeant had departed to give similar instructions to the occupants of the adjoining "desirable villas".

The question remained unanswered. In silence Malcolm and his comrades took their rifles and filed out into the already-crowded communication-trench.

"Let's find Fortescue," said Malcolm, addressing Selwyn in a low voice that hardly sounded like his own. "He'll be in the next bay or the one beyond."

"Lead on, then," prompted his chum.

Slinging their rifles, the twain made their way along the narrow, winding trench, stumbling over the recumbent forms of resting men and squeezing past the fully-accoutred troops packed into the narrow place.

"He was here a minute ago," declared one, after several fruitless enquiries had been made of the denizens of the two adjoining sectors. "Guess he's in the firing-trench. They're fixing the storming-ladders."

The firing-trench was comparatively clear. A dozen men were sitting on the fire-step, listlessly fumbling with their equipment in a vain effort to kill time before the supreme moment arrived to go out into the open. Others were placing in Position the rough wooden ladders by which the stormers would be able to scale the breast-high parapet, each ladder being carefully tested lest an insecure structure should impede the operation of going over the top. A few non-coms., detailed to lay off the distance-tapes, were comparing notes as coolly as if they were arranging for the regimental sports.

"Dashed if I can see him," whispered Malcolm. Although there was no need for speaking in an undertone, the scene of preparation instinctively Compelled him to lower his voice. "Seen anything of Sergeant Fortescue?" enquired Selwyn, addressing a rifleman who had just completed the fixing of one ladder and was thoroughly surveying his work.

The man turned sharply, gave a grunt of Surprise, and before the lad could realize what had happened, he swarmed up the ladder, paused irresolutely for a brief instant on the sandbagged parapet, and leapt into the darkness of No Man's Land. It was the spy, von Feldoffer.

CHAPTER XVII

Over the Top

"Wing him!" exclaimed Malcolm, unslinging his rifle, opening the cut-off, and springing upon the fire-step. Selwyn followed his example, and with levelled rifles the two chums awaited the first sound that might betray the progress of the spy.

"What are you fellows up to?" enquired a sergeant. "Don't you know the order? No individual firing until further orders."

"A man has just leapt over the parapet. He's a spy," said Malcolm.

"In a N.Z. rifleman's uniform," added Selwyn.

The Sergeant snorted incredulously.

"You've been seeing things," he remarked, but to satisfy his curiosity he raised his head above the parapet and peered into the gloom just then a star-shell burst overhead, its glare throwing every object on the immediate front into strong relief. The crater-pitted No Man's Land showed no sign If any movement. A score or more silent forms in field-grey uniform lay upon the ground--they had been there for the last three days. Not a trace Of a man in khaki was to be discovered.

"Come out of it, you chaps," continued the Sergeant. "You've made a mistake. Hop it!"

Malcolm and Selwyn obeyed promptly, and alighting upon the floor of the trench the latter cannoned into a passing soldier.

"Here, what the deuce do you think you're doing?" asked a well-known voice, despite its tone of plaintive asperity.

"By gum, Fortescue," ejaculated Selwyn, "this is lucky! We've been looking for you."

"And so your search is rewarded," rejoined Fortescue. "What's the idea?"

"We thought we'd hang together when the stunt comes off," explained Malcolm. "But there's another thing. Our Muizenburg pal was here a few minutes ago."

"What?" exclaimed Fortescue incredulously.

"Fact!" confirmed his informant. "We asked if you were anywhere about, and the fellow we addressed happened to be Konrad von What's-his-name. He recognized us, for he *impshied* like a wild colt. I was----"

"Sergeant Fortescue here?"

"Yes, sir," replied Fortescue, standing to attention and saluting as he recognized Captain Nicholson the S.I.N. of the old *Awarua* days and his lieutenancy a thing of the past.

"You've warned the men to nip over smartly?" asked the Captain.

"Yes, sir, I've seen to that. There is another matter on which I should like to speak."

Briefly Fortescue related the incident of the spy's flight as told him by his two comrades. Captain Nicholson's face lengthened.

"By Jove, this is a serious matter! What was the fellow doing?"

"Assisting in fixing ladders, sir."

"Then pass the word for the sergeant in charge of his party."

The non-com. was soon on the spot. He was the sergeant who had doubted the veracity of Malcolm's statement, and still had the same opinion on the matter as before.

But when the roll-call was taken one of the men was missing--Rifleman Scrooch.

"Know anything about him, Sergeant?" enquired Captain Nicholson.

"Not much, sir," was the reply, "except that he came in with the last draft from Etaps."

Captain Nicholson consulted his watch.

"He won't get far," he remarked grimly. "In another fifteen minutes----"

"Let's get back," suggested Fortescue as his officer disappeared. "The bombers will be falling in here in half a tick. We're in the first supports. Fritz is pretty sleepy to-night; I wonder if he knows what's in store for him."

The bomb-throwers, heavily laden with canvas bags filled with their death-dealing missiles, filed into the front trench, together with their supporting riflemen. A sharp, decisive order was passed from one officer to another, and the sinister clicking sound of bayonets being fixed to rifles rippled along the line of trenches as the very pick of New Zealand's manhood prepared for the coming ordeal.

Every man of the brigade knew what was to be expected of him. Messines Ridge was to be carried at the point of the bayonet, and the knowledge that the hostile wire was practically uncut and that the heights bristled with machine-guns was common property. Stupendous though the task was, not a man flinched, although several groused at the lack of consideration on the part of the Staff to send them against a prepared position in a practically-unbroken state; which showed that the troops were generally ignorant of the measures taken to safeguard them.

"Five minutes more!"

The officers bunched together to compare watches. They had done so a dozen times that evening, but perhaps it was excusable. Everything depended upon the operations being carried out with the precision of reliable clockwork. A second or two out either way would mean throwing away scores, perhaps hundreds, of valuable lives, for Fritz, although fairly quiet, was on the alert.

The British artillery was now almost silent. In previous stunts the position to be attacked was subjected to hours of terrific bombardment, but now hardly a shell fell upon the Hun defences. As for the protecting "barrage", the waiting troops looked for it in vain.

"Keep together!" whispered Malcolm tersely, as he nervously felt the tip of his quivering bayonet.

"Right, old man!" replied Selwyn in a low-pitched, unnatural voice.

It was useless to disguise the fact. Both had "the wind up" very badly. Malcolm could hear his heart thumping violently under his tunic; he was fully conscious of an empty, nauseating sensation in the pit of his stomach. He doubted whether he could stir up courage at the critical moment to leap over the parapet into the impending tornado of machine-gun bullets and pulverizing, bursting shells.

[Illustration: "WING HIM!" EXCLAIMED MALCOLM]

Others had done the same. Why not he? Vainly he tried to argue with himself that he was differently constituted from other men. He was too young to die. He had not drunk deeply of the joys of manhood. Why had he been such a fool as to underrate his age when he joined up? If----

The shrill blast of a whistle pierced the strained silence. With a loud yell the men leapt upon the scaling-ladders. His fears thrown to the wind, and the exhilarating sensation of unfettered action surging through his veins, Malcolm found himself scrambling over sand-bags and leaping into the pitted No Man's Land.

Even as he took the leap a seven-fold lurid flash burst from the dominating ridge of Messines. The ground trembled and swayed beneath his feet. Sand-bags and tons of earth subsided into the trenches so recently vacated by the troops, while a deafening, dumbfounding roar beat upon the lad's ears.

Almost mechanically Malcolm broke into a run. In front and on either side other men were surging onwards, their bayonet-tips describing erratic curves as they lurched over the still-trembling ground. Showers of dust beat upon their faces. Farther ahead masses of solid rock and earth were falling with a succession of thuds, while, where Messines Ridge had been, was a riven mound of disintegrated Soil, over which a dense cloud of black smoke rolled sullenly in the sultry night air.

One of the greatest engineering feats of the Great War--in fact, the greatest mining operation in the history of the world's battles--had been successfully carried out, a task compared with which the great mine of Beaumont Hamel paled into insignificance. With a concentrated roar, the concussion of which was distinctly felt over the greater part of south-eastern England, the

explosive contents of a series of mine-chambers were fired simultaneously.

In the fraction of a second the whole of Messines Ridge underwent a startling change. German dug-outs, trenches, machine-gun emplacements, and an unknown but vast number of troops went up in the terrific blast.

Months of diligent and stupendous labour had not been spent in vain. At one stroke the culminating moment had done more than hours of intensive bombardment. With little risk the British troops were able to sweep the position that for two years had defied their efforts.

Yet the New Zealanders were not to have a "walk over". From the heavy guns, well behind the pulverized ridge, shells were bursting in front and behind the trenches. Hostile machine-guns that had almost inexplicably escaped the general carnage were spitting venomously, while in the front German trenches, which were on comparatively level ground to the east of the Messines Ridge, a hot but erratic rifle-fire was directed upon the khaki-clad stormers.

On and on Malcolm ran, his face turned towards the two lines of sand-bags beyond which the Huns were still putting up a fight. Whether Fortescue and Selwyn were with him he knew not. The resolution he had made to keep with his chums was gone. His sole desire was to reach the hostile trenches and battle with the field-grey enemy.

Men were running in front of him. Swift of foot though he was, there were others who surpassed in the maddening rush. More than once he had to leap over the writhing bodies of gallant Anzacs who had gone down in the charge. He was dimly conscious of khaki-clad forms crashing heavily to the ground on either side, of a whizz of flying metal that sent his steel helmet spinning, of a sharp, burning pain in his left wrist, and of a dozen other mental and physical sensations.

In the midst of a regular mob of panting, yelling, and shouting men, and preceded by a terrific fusillade of Mills's bombs, Malcolm found himself struggling through masses of partly-severed barbed wire and up on the hostile parapet.

The ruddy glare from the exploding missiles revealed a line of cowed, terrified men, some with "pill-box" caps, others with the typical "Dolly Varden" steel helmets. With uplifted hands and tremulous cries of "Kamerad!" they bowed to the inevitable, and almost contemptuously were sent through the crowd of New Zealanders to the British lines.

Other Huns were made of sterner stuff, and offered a stubborn resistance. With rifle-shots, bayonets, clubbed weapons, and bombs they contested their ground. Machine-gunners used their deadly weapons with desperate energy, until they were stretched out by the sides of their now silent charges. The air was heavy with suffocating smoke; fragments of shell were flying with complete impartiality; shouts, oaths, and curses punctuated the crash of steel and the rattle of musketry, as men in their blind ferocity clutched at each other's throats and rolled in mortal combat upon the ground.

Presently Rifleman Malcolm Carr found himself confronted by a tall, bearded Prussian, whose head-dress consisted of a steel helmet, with a visor completely covering the upper part of his face as far as his mouth. Even in the heat of combat Malcolm could not help noticing the incongruity of the bristling whiskers flowing beyond the fellow's face-armour. It was one of those transitory yet indelibly-stamped impressions that are frequently formed in times of imminent danger.

The Prussian lunged with his bayonet. Malcolm promptly turned it aside and countered. His bayonet, darting above the other's belated guard, caught the Hun fairly in the lower part of his chest.

With a disconcerting jar that wellnigh dislocated his wrist, and sent a numbing pain through his right arm, the lad realized that he was up against great odds. The Prussian was wearing a steel breastplate underneath his tunic. Malcolm could imagine the grin of supercilious triumph under the Hun's mask. He shortened his grasp and thrust again, this time at the Fritz's shoulder. The man, despite the handicap of wearing heavy steel plates, ducked agilely, and, reversing his rifle, prodded the New Zealander with the butt of his weapon. Stepping backwards to avoid the blow, Malcolm tripped over some obstacle and fell heavily into a still-intact emplacement.

For some seconds he lay still. A few inches above his head came the deafening tick-tock of a German machine-gun. He had fallen in front of the weapon, and was pressed down by a heavy weight that still had the power of movement.

Groping, his fingers came in contact with human hair--the beard of his antagonist. The Prussian was lying face downwards upon the New Zealander's body.

"My festive," mentally ejaculated Rifleman Carr, "you didn't play the game with your body-armour; I'll do the reprisal dodge."

Fiercely he tugged at the Prussian's beard. With a yell of pain the fellow bent his knees and reared his body, only to fall inertly upon the half-suffocated Digger. In rising he had intercepted a dozen or more bullets from the machine-gun. So close was the muzzle, that his clothes smouldered in the blast of the weapon. Not that it mattered very much to him, for he was stone

dead.

With a frantic effort Malcolm rolled himself clear of the body of his late foe; then, resisting the temptation to regain his feet, he crouched in a corner of the emplacement and took stock of his immediate front.

He could easily have touched the cooling-jacket of the weapon as the machine-gun continued its death-dealing work. He could discern the sullen, determined features of the two men who alone remained of the machine-gun's crew.

Vainly Malcolm groped for his rifle. The violent impact had sent the weapon yards away. Nor could he find the rifle of his late adversary. The man had been a bomber; perhaps some of his stock of hand-propelled missiles yet remained?

Very cautiously the New Zealander felt for the canvas pockets suspended from the Hun's neck. Every one was empty.

"Rough luck!" he soliloquized. "Don't know so much about it, though; if he had had any left when we scrapped he might have chucked one at my head."

The machine-gun ceased firing. For a moment Malcolm was seized with the haunting fear that the gunners had spotted him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that they were fitting another belt of ammunition.

Presently Rifleman Carr's hand came in contact with a hard substance protruding from the Prussian's pocket. By the feel of it he was assured that he had found a revolver. Stealthily he withdrew the weapon and examined it. The pistol was evidently smaller than those used in the opposing armies. Belgian made, it had probably been obtained from a looted shop. Although officially unsanctioned, raiding parties, British, French, and German, frequently carried small revolvers when engaged in paying uninvited and unwelcome visits to the hostile lines.

The weapon was loaded in five chambers. Whether it was sufficiently powerful for the work Malcolm proposed to do the lad could not definitely form an opinion. It was like riding an untried steed. Failure on the part of the cheap mechanism meant death; nevertheless, for the sake of his comrades who were exposed to the brisk fire of the machine-gun, he was determined to take the risk.

A gentle pressure on the trigger revealed the pleasing fact that the revolver was of a self-acting type. So far so good. The next question was--are the cartridges reliable?

Deliberately Malcolm, steadying the barrel on the neck of the dead Hun, aimed between the eyes of the fellow holding the firing-handle of the machine-gun.

Two shots rang out in quick succession. Giving a yelp of mingled pain and surprise, Fritz doubled up across the gun, his feet beating a tattoo against an ammunition-box. His companion, partly deafened by the double report almost under his nose, and taken aback by the collapse of the gunner, crouched irresolute. Before he could decide whether to snatch up his rifle or to raise his hands and shout "Kamerad" a bullet from Malcolm's revolver struck him fairly in the centre of his low forehead.

Wriggling from underneath the dead Prussian, Rifleman Carr regained his feet. The wave of New Zealanders forming the first storming-party had swept beyond the now silent machine-gun. The supports were doubling up, their numbers no longer lessened by the rain of bullets from the hitherto overlooked emplacement. Between the two lines of attackers khaki-clad figures littered the ground, while numbers of wounded, both New Zealanders and Huns, trickled towards the British trenches.

"My capture!" exclaimed Malcolm. "I'll put a tally on the beauty."

Searching, he found his rifle and bayonet. Unfixing the latter, he scratched upon the field-grey paint of the machine-gun the words: "99,109, Carr, No. 3 Platoon, C Company".

"If I go under, the boys will know I've done something towards my bit," he muttered. "I wonder where my pals are?"

CHAPTER XVIII

The Captured Trench

"Hallo, Malcolm!"

Above the rattle of musketry and the crash of bombs, Rifleman Carr heard his name shouted in cheery stentorian tones. Looking in the direction from which the shout came, the lad saw two stretcher-bearers jogging along with a heavy burden over the uneven ground. One of the men was Mike Dowit, the hero of the bombing exercise at far-off Featherstone Camp. It was not he who called, for his jaw was swathed in a bandage. The other man was unknown to Malcolm.

Right at the heels of the stormers the regimental stretcher-bearers had gone over the top, defenceless, and, as such, running even more risks than the infantry. Already Dowit and his companion had made three journeys to the advance dressing-station, notwithstanding the fact that the former had received a nasty wound in his chin from a fragment of shell.

"Hallo, Malcolm!" was the repeated hail, as the man in the stretcher waved his shrapnel helmet to attract attention still further.

It was Sergeant Fortescue,

"Proper buckshie this time," he declared, as the bearers, through sheer weariness, halted and set their burden on the ground. "Machine-gun copped me fairly. Three if not four bullets through my left leg, close to knee. 'Fraid I won't see you for another three months."

"Seen Selwyn?" asked Malcolm anxiously.

"Up there clearing out the dug-outs," replied Fortescue. "He's all right; so's Joliffe, M'Kane, and M'Turk. Poor little Billy Preston's done in, though. Shot through the head. I saw him. A fearful mess."

"You're a liar, Sergeant!" muttered a hollow voice, as the subject of the conversation strolled in a leisurely manner up to the stationary stretcher.

Corporal Preston's appearance did not belie Fortescue's statement that it was a fearful mess. Almost as the last German was cleared out of the captured trench, a piece of shrapnel struck the Corporal just below his right ear, and ploughed through his skin from the cheek-bone to the corner of his mouth. He dropped like a stone, and Fortescue had come to the erroneous conclusion that Billy Preston had made the great sacrifice.

Despite his injuries, Corporal Preston was grinning broadly on the uninjured side of his face. A lighted cigarette was between his lips. A saturated field-bandage held to his wound partly concealed the slight but ugly gash.

"Feel as dinky as anything, by gum!" he mumbled, without removing the consoling "fag". "This'll mean a trip to Blighty. I can do with it nicely, but I'm jolly glad I got there. Five blessed Fritzes to my certain knowledge, by gum! I'm from Timaru, but I'm not timorous--not I."

And, waving his disengaged hand, Corporal Billy Preston resumed his long trek of pain that was to end somewhere in England under the kindly care of nurses from far-off New Zealand.

"By Jove, he has!" agreed Fortescue. "I saw him polish off a couple of Huns with his bayonet, and knock out another with the butt of his rifle. Well, s'long, Malcolm, and *kia ora*."

The bearers lifted the stretcher and continued on their way, while Rifleman Carr, slinging his rifle over his shoulder, hurried towards the German second-line trenches, where, judging by the deep detonations of exploding bombs and the sharp crack of rifle-shots, there was still work to be done.

German shells were "watering" the captured ground. Malcolm hardly noticed them. He had acquired the hardened campaigner's indifference to Fritz's "hate" that confidence in the knowledge of being on the winning side cannot fail to give. Overhead, British shells screeched on their way, as with mathematical precision they fell in the place appointed, to form a "barrage" through which neither German supports could advance nor defeated Huns retire without risk of being pulverized by the high-explosive missiles.

The second-line German trenches formed the nearmost limit of ground practically unaffected by the explosion of the great mine. Beyond lay the tortured slopes of Messines Ridge, from the fissures of which escaping smoke trailed upwards in the wan morning light.

Already the first line of storming troops was engaged in consolidating the captured position, while the supports were assembling and concentrating prior to advancing upon the farthermost of their objectives--the village of Messines. Every Hun remaining above ground had been accounted for. Hundreds were lying in grotesque attitudes, never to move again, while dejected and dazed prisoners were being marshalled in droves under escort for the advance cages. But in the tottering dug-outs the Prussian die-hards were still offering resistance; and it was the clearing of their sub-terranean strongholds that was occupying the attention of the victorious New Zealanders.

"Look out, chum!" shouted a voice as Malcolm approached a knot of Diggers gathered in a shellhole in what was formerly the parados of the trench. "Duck!"

Malcolm obeyed promptly. He was used to taking imperative hints with the utmost smartness. Even then he was only just in time to escape a bullet. For the second time that morning his steel helmet was sent flying, strap notwithstanding.

"Come and bear a hand and get your own back," continued the man who had warned him.

Recovering his head-gear, Rifleman Carr joined the group by a discreet and circuitous route, to find Grouser Joliffe and half a dozen men of his platoon engaged upon the task--up to now unsuccessful--of clearing out a dug-out. Joliffe had discarded his rifle. His wounded arm had given out, and he had the limb supported in a sling made from a puttee. A dozen bombs hung from his neck. He held another in his uninjured hand.

"Take that, you skulking Hun!" he shouted, hurling a bomb into the mouth of the dug-out. "That's the fifth I've given 'em," he added, addressing Malcolm as if to apologize for the fact that the occupants of the den were still in a state of aggressive activity. "One of our chaps has gone for some smoke-bombs. He ought to be here by now if he isn't knocked out on the way. That'll settle their hash."

Rifleman Joliffe was the only member of the party who remained standing. Partly sheltered by a break in the traverse, he proposed to throw another missile, while his companions, taking cover behind a few hastily-piled sand-bags, waited with levelled rifles the expected rush from the dug-out.

Deftly the bomber lobbed another grenade fairly into the yawning cavity. With a muffled crash the bomb exploded. Acrid fumes drifted from the sloping tunnel, while a succession of dismal groans gave credence to Joliffe's belief that he'd "done the blighter in this time".

"Hold hard!" cautioned the corporal of the section as the daring rifleman prepared for a closer inspection of his handiwork.

"What for?" expostulated Joliffe. "I know that copped him right enough."

"Then it's your bloomin' funeral," rejoined the non-com. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Confident in the result of his prowess, the bomber strode boldly towards the mouth of the dug-out. Before he had taken three steps the still eddying smoke was pierced by the flash of a rifle. With a look of pained surprise upon his face Rifleman Joliffe half-turned and stood stock-still for quite five seconds. Then his knees bent and down he went; his legs and arms quivered convulsively for a few seconds.

"What are you men doing?" enquired Captain Nicholson, who, unawares, had made his way along the trench until stopped by the knot of prone riflemen. "Dug-out giving trouble, eh? All right; follow me and we'll rush it."

"Better not, sir," said the Corporal. "We've chucked in a couple of dozen bombs, but still we haven't knocked 'em out."

Although the non-com.'s report was an exaggerated one as to the number of missiles thrown into the mouth of the tunnel, the fact that the defenders were still able to offer resistance was a perplexing problem. According to the rules of the game the bombs ought to have blown the Huns to pieces.

"We've sent for some smoke-bombs," continued the Corporal. "Then, sir, when we've tried these, we'll follow you. Hallo, here they are, the beauties!"

"Four--all I could get," announced the newcomer's well-known voice. It was Dick Selwyn--ragged and begrimed, but unharmed.

Handing over the missiles, Selwyn threw himself down by the side of his chum. Not a word passed between the two, although they were longing to exchange confidences. All attention was centred upon the sinister hole in front of which the body of Rifleman Joliffe lay--a silent warning of the danger that lurked within.

"You're a left-handed thrower, M'Turk," said Captain Nicholson, who knew the physical capabilities and peculiarities of each individual of his platoon. "Try your hand with one of these."

Being able to throw left-handed gave the Digger a considerable pull over his companions for the work of smoking out the Huns. Without exposing any part of his body, which a right-handed man would have had to do owing to the position of the dug-out, M'Turk could lob the bombs fairly into the mouth of the tunnel.

With unerring accuracy the "stink-bomb" vanished into the dark recess. The New Zealanders could hear it rolling down the steps. Smoke began to issue from the dug-out, thinly at first, then rapidly increasing in volume and density.

Suddenly a startling apparition dashed through the thick cloud of smoke--a man whose head and body were completely encased in steel. With arms outstretched the Hun staggered towards the Diggers, coughing violently the while under the irritating influence of the smoke-bomb.

"Collar him!" ordered Captain Nicholson.

A dozen hands seized him. His head-dress was removed, disclosing the features of a pale, insignificant, and spectacled German.

"What a cheek!" exclaimed M'Turk. "Fancy a worm like that holding us up!"

"Science against brute force, chum," remarked the Corporal, pointing to an anti-gas apparatus that dangled from the man's neck. "If it hadn't been that the gadget was smashed we might have gone on bombing till the end of the war."

The prisoner's armour was certainly proof against fragments of bombs, even at close range, as the splayed marks upon the steel testified. With the anti-gas apparatus he had been able to withstand the choking fumes, until a chance splinter of metal had perforated the flexible pipe between the Hun's mouth and the oxygen-container hidden under his back-plate. Although his arms and legs were unprotected, the man had practically escaped injury from the bombs, since the fragments of the exploded missile flew upwards. A gash on the knuckle of his right hand and a few slight scratches on the calves of his legs were the total result of the Anzacs' efforts until the smoke-bomb came into play.

"A chirpy little sausage-eater!" exclaimed Captain Nicholson, who, like his men, was not backward in acknowledging bravery even in an enemy. "See that he is sent back, Corporal. Now, lads, why was he so determined? There's more in this dug-out than meets the eye, I believe. I mean to find out. Who'll back me up?"

CHAPTER XIX

Trapped in a Dug-out

"I will, sir!" said Malcolm promptly.

"And I," added Selwyn.

"Me too," chorused M'Turk and M'Kane.

"And, by gum, how about me?" enquired a lusty voice, as Riflemen Joliffe, bleeding profusely from the head, sat up and vainly attempted to regain his feet.

The other New Zealanders had forgotten Grouser Joliffe, or rather they had put him out of their minds until the clearing-up job was completed. One and all had taken it for granted that the rifleman had paid the penalty for his rashness, and had been shot dead on the spot. Had they known that he was only wounded they would have rushed to his aid, but, thinking otherwise, they had no intention of attending to the dead until the wounded were cared for and the position properly consolidated.

It was Joliffe's steel helmet that had saved him. The German's bullet, fired at a range of ten yards, had struck the upper part of the rim and deflected upwards, completely penetrating the head-dress, while the wearer escaped with a scalp wound, rendering him unconscious for a quarter of an hour.

"Another day, Joliffe!" sang out Captain Nicholson. "See to him, you fellows. Now then, Carr, keep close behind me. M'Turk, M'Kane, and Selwyn at three paces interval."

With a revolver in his right hand, and an electric torch in his left, the Captain, bending low, began the descent of the steep flight of steps leading to the dug-out. By this time the noxious vapours had exhausted themselves, although there was still sufficient smoke to dim the rays of the torch.

Rifle and bayonet at the ready, Malcolm followed his officer, his ears on the alert to catch the first sound that might denote the presence of other Hun cave-dwellers.

As he descended, Malcolm found that the smoke was dispersing under the influence of a steady draught of warm air. The tunnel was heavily timbered--top, sides, and floor. Along one side ran a couple of insulated wires, one of which belonged to an electric alarm-bell. The other was for internal lighting, but every incandescent bulb had been shattered under the terrific concussion of the great Messines mine. In places the massive planks were bulging ominously; so much so that Captain Nicholson hesitated more than once.

"What do you make of it, Carr?" he asked, pausing at a particularly bad spot.

"I hardly know, sir," replied Malcolm. "Since the shorings didn't collapse when the mine went

up, they ought to stand for a bit longer."

"Suppose so," agreed the youthful officer as he resumed his tour of discovery. "Sort of 'creaking door hangs longest'. Let's hope so in this case."

At the ninety-eighth step--Malcolm counted them carefully--the descent ended. The daring five found themselves in a long room, measuring about eighty feet by ten. On one side were recesses that formed, as they afterwards discovered, the lower part of the lift-tunnel communicating with the open air. At one time the lift had been used for bringing up machine-guns that were stored deep underground in anticipation of a heavy bombardment of the British guns. Each recess was piled high with rubble, the result of the stupendous concussion, while a dozen intact machine-guns had been prevented from being brought into action against the attacking infantry.

In the opposite wall were other recesses, panelled and furnished with rich curtains and hangings. Each recess contained a wire mattress and bedding, while articles of a personal nature showed that the former occupants were officers, and not of the rank and file.

"I believe we've struck the brigade headquarters," said Captain Nicholson, flashing his torch into a large recess in which stood a table littered with book and papers. "We'll attend to those documents later. No use doing so until we've made sure of our ground. I wonder where the gilded occupants are?"

"From what I know of the blighters, sir," remarked M'Turk, "they didn't show their mugs above ground while we were tumbling over the top."

"Perhaps there's another way out--a sort of bolt-hole," suggested Selwyn. "Hope they haven't ruined the show?"

"No likely," replied Captain Nicholson briskly, "As for your idea of a bolt-hole, there's something in that. It would account for that fellow in that sardine-can suit holding out so long, just to give them time to get clear. Ssh! Ssh! What's that?"

The men stood on the alert for some moments.

A muffled cough broke the silence. Then came the dull thud of a pick being driven into soft earth.

"This way," ordered the Captain, striding towards the end of the room. "Get a bomb ready."

"Not a blessed one between the lot of us, sir," reported M'Kane. "Thought we'd finished with Mills's pills for a bit. I'll nip back and get a few."

Captain Nicholson hesitated.

"No need," he decided. "The fellows, whoever they are, are trapped. They'll give in when they find that the game's up."

In the panelled wall, so skilfully fashioned that it almost escaped attention, was a door. The New Zealanders stopped and listened. Voices were heard talking excitedly, to the accompaniment of the tearing of paper.

Thrusting his torch into his breast pocket, the Captain, holding his revolver ready for instant action, threw open the door.

Another long room showed beyond the doorway. At the farther end a table extended almost from side to side. On the floor were several lighted candles that cast an unaccustomed glare upon the faces of a dozen German officers. Some of them were engaged in burning documents, others in tearing up books and plans. Right at the far end two men were attacking a fall of debris by means of pick and shovel.

This much Malcolm took in at a glance, as with levelled rifle he supported his captain.

"Surrender!" shouted Captain Nicholson sternly.

"Not so fast," replied a Prussian, speaking in English, and with hardly a trace of a foreign accent. "Let us discuss the situation."

"By all means," agreed Captain Nicholson, confident that he held the winning cards.

The Hun who had spoken was carefully noting the strength of the intruders. He had a particular object in gaining time.

"You are too premature, Herr Kapitan von Anzaken," he continued slowly. The boot is on the other leg. You are our prisoners. *Nein*--do not get excited--consider: you are but a handful. We are fourteen, all armed. In there"--he indicated a doorway on his left--"are fifty tons of explosives, so I would not have you throw a bomb, for our sakes and yours. Again, I have but to touch this button and the tunnel to the dug-out by which you made your approach will be blown in. We have particular need of you, since your friends will hesitate twice before attempting to smoke us out

with you here. Now, to avoid further unpleasantness, you will throw down your arms and make surrender."

"I'll see you to blazes first!" retorted Nicholson. "Hands up, or----"

Like a flash a dozen hands went up--but each hand held an automatic pistol! The New Zealand officer made no attempt to back. Outwardly calm, he stood erect on the threshold, with his four men close behind him.

Confronting him were the obviously excited Huns. Even the slight pressure of a trembling finger upon the trigger of one of the automatic weapons would mean death to the imperturbable Nicholson.

"I give you ten seconds to surrender!" he exclaimed.

"And I give you five to throw down your arms!" retorted the Prussian major. "One--two--three----"

Crash!

A blinding flash seemed to leap up from the floor, and, with a deafening roar bursting upon his ears, Malcolm was dimly conscious of being hurled backwards by a terrific blast, then everything became a blank.

He regained his senses to find himself in utter darkness. He was lying on the floor with his shoulders and head leaning against something aggressively hard. Acrid fumes assailed his nostrils. He tried to move, to find a heavy, inert body lying across his legs.

Groping to find out the nature of his surroundings, his hand came in contact with his uncomfortable pillow. It was a pair of hobnailed boots. As he thrust them aside the wearer stirred.

"What's up, Sergeant? Another stunt?"

It was M'Turk, wandering in his mind. Evidently he was under the hallucination that the Platoon sergeant was rousing him at an unearthly hour of the morning.

"Where are we, M'Turk?" asked Malcolm.

The Digger grunted.

"Ask me another, chum," he replied, coughing after every word. "By gum! I remember--those swine of Huns and fifty tons of explosives. Well, we're still alive and kicking, so to speak. Where are the others? The Captain?"

"Someone lying across my legs," replied Malcolm. "Our captain, I fancy. Have you a match?"

"Have I a match?" repeated M'Turk mirthlessly. "A dozen boxes in my dug-out. Came with me last parcel--but ne'er a one on me. Where's that torch?"

Sitting up, Malcolm bent forward and searched the man who was pinning him down. He was wrong in his surmise. It was not Captain Nicholson, but one of the riflemen. In one of his pockets Carr found a squashed box containing three or four precious matches.

The first match fizzled and went out.

"Damp, like everything else except my throat!" muttered M'Turk. "I could drink half a gallon at one go. Try again, chum."

At the second attempt the flickering light struggled bravely for the mastery, then out it went.

"Two more," announced Malcolm.

"Hold on," ejaculated his companion. "I've a paper. I'll tear off a piece, and you can set it alight--if your matches aren't all duds!"

This time the attempt was successful. In the glare of the burning newspaper Malcolm made the astonishing discovery that Grouser Joliffe was lying across his legs, while nearer the room in which the German staff officers had been was Dick Selwyn, leaning against the wainscot and breathing stertorously. The faces of both men were black with smoke and dirt. There were no signs of Captain Nicholson or M'Kane.

"Old Grouser, by gum!" exclaimed M'Turk. "How in the name of everything did he get there?"

"Give it up!" replied Malcolm, as he made his way to Selwyn's side. "There are a lot of things that want explaining in this hole."

"Say what?" prompted his companion, tearing a fresh strip from the newspaper and rolling it into a rough-and-ready torch.

"Where are Fritz & Co.? Where is our officer? How is it that I was next to him, and now Selwyn is nearer the door; while Joliffe, who is supposed to be on the way to the dressing-station, is here? And what about the fifty tons of explosives?"

M'Turk staggered to his feet and made his way to the entrance to the inner room. The door had been wrenched from its hinges; from the root ferro-concrete girders had fallen, bringing with them a pile of debris that completely covered the table. Of the Huns, all were buried beneath the mound of earth, unless they had been blown to pieces by the explosion.

"Not so much as a Hun's button left as a souvenir!" reported M'Turk. "Hope our mates haven't been kyboshed. Yet it seems to me that if fifty ton of stuff did go up we wouldn't be here now--except in little bits."

"That's what puzzles me," admitted Rifleman Carr. "Perhaps only a portion of the explosives went off. Again, who propped you and Selwyn up against the wall?"

M'Turk made another roll of crumpled paper.

"Won't last out much longer at that rate!" he remarked ruefully. "Hallo! What's that?"

A couple of dull concussions were distinctly felt. In the inner portion of the spacious dug-out more rubble slid noisily from the caving-in roof.

"Fritz getting to work again," said Malcolm. "They are shelling the captured position."

"And following it up with a counter-attack," added M'Turk. "Strikes me our chaps won't have any time to attend to us for a bit."

"I did the job properly that time--a bit too properly?" exclaimed Grouser Joliffe, who had recovered consciousness and was taking a lively interest in the conversation.

"You did what?" enquired M'Turk.

"I wasn't going to be done out of the fun," said Joliffe doggedly. "Didn't I draw that little tinpot's fire, and give you a chance to butt in?"

"You did, like a blooming idiot!" agreed M'Turk.

"So when you fellows *impshied* down the tunnel I slipped in after you. You wanted looking afters just fancy, nosing around a dug-out and not taking any bombs. I kept out of sight while the Captain was taking stock, knowing he'd send me back if he twigged me. Then, when the Boches tried to hold you up, I nipped behind and slung a bomb at 'em. By gum! It was a beauty, though for the life of me I don't know how we got blown out here. It wasn't my bomb that played a dirty trick like that, and it wasn't fifty tons of high explosives. So what was it? Anyone got a drink? My throat's like blotting-paper."

"The last of the paper," announced M'Turk. "Any of you fellows got some more? No; well, I'll nip round to see if I can find any. I'd as soon set the show on fire as stick here in the dark."

"There's someone coming," declared Malcolm.

"Where?" enquired M'Turk and the bomber simultaneously.

The sound of footsteps grew nearer and nearer, the rays of a torch flashed on the ground, and Captain Nicholson's voice was heard exclaiming:

"It's no go that way, M'Kane. We'll have to make the best of things; but it's no use denying the fact that we're trapped."

CHAPTER XX

The Way Out

"So, you cat with nine lives, we've to thank you for this beautiful fix!" remarked Captain Nicholson after he had greeted his companions in misfortune.

"Don't know about that, sir," replied the bomber. "If I hadn't been nippy, those Huns would have plugged the lot of you, and more'n likely they would have got away. What were those coves doing with the pick and shovel, sir, if they didn't know there was a chance of getting out that way?"

"That passage is closed, at any rate," decided Captain Nicholson, glancing in the direction of

the mound of debris and the displaced girders. "M'Kane and I have explored the entrance, There's been a big fall. The supplementary shoots are also choked. We followed a level working for nearly a hundred yards. It leads nowhere. Fritz never had time to finish it. Look here, this torch won't hold out for ever. The battery's running down. How's Selwyn?"

"Only suffering from shock, sir," replied Malcolm.

"All right; you can do nothing more so far as he is concerned," decided the officer. "We'll make a thorough search of these sleeping-quarters, and see if we can find any candles. Knowing the systematic thoroughness of Fritz, I guess he's taken precautions in the event of the electric light going out. By Jove," he added, as the dug-out trembled violently, "there's some strafing going on outside!"

A search resulted in the discovery of several oillamps and packets of candles. There was also food in considerable quantities and wine in bottles.

"I'd swop all that fizz for a pannikin of tea," declared Joliffe.

"You're never satisfied, chum," remarked M'Turk, deftly knocking off the neck of a bottle and taking a draught.

"If you had what I've got you'd be satisfied," retorted the bomber. "I don't mind telling you now. Captain can't order me back out of it, can you, sir?"

"Well, what have you got?" enquired Nicholson.

"Splinter of shell in me shoulder--copped that last night along with the ration-party, sir; then this crack on the skull from that tin-pot Boche; and now I've copped it in both legs--and still I'm not knocked out."

The men sat down to make a meal. Selwyn, under the reviving effect of a drink of wine, had opened his eyes. Although considerably shaken, he was otherwise unhurt.

Captain Nicholson's story of what had occurred threw little light upon the mystery. He remembered the explosion; he was conscious of being hurled high in the air and of falling on top of the prostrate body of one of his men. The first to recover, he waited until M'Kane regained consciousness, and, having placed M'Turk and Selwyn in a reclining position, set off to find an egress and bring assistance.

At the thirtieth step they were stopped by a solid mass of rubble that was only prevented from falling upon them by the fact that two massive timbers had dropped across the tunnel. To tamper with them meant certain disaster. Retracing their way to the main dug-out, they found a hitherto overlooked passage running at right angles to the longer walls. As the Captain had previously reported, it was a blind alley.

"Although I believe that the Hun's yarn about fifty tons of stuff is all moonshine," continued Nicholson, "I can't see how one bomb would raise Cain like this. It's just possible that there was a small quantity of explosives in the place--sufficient to bring the roof down and to give us a pretty shaking up."

The imprisoned men ate, drank, and talked--all except Selwyn, who complained of a violent headache and dizziness. Captain Nicholson let them carry on at their leisure. As long as they kept their spirits up there was little cause for anxiety. The great thing was to guard against depression.

"Now then, boys!" he exclaimed at length. "Heaven helps those who help themselves--how about it? Are we going to sit here until we are dug out or are we going to extricate ourselves?"

"Win off our own bat, sir," replied M'Turk.

"That's the sort," rejoined his officer. "Now, look here. Do any of you fellows remember if there were other dug-outs close to this?"

"There was an entrance about twenty yards to the left of this one, sir," said Malcolm. "I noticed that it was clear, for when I came up our fellows were hauling out a batch of Huns."

"That's our direction," decided Captain Nicholson. "It's not much use trying to open up the tunnel at which the Boches were working when we surprised them. It leads towards Messines Ridge, and I guess there's not much tunnelling left there. I should imagine they were ignorant of the actual results of the mine, or they would have given it up as a bad job."

Armed with mattocks and picks, Malcolm, M'Turk, and M'Kane attacked the side of the entrance-tunnel at a spot a few yards beneath the choke. The ground was clayey and easy to work, but in the absence of shoring material there was a grave risk of the new tunnel caving in. At the end of an hour's strenuous activity a tunnel about twelve feet long, and sufficiently large to enable a man to crawl along, had been excavated.

"Any luck?" enquired Captain Nicholson for the twentieth time during that hour.

"No, sir," replied Malcolm, who was working at the head of the sap and cautiously dislodging soil, which, in turn, was picked up by M'Turk and passed out so as not to obstruct the portion of the tunnel already dug.

The ground vibrated under the impact of a heavy shell thirty or forty feet overhead. Although the bombardment had decreased in violence the Huns were still sending heavy stuff across at irregular intervals.

"Hanged if I like this job," soliloquized Malcolm. "I thought the whole show would collapse that time. By Jove, something's going!"

Making a vain attempt to back out of the confined space, Carr felt the ground giving way beneath his bent legs.

"What's up, Digger?" enquired M'Turk, hearing his companion's exclamation.

Without waiting for an answer M'Turk crawled to within arm's length of the lad and grasped him by the arm. As he did so the subsidence increased, and, amidst a shower of soil, the two riflemen found themselves falling through the air.

Both uttered an exclamation of horrified surprise, not knowing at that stage if they were hurtling into a deep abyss to be dashed to pieces at the bottom. Anticipating the worst, they were agreeably relieved to find that they had dropped only ten or twelve feet, and had alighted upon a pile of soft material that proved to be a stack of folded blankets.

"It's all right, sir," shouted Malcolm.

"Where are you?" enquired Captain Nicholson, crawling cautiously along the newly-excavated gallery.

"That's more than I can say, sir," replied Carr. "We're in the dark absolutely."

Having tested the ground at the edge of the hole, Captain Nicholson flashed his torch into the dug-out into which the two riflemen had fallen.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, "you've found a way out! I won't join you just yet. Stand by while I drop some candles and matches; then have a look round and report. See if there's a ladder available."

The torch was switched off and the two riflemen waited in utter darkness.

"I'm beginning to fancy I'm a blessed mole!" remarked M'Turk. "Twice I've been buried in our own dug-out. First time wasn't much to speak of; but Plug Street--ugh! For five mortal hours I was pinned down, the Huns strafing all the time, and the water rising up through the dirt that covered me up to my chin. And, as if I hadn't had enough, one of the boys who were digging me out must needs drive a pick through my calf. After all," he added, "it was worth it. I got six months in Blighty, and haven't had the same luck since. I'd give five pounds for old Fortyscrew's buckshie. Guess he's having a fair holiday by now."

"Fortescue was hit only quite recently," said Malcolm. "I met him on my way up."

"D'ye know we've been nearly fifteen hours in this warren?" asked M'Turk. "I thought not! And with reasonable luck a man can be hit and find himself in Blighty within twelve hours. Hallo, here's the Captain!"

The torch was flashed upon the two men and a cloth in which were two candles and a box of matches dropped into the circle of light.

"Look alive!" was the officer's exhortation. "It's quite time we broke through. Does the air seem pure? No petrol fumes hanging around, for instance?"

"Now you come to mention it, sir," replied M'Turk, "it does hum a bit, although it's not petrol. Since I've been out here I've become a Sort of authority on stinks."

"It's the fumes of high-explosive," declared Malcolm.

"Right you are," rejoined his companion, as he struck a match and lit the candles. "By gum, this dug-out's copped it."

In the dim light the place looked a regular shambles. The dug-out was larger than the one in which they had been trapped, but the fittings were of a plainer and more substantial nature. Evidently it had been the underground quarters of some of the Prussian rank and file, for three sides of the place consisted of four tiers of bed-boxes. The fourth, except for a doorway, was taken up with a large arms-rack capable of holding a couple of hundred rifles and bayonets. Most of the floor space was occupied by long trestle tables, while in one corner was the large stack of blankets and bedding upon which Malcolm and M'Turk had fallen.

Although there was no shattered woodwork, everything pointed to a violent disturbance in the

enclosed space. Tables and stools had been overthrown; the floor in front of the arms-rack was covered with weapons hurled from their stands. Broken bottles, plates, and earthenware littered the lime-trodden floor.

Against the doorway were four huge Prussians, leaning apathetically against the timbered supports of the arms-rack. Two of them, their eyes fixed upon the New Zealanders, had their arms folded on their broad chests. The others were steadying themselves by their rifles, to which the bayonets were fixed.

Without any weapons, either of offence or defence, for they had left their rifles in the other dug-out, Malcolm and M'Turk were at a decided disadvantage; but the odds did not deter them.

"Bomb 'em out of it!" shouted M'Turk, swinging a purely imaginary missile. "Hands up, Fritz!"

The Huns stirred not a muscle.

"What's the fuss?" sang out Captain Nicholson.

"Four Boches, sir," replied Malcolm.

In a trice the Captain dropped from the tunnel into the dug-out. With his revolver ready for instant action he rejoined his two men, while M'Kane, preceded by his rifle, followed his superior officer's example.

"Hands up!" ordered Captain Nicholson, levelling his revolver at the head of one of the Huns at a range of less than ten yards. The Boche's eyes stared unblinkingly at the muzzle of the weapon, while his companions showed no signs of shaking off their apathy.

"By gum, sir," exclaimed M'Turk, "I believe they've been done in!"

Holding the candle above his head, the rifleman strode over the littered floor and gripped one of the Prussians by the shoulder. Like a log the heavy body toppled forward and fell on its face.

"Stone dead, sir," replied M'Turk. "Every man jack of 'em. And there are more of them over there."

Curiosity prompted Captain Nicholson to examine the corpses. Not one bore the trace of a wound. In addition to the four by the doorway sixteen lay partly hidden by the overturned tables and chairs. Without a mark to show how they had been killed, all the men were dead. Some had been struck down in the act of writing. One man still held a pencil firmly clenched in his hand. Others were eating when death overtook them suddenly and painlessly.

"Killed by concussion when the mine went up," suggested M'Kane.

"More likely by one of our heavy shells," declared Captain Nicholson. "If your theory is correct, how do you account for the fact that those staff officers in the next dug-out came off scot-free until Joliffe thought fit to bring trouble on them and us? No, stay where you are, Joliffe!" he exclaimed, as the bomber's voice was heard shouting his intention of "barracking in". "We'll come back and fetch the pair of you when we've found a way out. Now, boys, let's see how the land lies."

Passing through the doorway and ascending a flight of steps the party reached a wrecked dug-out that bore unmistakable testimony to the tremendous powers of devastation of a British 14-inch shell. The missile had penetrated twenty feet of earth and concrete, closing the entrance to the open air, and half-filling the place with debris. A funnel-like shaft, through which the sky was visible, was now the only means of communication with the open.

"We're not out of the wood yet, boys," remarked Captain Nicholson, surveying the scene of destruction, "but we're getting on."

As he spoke, the orifice was darkened, and a gruff voice from above exclaimed, to the accompaniment of a string of highly uncomplimentary ejaculations:

"Now then, you, up you come or I'll blow you to blazes!"

"Please don't stand there calling us names," expostulated Captain Nicholson affably. "Rather skip off and bring a rope."

CHAPTER XXI

Out of Touch

After a wait of nearly ten minutes a rope was procured, while other willing helpers brought a number of short ladders to the mouth of the crater. These, lashed together, were lowered into the hole and allowed to rest upon the steeply sloping sides.

Down swarmed several men, not New Zealanders, but belonging to an Australian regiment. Foremost amongst them was Malcolm's Queensland chum on board the *Pomfret Castle*--big Jack Kennedy.

"Hallo, Digger!" exclaimed that worthy, recognizing Rifleman Carr in the candlelight. "What have you been doing? Cleaning out a chimney? You're as black as an aborigine."

"I hardly thought to run across you again," remarked Malcolm.

"The world is small," rejoined Kennedy. "We were on your right when the attack started. Your fellows have rushed Messines village and are holding all the captured positions. Who are your pals? Beg pardon, sir, I didn't know you were an officer!" (This to Captain Nicholson, who, owing to the dirt and grime in which he was smothered, was hardly distinguishable from the others.) "We'll give you a leg up."

"Hold on," protested Captain Nicholson. "There are two of our men who have to be brought along. They're rather shaken up. You'll want a ladder--Carr."

"Yes, sir," replied Malcolm.

"Will you show these men the way into the other dug-out?"

Saluting, Malcolm turned and made his way over the wrecked woodwork, three Australians following in his footsteps. Two of the latter carried a short ladder.

"Fortescue with you?" enquired Kennedy, as the men planted the ladder on the pile of earth that had fallen from the newly-excavated tunnel.

"No," replied Carr. "He got a buckshie in his advance, but Selwyn's there. Do you remember Pieter Waas on the old *Pomfret Castle*?"

"Do I not, the larrikin!" replied Kennedy. "I suppose you know that he got away soon after he was landed at Plymouth?"

"Yes, and more," added Malcolm. "He was in our trenches last night, and slipped over the top to the German lines."

The Australian smiled incredulously.

"Fact!" persisted his informant. "I spotted him and he spotted me. Before he could be winged he was off in the darkness."

"Then let's hope he went up in the great bust," said Kennedy. "A bit of a sell that, to bunk from the security of our trenches right on top of a million pounds of aminol. This the way up? Golly, this tunnel wasn't made for a man of my size!"

The rescuers found Grouser Joliffe indulging in a particularly strong burst of grumbling--not at his adventures in the dug-out, not at the hardships he had undergone, nor at the wounds he had received. He had just made the disconcerting discovery that he had lost a packet of five cigarettes, and, being a frugal man, the loss irritated him exceedingly.

Dick Selwyn, although stiff and exhausted, was able to walk with assistance, although Malcolm foresaw difficulties when his chum came to the narrow tunnel and the swaying ladder leading to the other dug-out.

"Which of the boys left his coat behind?" enquired Selwyn, indicating a neatly folded bundle on the ground at a few feet from him.

"None," replied Malcolm emphatically.

"Then what's this?"

Malcolm examined the clothing. Not only was there a coat, but a New Zealander's complete kit.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, "I have it! That's the uniform the spy fellow was wearing. He must have come here, knowing that this dug-out was the Hun brigade head-quarters, and changed into a Boche rig-out. Ten to one he was amongst that lot of staff officers."

"If so, he's properly done in," added Selwyn.

The two chums were only partly correct in their surmise. Konrad von Feldoffer, on realizing that he had been recognized by a couple of men who, he thought, belonged to another battalion, had rather prematurely bolted for the German lines. In the guise of a New Zealander he had been hoping to gather useful and definite information concerning the forthcoming advance. Since most

of the Diggers were in ignorance of the mining operations under Messines Ridge, von Feldoffer gained very little information on that point.

By means of a pre-arranged signal the spy arrived at the German trenches without being fired on by his compatriots, despite his khaki uniform and British-pattern shrapnel-helmet. Taken to the head-quarters' dug-out, he made his report to the Hun authorities, changed into German uniform, and left immediately afterwards for a new sphere of activity. So, once more, by the matter of a few hours, Konrad von Feldoffer escaped a well-merited death; while, through ignorance of the terrific preparations made for the blowing up of Messines Ridge, he had unwittingly done the Allies a good turn; for instead of withdrawing the troops the Hun commander had concentrated a thousand on the mined ridge in order to repel an infantry attack that threatened only in the minds of the German staff.

"What are you fellows doing?" enquired Malcolm of the Australian. "Demolishing dug-outs?"

"Not much," replied Kennedy. "We are not raiding this time. We're here to hold what we've got, not to do as much damage as we can and return to our own lines. Already our heavies are well up. A battery of 14-inch guns is in a position just behind the original first-line Boche trench. The air is positively stiff with aeroplanes--all British. The Hun airmen take jolly good care to give us a miss. They absolutely funk it."

"Don't blame 'em!" added another Anzac. "We're top dog in the air just now."

Taking the discarded uniform for identification purposes, Malcolm proceeded to lead the rescue party on their return journey. The two injured men gave considerable trouble. Joliffe, whose wounds were giving him excruciating pain, showed a decided tendency to become light-headed, while Selwyn was so badly bruised and shaken that he could hardly crawl.

Yet, in spite of their difficulties, the Australians succeeded in bringing both men to the foot of the shaft communicating with the open air.

Placed on a stretcher, that was raised by means of a rope running through a block at the end of a hastily constructed derrick, the injured men were taken up the funnel-like shaft, while the others ascended by means of ladders, Captain Nicholson being the last to quit the dug-out that might have proved to be his grave.

After receiving medical attention, Selwyn and Joliffe were sent to the base hospital, while Captain Nicholson and Riflemen Carr, M'Turk, and M'Kane set out to rejoin their battalions at Messines village.

A steady trickle of Anzac wounded--mostly walking cases--making their way to the advance dressing-stations, gave indications that the Diggers were still hotly engaged. Although the British guns already in position were pounding away as hard as they could, there was a heavy fire from the hostile artillery, of which a formidable number had been placed in prepared positions behind the shattered ridge. With typical Teutonic thoroughness the Huns had prepared for the possibility of having Messines wrenched from their hands, and, having lost the ground, they were ready to swamp it with high-explosive shells before launching a counter-attack on a large scale.

Judging by the cheerfulness of the wounded, the New Zealanders were confident of being able to hold the captured village. To Captain Nicholson's question every man expressed his opinion that Fritz was badly beaten. Some of the pick of the Prussian and Bavarian regiments had already attempted to retrieve the lost ground, but had gone down against the brave lads of the Antipodes.

Malcolm found the bulk of his company entrenched on the right of the shell-racked village. A line of captured trenches had been reorganized and placed in a state of defence against its former masters. Since the threatened counter-attack had not yet materialized, most of the New Zealanders were resting in the dug-outs obligingly constructed by Fritz, who little thought that he would have to abandon his painstaking work except upon the conclusion of a victorious German peace.

Apart from an alarm in the early hours of the morning, when a very half-hearted attack was easily repulsed, the New Zealanders spent an undisturbed and comparatively restful night.

With morning came most reassuring and gratifying reports from the whole of the Messines Front. English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, Canadian, and Anzac troops had gained their respective objectives with comparatively few losses, taking into consideration the important results. Once more the prestige of the German army had suffered a severe blow, while, in prisoners alone, the Huns lost more than the total casualties of the successors to the "contemptible little army".

It was not to be supposed that the High Command of the Hun armies would suffer the loss of an important position without making desperate and determined efforts to turn the scale of victory. Fresh divisions were hurried up to relieve the wornout and demoralized troops, whose *moral* had, been badly shaken by the stupendous explosion under Messines Ridge, and the fierce infantry attacks that succeeded it.

Across the shell-pitted ground dense masses of field-grey-clad Huns were hurled, supported by a terrific covering fire from the German guns.

In the hastily-constructed trenches beyond the ruined village the New Zealanders awaited the assault with a quiet confidence. To Malcolm Carr the experience was a novel one. During his comparatively brief service in the trenches he had been called upon to repel isolated raids, both by day and night; he had taken part in several successful excursions over the top to harry the German trenches; he had participated in one of the greatest actions on the Western Front; but, for the first time, he was helping to man a captured position against a massive hostile counter-attack.

This was something very different from anything he had previously experienced. The rousing cheer, the surging mass of khaki-clad figures over the top, and the mad excitement of the headlong rush were absent. In silence the riflemen manned the firesteps and awaited the assault of Germany's crack "shock troops ".

Overhead, far above the bursting shells, aeroplanes were swooping hither and thither. Whether they were friend or foe the Diggers hardly troubled to ascertain. As a matter of fact they were both, and high in the air fierce combats were in progress as the Hun airmen sought in vain to drive off the almost too daring British fliers.

One thousand yards--nine hundred--eight hundred.

Not a shot was fired from the Anzac trenches--although dozens of Maxims, Lewis guns, and rifles were ready to receive Fritz in the strictly conventional way--until the foremost of the serried grey-clad masses drew within seven hundred yards. Then, like the outpouring of a dozen concentrated thunderstorms, British guns that hitherto had been silent set up a barrage--so heavy that the German fire, furious though it was, seemed negligible in comparison.

In front and in the rear of the advancing German infantry the hail of shells descended like a giant twin portcullis, while the intervening space was thick with shrapnel. The dense masses desisted, recoiled, and attempted to flee through the barrage, while death and wounds took heavy toll.

A whistle sounded; others took up the call. Whether the order to advance was premeditated, or given on the spur of the moment, few of the New Zealanders knew. At any rate, now was the opportunity to secure another few hundred yards of ground.

"Up and over, boys!"

A line of khaki topped the parapet, leapt into the open, and broke into a steady double.

Malcolm, with bayonet fixed and magazine charged, found himself right-hand man of C Company as the Diggers surged onwards in extended order.

A few scared and demoralized Huns, who had contrived to dodge the barrage, came towards them slowly, as if uncertain of their reception. With hands upraised and cries of "Kamerad" on their lips the surrendering men passed between the advancing troops, who saluted them with ironical advice to "Cut it out, and not so much of your Kamerad stunt!"

Presently the battalion slowed down. The men were treading on the heels of their own barrage. So perfectly were the shells falling that there was little fear of one falling short and playing havoc with the khaki boys. With a feeling of complete confidence, akin to that of a child for its mother, the New Zealanders literally clung to the skirts of the barrage, at the same time adjuring the distant artillerymen to "Push it along and let's get on!"

In response to a signal from an observing aeroplane the barrage suddenly parted, some of the guns surging round to the right, others lifting and pounding away at a mass of German reserves. Immediately in front of C Company was a gap that would bring men to hand-grips with the foe.

Nothing could have kept the Anzacs back. In vain a daring German aeroplane swooped down and brought a machine-gun to play with absolute impartiality upon the combatants, finally to "crash" upon the corpse-covered ground. With no visible result did the Huns send up their so-called S.O.S. signals for aid. The retirement became a rout, while the New Zealanders pressed hard at the heels of the opponents.

"Enough of that, boys!" ordered Captain Nicholson, who of all the company officers was the senior one unwounded. "Dig yourselves in and stand fast."

Already the haunting suspicion that C Company had pushed on in advance of the rest of the line assailed the young officer. Times without number he had been impressed, and had impressed others, with the need of keeping in touch with the flanking companies. How the line ran, whether the Australian troops of the right were in advance or to the rear of the New Zealanders, he knew not. Dense clouds of low-lying smoke hid everything. The Huns were releasing prodigious quantities of poison gas. Away to the left an advance ammunition-dump went up with a terrific explosion.

In a slight depression, littered with coils of severed barbed wire and displaced sand-bags, Captain Nicholson got his men in hand. The defeated Prussians were being swallowed up in the haze of battle, but dense masses of grey-clad troops were advancing under cover of the liberated

gas.

There was no doubt about it, C Company had lost touch. Every man realized the fact, although none remarked it to his comrade. The heat of battle over, they set to work to consolidate and hold the position they had carried at such a cost. Rifle and machine-gun bullets were beginning to spray the ground anew.

Captain Nicholson scribbled a few lines in his pocket-book, tore out the leaf, and beckoned to Malcolm, who was engaged in collecting sand-bags.

"Cut it out, Carr!" he shouted. The order, puzzling to a Tommy, was plain to the rifleman addressed. Desisting from his task, he approached his officer and saluted.

"Find the C.O.," ordered Captain Nicholson. "Give him this--at all costs."

Malcolm took the folded paper and thrust it in his pocket, unfixed his bayonet and returned it to the scabbard, slung his rifle, and started off at a run in the direction of the invisible Messines village. According to the ethics of the Great War a dispatch-bearer must walk while under shell-fire, but when exposed to rifle-fire he may run without loss of dignity or prestige. And, since the matter was urgent, Malcolm felt glad that he was not to traverse a shell-watered zone.

Wounded men, both friend and foe, called imploringly as he passed. Beyond a few cheering words to his helpless comrades he could do nothing to aid them. His errand was too pressing. There were dead, too, in ghastly heaps, some with their fingers still clutching the throats of their opponents, others in a naturally recumbent position that gave the appearance of having fallen easily to sleep.

All the while bullets were whizzing overhead, thudding against the debris that littered the ground, or ricochetting from the hard earth. In his imagination Malcolm felt that he was the target for a whole Prussian division. No wonder, then, that his heart was in his mouth as, bending low, he darted from shell-hole to shell-hole and took advantage of the slightest shelter afforded by a rise in the terrain.

A feeling of utter loneliness assailed him. It was different from advancing with tried and trusted comrades around him and the inspiring dash that accompanied the rush of men confident of victory. Save for the slain and wounded he was alone in the open, not facing bullets, but followed and overlooked by a regular hail coming from an unseen source.

"I've got the wind up this time," he muttered. "Hope I'm on the right track. I don't remember passing this----"

His foot tripped on a strand of wire, the lowermost and only intact part of an entanglement. Down he crashed heavily, his shrapnel-helmet rolling down a declivity for a distance of nearly ten yards.

"Buckshie for me this time," he exclaimed, without making an effort to rise. "Wonder where I've got it?"

Gradually he made the discovery that beyond a grazed instep, for one of the barbs had penetrated his boot, he was unwounded. His ankle was throbbing painfully. In his fall he had sprained it. With an effort he regained his feet, clenched his teeth as a sharp twinge shot through his frame, and again pushed onwards. Although at a deminished pace he still ran--not from inclination but from a sense of duty.

A bang and a cloud of white smoke high above his head told Malcolm that the guns were renewing their activity.

"Shrap., and I've lost my helmet!" he exclaimed. "I'll lose my head next, if I haven't done so already. By gum, I'm out of my tracks!"

He stopped and surveyed his surroundings. He was now quite alone. Even the dead and wounded were no longer in evidence. Smoke limited his range of vision to a distance of less than a hundred yards. Beyond, a few gaunt stumps of trees loomed through the pungent vapour like distorted shadows. With the sun completely obscured, he had no means of ascertaining his direction. For all he knew he might have followed a semicircular course. The sound of the guns helped him not at all. Which were the hostile and which the British artillery was a question he was unable to answer.

A whiff of nauseating gas drifted across his path. His right hand sought his anti-gas mask. It had vanished. Only a portion of one of the straps remained; it had been completely severed by a bullet.

And now another difficulty arose. The deadly gas used by the Huns, having a density greater than air, has a tendency to fill the hollows and leave the high ground comparatively clear. On Malcolm's front the ground rose gradually to a height of about twenty feet. While it might afford protection from the noxious vapour, the ridge was certainly open to rifle-fire. Nor could Carr understand why, in a temporarily-deserted expanse, there should be such a persistent hail of

machine-gun fire.

"Better to risk a bullet than a dose of gas," decided the rifleman, and with this intention he breasted the slope as rapidly as his sprained ankle would allow.

"Might get a sight of the village, too," he soliloquized as he neared the summit of the ridge.

Something struck him sharply on the hip. Mechanically he glanced down. The butt of his slung rifle was splintered, the brass heel-plate curiously twisted. A piece of shell, which otherwise would have inflicted a dangerous if not mortal wound, had been intercepted by the rifle.

"A miss is as good as a mile," he remarked to himself.

The sensation akin to panic had passed. A kind of blind fatalism gripped him.

"If I'm booked to be plugged it's no use getting flurried over it," he continued, talking aloud. His voice seemed strange and distant, but for want of someone with whom to converse it afforded him a slight sense of companionship--an audible indication that he was still alive. "On the other hand, if my number isn't up, why worry? All the same, I should like to know how far I'm away from Messines."

Fifty yards ahead was a zigzag trench, its direction only discernible by interrupted sections of sand-bags and badly-shattered wire. Subjected earlier in the day to a terrible artillery pounding, it had been abandoned, but whether by Briton or Hun there was no indication except by closer examination. Evidently it was the rearmost of an intricate system of field-fortifications, for Malcolm was on the parados side while beyond, merging into smoke and haze, were other ramifications of the maze of trenches, all silent and deserted.

"They are bound to lead somewhere," was Malcolm's surmise. "To the Messines salient most likely. I'll risk it. It's certainly safer than in the open, so here goes."

Choosing a gap in the parados, Rifleman Carr cautiously slid on to the floor of the trench. The effort gave his ankle a wrench that sent a pain through his leg like the searing of a hot iron.

"I'll get there if I have to crawl for it," he muttered. "There's one thing certain, I won't be able to go back."

The trench was dry and the floor made good going, except in places where the sand-bags had slipped and formed awkward obstacles. There were no indications as to who were the owners of the place. Discarded British and German rifles, clips of cartridges, and other articles were impartially strewn about.

Just as Malcolm was approaching the fourth or fifth bay a heavy shell landed about twenty yards from the parapet. With a concussion that sent sand-bags flying and hurled tons of dirt high in air the missile exploded.

Bending to avoid the flying fragments that were descending like rain, Malcolm, regardless of his sprained foot, bolted round the traverse, and before he was fully aware of the fact he had blundered right into a party of Huns.

CHAPTER XXII

A Prisoner of War

It would be difficult to say who were the most taken aback: the Boches at the sight of a khaki-clad man who might or might not be the foremost of a party of trench raiders, or Malcolm on finding himself confronted by a score of fully-armed Germans.

The New Zealander's first impulse was to unsling his rifle. By use of his magazine he might drive the Huns into the next bay, and, profiting by the diversion, effect a smart retirement. The weapon was useless; the piece of shell that had smashed the butt had jammed the bolt action. The rifle was little better than a broken reed.

Malcolm turned and ran, but he had forgotten his sprained ankle. Before he had taken a couple of strides his legs gave way under him, and like a felled ox he collapsed upon the duck-boards.

Even as he lay prostrate his wits did not desert him. At all costs the note entrusted to him by his captain must be destroyed. Although ignorant of its contents, Malcolm felt assured that it was of great importance, otherwise Captain Nicholson would not have sent anyone across the open under a hail of bullets. With a deft movement the trapped rifleman removed the paper from his pocket and conveyed it to his mouth, and before the approaching Huns were upon him he had

swallowed the paper.

Ten seconds later he was in the grip of three hulking Saxons, who promptly bound his wrists behind his back and propped him up against the fire-step of the trench. The others, having satisfied themselves that the prisoner was an isolated straggler, crowded round and regarded him with undisguised interest.

Unable to understand a word Of German, Malcolm was at a loss to follow their excited conversation. He managed to glean that there was a discussion as to what the Huns would do with their prisoner. One particularly villainous-looking Boche was apparently advising that he should be shot outright, fingering the trigger of his rifle as if in joyous anticipation of playing the joint rôle of judge and executioner.

This amiable proposal was overruled by the others, and, after the prisoner had been searched and his belongings confiscated, Malcolm was marched along the trench, preceded and followed by men with loaded rifles.

Almost every yard of the way was occupied by troops. The men regarded the passing of the prisoner with slight interest. Their attention was principally directed upon some distant object, as if they were momentarily expecting an attack.

By one of those freaks of misfortune Rifleman Carr had completely lost his bearings, and in his wanderings had made his way towards the German trenches instead of towards the village of Messines. The shells and bullets that had given him such a warm time had come from his own lines, and in endeavouring to seek cover he had stumbled upon a temporarily-unoccupied section of the original enemy support-trenches. Even then he had no warning of his expensive mistake until he literally walked into a trap, the bay being filled with Saxons of the 209th Reserve Regiment.

Conducted into a deep and spacious dug-out, the prisoner was brought before two German officers. One, a major, was short and corpulent. Bald-headed, of florid complexion, and with abnormally-puffed eyelids, magnified still more by a pair of heavy convex glasses, the Saxon had Landsturmer written all over him. His companion was a tall, cadaverous lieutenant of about twenty-five, narrow-chested, and with protruding shoulder-blades. His hawkish features, upturned moustache, and colourless skin gave him a truly Machiavellian aspect. He wanted only a pointed beard and a ruff to complete the living representation of a sixteenth-century portrait of one of the ruffianly Margraves of the Palatinate.

"It's the long chap who will cause trouble," mentally decided Malcolm. "The big-paunched fellow won't count. They're going to question me, that's evident. If I try to bamboozle them there will be trouble. By Jove! I'll give them a few choice New Zealand catch-phrases, and see what happens."

At a sign from the Lieutenant the sergeant in charge of the escort deftly removed the prisoner's identity disc and handed it to his superior officer for inspection. The cadaverous one jotted down something in a pocket-book, and exchanged a few words with his confrere.

"Now listen," began the Lieutenant in broken English; "der truth we must haf. If lies you tell it useless is. We vill haf you shot at vonce. Tell me where you come from?"

"Ask me?" replied Malcolm promptly.

The Lieutenant frowned.

"I haf asked," he rejoined. "Where you come from--what position?"

"Cut it out!" ejaculated the lad.

His questioner bent over a map spread out on the table in front of him. With a puzzled expression on his face he addressed the Major. Malcolm distinctly heard the words "Cut it out" mentioned more than once.

The lad smiled inwardly. The sight of the two Germans poring over a map to find this non-existent locality of "Cut it out" tickled his sense of humour.

Foiled in that direction, and attributing his discomfiture to the fact that the military map was quite inadequate to present needs, the Lieutenant wrote in his notebook again.

"How you arrive at our lines?" continued the inquisitor.

Malcolm thought fit to reply in a totally irrelevant string of Maori phrases, concluding with "*Haeremai te kai*" (come to dinner) and a decisive shake of his head.

By the time he had finished the Hun lieutenant's face was a study in angry astonishment.

"It is evident," he remarked in German to his companion, "that the prisoner is one of the Englander's mercenaries--from Portugal, perhaps, or even from one of those outlandish and unheard-of nations that have presumptuously declared war against us. The fact that his identity

disc proclaims him to be a New Zealander proves nothing, except that the English are liars. I was always under the impression that New Zealanders were black, tattooed savages. Since the prisoner is worthless to us I would suggest that he be shot forthwith."

The Major shook his head.

"Do not be too hasty, von Rügen. Shooting prisoners would be all very well if we were not in a vile plight ourselves. What would happen to you and me if those Englanders repeated the success they had over the 46th Westphalians? By some means the enemy found out that von Tondhoven had executed the two sergeants who were caught just beyond our entanglements--and what was the result? Not a single officer of the 46th Regiment was given quarter. Here we are cut off from our supplies. At any moment that infernal barrage might start, and then the khakis would be swarming on top of us. No, no, von Rügen, I am not at all satisfied with your suggestion, nor am I at the prisoner's replies."

To Malcolm's mortification the Major held up a packet of documents taken from the prisoner--his pay-book, a few letters and post cards from far-off New Zealand, and a few snapshots of incidents on board the transport *Awarua*.

Scribbling on a piece of paper, the Major handed the slip to the prisoner. On it was written:

"How is you not understand English, since we haf writing on you discovered?"

Malcolm studied the writing with feigned interest, puckering his brow and frowning in assumed perplexity. By a pantomime display he obtained a pencil from the Sergeant, and wrote rapidly and distinctly "'Nuff sed" in reply.

A reference to two different Anglo-German dictionaries followed, accompanied by many guttural ejaculations from the baffled Teutons. "I will have the prisoner sent back to-night," decided the Major. "We have evidently captured one of a new type. He will interest the Intelligence officers---- Himmel! Is that the cursed barrage commencing?"

A heavy shell landing in close proximity to the dug-out set the concrete girders shaking. With a hurried gesture the Major dismissed the prisoner, and, accompanied by the saturnine lieutenant, bolted to a flight of steps leading to a still deeper refuge.

At a guttural order, the purport of which there was no mistaking, Malcolm turned, and, surrounded by his guards, hurried out into the trench.

There was good cause for haste. With the exception of a few sentries, stationed in concreted, sand-bagged shelters, the trench was deserted. The Saxon infantry had bolted to their dug-outs like startled rabbits, as shell after shell screeched overhead and burst amongst the labyrinth of trenches in the rear.

Speedily Rifleman Carr, now a prisoner of war, found himself in a dug-out with half a dozen Huns for companionship.

For two reasons the Boches were favourably disposed towards their captive. One was that they were Saxons, who, hating the Prussian and all his works, were less imbued with the doctrine of hate towards the enemies of the Fatherland. The other was the knowledge that, in the event of a successful British infantry attack, the presence of a well-treated prisoner would tend considerably to mitigate their treatment when the tables were turned. Over and over again instances have come to light of whole companies of Huns surrendering to their late prisoners when the lads in khaki were swarming with fixed bayonets over the parapets and into the enemy trenches.

Malcolm acted warily. Suspecting a trap, he refrained from verbal conversation, although several of the Saxons could speak a few words of English. He thanked them by signs when they provided him with a portion of their own meagre fare and showed him their treasures in the form of photographs of relatives and places in the Fatherland.

Meanwhile the bombardment continued without intermission. Although the expected barrage had not put in an appearance, the British "heavies" were lavishly showering shells upon the German position. The ground was trembling continually, acrid-smelling smoke found its way into the deepest dug-outs. Wherever a direct hit occurred it was all U P with the luckless inmates of the crowded underground shelters. Twenty or thirty feet of earth, reinforced with concrete and sand-bags, was not proof against the terribly destructive missiles.

From time to time, as shells landed unpleasantly near, the faces of the Germans grew long. Malcolm, too, felt far from comfortable. The possibility of being blown into infinitesimal fragments by British shells was not what he had bargained for. He was quite willing, for five shillings a day, to take his chance of being knocked out by the Boches, but----

The lugubrious faces of the Huns had the effect of making the rifleman pull himself together. At any rate, Fritz was not going to see that he had cold feet. Moistening his lips, Malcolm began to whistle.

In ordinary circumstances he could whistle well. Often while in billets or standing by in a dug-out his chum would ask him to oblige with a whistling solo; but now he was forced to confess that the result was not exactly melody.

"Nicht mehr!" exclaimed a corporal peremptorily.

Although he did not know what the Saxon said, the accent and the emphatic gesture were sufficient.

"He means 'shut up'," soliloquized Malcolm. "That's a nasty one. I suppose it gets on his nerves. Well, I'm not surprised. I fancy I was a trifle flat and wobbly."

A few seconds later the dug-out shook violently. Some of the men who were standing upright were thrown forward, gear was hurled from the racks and shelves, while the concrete walls cracked from top to bottom, bulging ominously under the pressure of earth behind them.

"A near one!" decided Malcolm. "Another five yards this way and it would have been all up."

A hoarse voice shouted through the tunnel that formed the entrance. Without showing any tendency to bestir themselves the men looked at each Other enquiringly. Evidently they were wanted outside, but were debating as to who should make the first move. The carrying out of orders promptly--generally the German soldiers' chief concern--was noticeably absent. It was not until the command had been given three times that the men reluctantly left their shelter.

Left to himself, Malcolm discussed the situation. Now was his opportunity to slip out at the heels of the Hun and trust to luck in the open. If he escaped being blown up, he might be able to go over the parapet unobserved and make his way towards the British lines. While the bombardment was in progress there was little chance of the Huns manning the trenches. On the other hand, prudence counselled him to stay where he was. Should the infantry attack develop and be successful his rescue would be merely a question of time. Then again came the maddening thought that if the British troops did not capture the position he would remain a prisoner in the hands of the enemy.

"I'll chance it and go outside," he decided.

Without, the air was thick with smoke. At the most, Malcolm could see but twenty to twenty-five paces to right and left. In front was the parados, the ground covered with a yellowish dust from the high-explosive shells. At the entrance to the dugout into which he had been taken to be questioned, a dozen men were vigorously plying pick and shovel, the while urged to still greater efforts by a gigantic sergeant.

A 12-inch shell had fallen on top of the shelter. Concrete earth and sand-bags were not proof against the terrific impact, despite the fact that thirty feet of solid material formed the roof of the subterranean retreat.

"They might just as well save themselves the job," thought Malcolm. "Mephistopheles and the Fat Boy won't be worth troubling about, I guess. It was a jolly good thing that they didn't invite me to stay and have dinner with them. Now for it!"

Making for a gap in the parapet the lad began to crawl up the steps of disentangled sand-bags and trench-props. The British guns were evidently lifting. Although the air was "stiff" with screeching shells, the missiles were flying high overhead and bursting far behind the German first-line trench. Machine-gun and rifle-firing had ceased. Beyond the few men engaged in digging out their unfortunate officers the normally lightly-held front trench was practically deserted.

"I'll win through yet!" exclaimed the lad, voicing his thoughts aloud.

The next instant a lurid flash leapt up from the ground almost in front of him. Hurled violently backward by a terrific blast again, Malcolm had a fleeting vision of the ground rising up to meet him, and then everything became a blank.

CHAPTER XXIII

At Düren Camp

When he recovered consciousness Malcolm Carr found himself lying on a bundle of straw in an advance dressing-station. He was puzzled greatly. He could not imagine how he came there, or why he should be there at all. He had no recollection of being lifted by the blast of a shell. Somehow things didn't seem quite right.

Gradually the chain of events during the last few hours connected itself. He remembered the stand of C Company; being sent off by the platoon-commander with an urgent message; blundering into the hostile lines; being made prisoner and attempting to escape.

"And now I've got a buckshie," he decided. "Wonder where I am?"

He raised his head and looked around. The effort sent a throbbing pain from the base of his neck to his spine. He felt bruised all over, while his left arm was tightly bandaged from elbow to wrist. A strange, almost uncanny silence seemed everywhere, and yet the place was teeming with activity.

The dressing-station was in the open. The ground was crowded with bundles of straw and stretchers, each occupied by a helpless human being. More stretchers were constantly arriving with their ghastly burdens. Men slightly wounded were staggering in, covered with dust, and looking utterly dejected. Not one had a smile upon his face.

Malcolm had seen an advance dressing-station more than once, where casualties were arriving after a stiff engagement. Then he had been struck by the cheerfulness shown by most of the men. Even the badly wounded were elated, for the day had gone well, and they were happy in the knowledge that the stiff task imposed upon them had been brilliantly accomplished. But things seemed different here.

In front of a partly demolished barn, over which was flying a Geneva Cross flag, covered ambulance motors were being filled up with wounded, who, their injuries attended to, were being dispatched to the base hospital. To Malcolm's bewilderment, the powerful motors started in absolute silence, while the heavy wheels made no sound as they jolted over the *pavé*.

Gradually the sensation of dizziness diminished, and it dawned upon Malcolm that he was still a prisoner. Everywhere the field-grey uniforms were conspicuous, but even that discovery did not explain the deep silence.

Making another effort, the rifleman sat up. The blanket that covered him had slipped off. From the waist upwards he was destitute of clothing. His skin was as yellow as that of a Chinese.

On the straw to his right was a Hun whose right leg had been badly injured. The man was trying to attract Malcolm's attention, but although his lips were moving no words fell upon the lad's ears.

In vain the New Zealander tried to reply. If he spoke he was unaware of it. The sound of his own voice was absent. He was deaf and dumb.

When Malcolm was thrown by the concussion of the bursting shell, he alighted in the trench he had left, unconscious, his uniform partly torn off, and his face and body dyed with the yellow fumes. In this state he lay insensible for several hours. When the bombardment cleared, the threatened infantry assault did not materialize. It was not intended that it should, the object of the artillery activity being to keep the Germans pinned to that section of their defences while other operations were being carried out in another part of the line. So, when the guns died down to a desultory shelling, the Huns set to work to clear up the badly-damaged trenches.

While the wounded were being removed, a couple of Prussian Poles, who were employed as ambulance-men, placed Malcolm on a stretcher, and threw a discarded greatcoat over his legs, not realizing that he was an enemy, since the remnants of his khaki uniform were indistinguishable from the field-grey after they had been "chromed" by the fumes of bursting shells. Otherwise it is doubtful whether the stretcher-bearers would have removed a wounded enemy. Without the discovery being made, the New Zealander was taken to the German advance dressing-station, and his injuries dressed, and thus he found himself wounded and a prisoner.

It was later in the evening when Malcolm was taken by motor-ambulance to a railway station twenty miles behind the lines. With him were about twenty Prussians, Saxons, and Würtemburgers, whose demeanour was one of extreme dejection. Their wounds, although serious, were not of a nature to debar them from further military service. They realized that they were going to be patched up in order to be again sent to the front, more than likely to the terrible Ypres district. Now that they were wounded they bemoaned the fact that their injuries were not greater, and envied those of their comrades who were permanently disabled and unfit for further service in the field.

"Wonder what Fortescue would say if he saw me in these togs?" thought Malcolm as he surveyed the German greatcoat and trousers with which he was provided on arriving at the station. "And Selwyn? 'Not too much of that, Digger'--that's what he'd chuck at me. I shouldn't be surprised if the Huns take me for one of themselves."

Which was exactly what they were doing.

For two hours the ever-increasing throng of wounded waited in the station. Momentarily men dropped, to be left to the rough-and-ready attentions of their comrades. The few doctors and their assistants, utterly fatigued by reason of the long and continual strain, were almost useless as far as their duties were concerned. Once again the German machine of thoroughness and

precision had broken down.

At last a hospital train drew up just outside the station. To Malcolm's surprise the Red Cross carriages disgorged a battalion of fully-equipped troops. Fearing attacks from British airmen, the German High Command had given orders that, as far as possible, troops were to be moved toward the Front in hospital trains, while, to bring up additional machine-guns with the least danger and delay, the motor-ambulances, still displaying the symbol that all unkultured nations respect, were employed to their utmost capacity.

The train then ran into the station, and the entrainment of the wounded commenced. Beyond the red cross on the sides and tops of the carriages there was nothing to distinguish the train from any other. Marshalled in military formation, the "walking cases" boarded the carriages, which were similar to the fourth-class compartments of the German State Railways--hard wooden seats not excepted.

Of the next twelve hours Malcolm had no clear recollection. Frequent stoppages were the only respite to the otherwise incessant jolting. At one station very inferior bread and watery soup were served out. Beyond that the wretched "cannon-fodder" went hungry until the train drew up at a large town that Malcolm afterwards knew to be Frankfort.

Here the conditions in hospital were passable, although food was poor and meagre; but Rifleman Carr made progress, and in less than a week he had recovered from the effect of his wounds except for his speech and hearing.

Several times doctors and nurses wrote questions for him to answer, but, not understanding German, he could only shake his head. Taken for a Saxon suffering from shell-shock, he was afterwards left severely alone as far as conversation was concerned.

One morning an orderly went round the ward distributing postcards to enable the patients to write to their relations and friends.

"Wonder if I can get a letter through to New Zealand?" thought Malcolm. "I'll have a cut at it anyhow."

Greatly to the curiosity of an observant nurse, the lad obtained a postcard, and wrote to his father, signing himself "R/m 99,109, Malcolm Carr, N.Z.R.B., prisoner of war."

The nurse, puzzled that the patient could write and yet be unable to read, called a doctor's attention to the fact, and Malcolm's postcard was kept back for examination.

Within five minutes the hospital ward was in a state of uproar, for the discovery had been made that an enemy was enjoying the same treatment and attention as a good German. After being subjected to a searching and protracted examination, the questions being written in English, Malcolm was summarily "fired out" to an unknown destination.

Escorted by two Landsturmers, and garbed in very motley attire, the New Zealander was marched through the streets to the railway station, and after a six-hour journey the train stopped at a small station that, from the name on the *Fahrkartenausgabe*, was called Düren. In what part of Germany Düren was situated Malcolm had not the faintest idea. He had yet to learn that it was a small town in Rhenish Prussia roughly midway between Aix-la-Chapelle and Cologne.

The prisoner kept his eyes open during his progress through the narrow streets. Everywhere were signs of industrial activity. The workshops were disgorging their occupants--old men, women, and children, whose emaciated features contrasted vividly with those of the prosperous munition-workers in Great Britain. At the outskirts of the town was a large, newly-erected factory, from which Gotha machines, their wings folded for transit, were being taken away in large motor-lorries, while sandwiched between the building and the outskirts of the town proper was a large barbed-wire compound within which were rows of wooden huts.

This was Malcolm's prison camp. So great was the Huns' fear of air raids over the industrial towns of the Rhine valley that several of the larger places of detention for prisoners of war had been broken up, and the men sent to numerous small camps in close proximity to towns within the radius of hostile airmen.

"This will be a tight hole to squeeze through," soliloquized the new arrival, as he noted the elaborate precautions taken against any attempt on the part of the prisoners to escape. The double gateway was strongly guarded by armed troops, assisted by a particularly ferocious-looking type of dog. Between the outer and inner rectangular fences, a distance of fifty feet, more guards kept vigilant watch; while at frequent intervals tall look-out boxes had been erected to enable the sentries to keep the whole of the camp under observation. Both fences were made of barbed wire, supported by massive posts, and so Criss-crossed that even a cat would have had considerable difficulty in creeping through without injury from the sharp spikes.

Having handed over their charge, the two Landsturmers were given a receipt for the delivery of the prisoner, and then dismissed.

Malcolm's latest jailers were four stolid-looking Prussians, who, badly wounded in Flanders,

had been retained as guards at the camp. By them the New Zealander was conducted to a building just within the second or inner gate. Here he was registered and given a number, and afterwards subjected to perfunctory examination by a doctor, who, finding that the prisoner exhibited no trace of infection or contagious disease, passed him as a fit inmate of the camp. In an adjoining room he was given a large sack and a filthy horse-cloth. The former, when filled with straw, was to serve as a bed; the latter was his one and only blanket. A printed list, in English, of the numerous rules and regulations was then handed to him, and the initiation ceremony of the new member of the Düren Prison Camp was completed.

Escorted by an armed orderly, Malcolm was taken down the broad central road. A few prisoners in khaki rigs were standing disconsolately at the doors of the huts. Most of them shouted a rough but well-meaning greeting to the new arrival, to which Malcolm, understanding the purport of the unheard words, replied by a wave of his hand. In vain Rifleman Carr looked for a New Zealand uniform: these were mostly Tommies and Jocks, a sprinkling of Canadians, and two West Indians; Anzacs seemed to be unrepresented in the motley throng of captives.

Presently Malcolm's escort halted, pointed to one of the numbers on the prisoner's card, and then to a corresponding number on the door of a hut. It was an intimation to the effect that, during the pleasure of the All Highest, Rifleman Carr was to be his guest in hut No. 7 of the Düren Detention Camp.

"What's the latest, chum?" enquired a Tommy as Malcolm entered. "Blow me if 'e ain't barmy!"

"Rot!" ejaculated another. "He's deaf. What's his regiment, I wonder? Come on, chaps, let's make the poor beggar comfortable."

"A jolly hard thing to do in this rotten hole," added a third. "Who's got a pencil?"

A stump was presently forthcoming, and, writing upon a piece of brown paper, the last speaker, a sergeant of an English line regiment, contrived to get in touch with the new arrival.

"He's a New Zealander," he announced to his companions. "Isn't there one of their chaps in No. 4? I'll give him the tip."

So saying, the good-natured non-com. left the hut, to return with a tall, bearded man, whose uniform was sufficiently intact to indicate that he belonged to the New Zealand Rifle Brigade. Even his hat was tolerably well preserved, even to the encircling red cord.

For a few minutes the two men from "Down Under" stood facing each other, astonishment and incredulity written in their faces. Then, with a loud bang, something seemed to give way in Malcolm's ears. With a vehemence that surprised himself, Malcolm Carr almost shouted the name of "Peter!"

The next instant the brothers were shaking hands and rapping out questions, to the surprise of the other occupants of the hut, who had suspicions that they were the victims of a practical joke.

"I don't know that it's so very remarkable after all," declared the Sergeant. "Plenty of fellows, deaf and dumb through concussion, have recovered speech and hearing by a shock of some sort. My word, those Diggers can talk!"

He crossed the room to where the brothers were exchanging experiences.

"Look here," he said. "I'm in charge of this hut, and my pal Jeffson is responsible for No. 4. After roll-call I'll arrange for you (indicating Malcolm) to doss in No. 4, and get another man from there to take your place here. Only, if you don't want to get me into a regular row with the camp commandant, take care to slip back before morning roll-call."

Peter Carr's greatest concern was the fact that he had never received a letter or parcel from New Zealand. He had written several times, but Malcolm was able to inform him that, up to a comparatively recent date, their father had not heard anything about Peter beyond the official statement that he was wounded and missing.

"I say," remarked the elder Carr in the course of the evening, "we'll have to make a change--a shift round. I've a Canuk for my linked man."

"Linked man?" echoed Malcolm. "What's that?"

"We're expecting and hoping for a raid," explained Peter. "Only three nights ago we heard bombs dropping on Julich, which is but a few miles away. So if some of our airmen do make a stunt, we'll take our chances of being blown up and make a dash for liberty. Since it would be madness for the whole crush to keep together, we've arranged to separate, if we do get clear, and work in pairs. Everything's all cut and dry, and we are told off in twos; but I'll push the Canadian on to the previous odd man out, and we'll stick together."

It was long after midnight when the reunited brothers ended their conversation. Nor did sleep follow quickly as far as Malcolm was concerned. It was not the constant clatter of machinery and the rasping of dozens of circular saws in the adjoining factories that kept him awake, but the

excitement of the day, culminating in the discovery of his elder brother, whom he had regarded as dead for months past.

Early next morning the prisoners were served with a meagre and ill-nourishing meal, consisting of turnip soup and a dirty-coloured liquid that was supposed to be coffee. This was supplemented by food sent from home, the men putting the edible contents of all their parcels into a common stock. At six they were told off in gangs for work either on the roads or in the fields. The Huns had tried hard to compel them to labour in the mines, but such was the indomitable spirit of the luckless sons of the British Empire that the attempt ended in failure.

Malcolm was fairly fortunate in being in the same party as his brother, their work being to construct new roads in the vicinity of the large aircraft factory. The prisoners were too well guarded to have the faintest chance of escape. Even those in the open fields were careful to keep together; any man straying more than twenty yards from the rest of the party being liable to be shot by the numerous armed guards.

"All in good time, Malcolm," remarked his brother, when discussing the subject of escape. "It's not much use having a few minutes' liberty and then being done in. Two of the boys tried the game a short time ago; both were back within half an hour. One had to be carried in with a gunshot wound in both legs and a bullet through his neck. The other lost a couple of fingers, and was badly bitten by the watch-dogs. That sort of thing cools a fellow down a bit; but when we get a fair chance----!"

Days ran into weeks, weeks into months, but the expected agent of deliverance was not forthcoming. The men had made their plans. Food of a nature that would not deteriorate by keeping had been laid by at the cost of great self-sacrifice. A map, cut from a pre-war Baedeker, had been passed from hand to hand, in order to give the men a fair idea of their whereabouts.

One night the men were for the most part asleep on their straw mattresses, dog-tired with their labours, when the hitherto constant whirr of machinery stopped. Accustomed to the clang and clatter, the sleepers were aroused by the unusual silence. The hut was in darkness, for lights were luxuries denied the prisoners.

"What's up?" enquired one of the men, as a steam whistle began to send out a succession of high and low blasts.

"Time you were, chum!" replied Peter. "Out of it, boys, and get your gear! Now's our chance!"

CHAPTER XXIV

Escape

Deftly and quickly the men dressed in the darkness. Much practice enabled them to don their scanty clothing and badly-worn foot-gear.

"Fritz has got the wind up properly this time," declared the Sergeant, as the sound of scurrying feet and cries and shouts of alarm rose on the still air. "Work's knocked off for the rest of the night, I reckon, even if our airmen don't pay Düren a visit."

He went to the door and peered cautiously down the roadway. Between the wire fences the watchdogs were barking furiously, adding to the din as the workers poured from the factories and rushed to their homes.

"The Boches are still on guard," he reported, "an' the dogs; but ain't they in a funk. I can see their bayonets shaking."

"The dawgs', Sargint?" asked a man facetiously.

"But no sign of our airmen," continued the non-com., ignoring the chartered funny man's question. "Hope they won't give the show a miss after all. All ready, you chaps?"

In the town the uproar was subsiding. The siren had ceased its two-pitched wail. The last of the powerful engines had stopped its belated purr. Even the watch-dogs were quieting down.

The night was dark but clear; overhead the stars shone resplendent; a soft north-easterly breeze rustled the leaves. In the distance the rumble of heavily-laden trains could be heard, but still no sound of approaching British aircraft.

A quarter of an hour passed in almost utter silence. The prisoners, assailed alternately by hopes and fears, strained their ears to catch the first faint purr of the aerial machines.

"By Jove, they're at it!" exclaimed one as a couple of vivid flashes, followed after a short interval by three in quick succession, lit up the south-western horizon.

"Shut up!" snapped the Sergeant, the while counting his pulse-beats between the first flash and the first report.

"Boom, boom--boom, boom, boom!"

The hollow, reverberating sound of five reports fell upon the listeners' ears.

"Ten miles off," declared the non-com., as calmly as if giving the range of a howitzer. "Good!"

Another flash, followed at a shorter interval by the crash of the exploding bomb told unmistakably that the raiders were approaching. The men felt like cheering. Even the prospect of being strafed by a British bomb did not cause them the slightest concern. In their blind faith they regarded a bomb as the key to unlock their prison doors.

Very faintly at first, then steadily increasing in volume, came the hum of many British aircraft.

"No Gothas this time!" exclaimed Peter, who, like the rest of the men, could distinguish with unfailing certainty the different "pitch" of the British and Hun machines.

"Here they are!" almost shouted Malcolm, pointing into the night.

He was not mistaken. Flying in perfect V-shaped formation, and at a low altitude that made the airmen more certain of hitting their objectives, were eleven biplanes standing out sharply against the star-lit sky.

"Crash! crash!! crash!!!"

Away on the left a battery of antis., the guns mounted on motor-lorries, opened a furious fire upon the rapidly-moving airmen. The air was thick with bursting shells, the flashes of which threw a lurid light upon the ground. The gunners were only a hundred yards or so from the barbed-wire enclosures.

"We'll have the shrapnel on our heads when they shorten the range," observed one man.

"No fear," replied Peter. "They'll be afraid of the stuff falling on their own thick skulls. Now, Malcolm, stand by. Hurrah, there go the white-livered Landsturmers!"

Which was a fact. Panic-stricken, the grey-bearded and bald-headed guards deserted their posts and bolted precipitately, as if by running they could outstrip a squadron of biplanes moving at a hundred miles an hour. The dogs, too, had changed their tune--instead of barking they were whining dolefully.

Right overhead the leading aircraft of the V formation seemed to swoop. The Huns, as Peter Carr had predicted, had ceased fire, and were tearing away to take up a fresh position whence they could serve their guns without fear of the earth-returning shrapnel peppering their gunners.

An ear-splitting roar announced that the strafing of Düren had commenced. A powerful bomb had landed fairly in the centre of the principal factory, blowing out the walls and sending showers of bricks, stones, tiles, and timber far and wide.

It was the first of several. The very ground seemed to emit fire, the earth trembled under the terrific concussions, dense clouds of smoke were rising up from the disintegrated buildings, while the din was indescribably awful.

"Now's our time!" roared the Sergeant. "No. 2 hut's empty. Good luck, chaps!"

Into the open the men ran, not away from the adjoining and badly-shattered factory but towards it. As they expected, some of the bombs had fallen wide of the building and had blown gaps in the double fence.

"Keep together, Malcolm," shouted Peter.

"You bet," replied his brother.

Unmolested, the crowd of prisoners slid boldly into the deep crater formed by the explosion of one of the missiles and scrambled up the other side. Almost before they were aware of it they had passed what had been lines of unclimbable fence. They were free men--but for how long?

Across the deserted main road and into the open country beyond, the fugitives ran, none to say them nay. Then, according to previous plans, they separated, each couple taking a different direction, until the two brothers found themselves alone.

Behind them the bombs were still falling. The raiders were circling over their objectives. Since they had flown such a long distance they were determined to do the job thoroughly. "Tip-and-run tactics" had no supporters in the British Air Service. "Make sure of your target, even if you have

to sit on it," was one of the maxims of the daring pilots belonging to a breed that produces the best airmen in the world, bar none.

Alternately running and walking briskly, the two Carrs covered a distance of about three miles without any attempt at caution. They were confident that no Hun was abroad that night within miles of the scene of the raid, with the exception of the anti-aircraft gunners. These, intent upon their work, and perforce kept to the highways, were not likely to give trouble. Right and left, within hailing distance, were other fugitives, but for all the sound they made they might be a league or more away.

Once Peter stopped to wrench up a couple of young saplings.

"Take this," he said, handing one to his brother. "It may come in handy."

Beyond that, no words were exchanged for the best part of an hour. Moving more cautiously, the twain set their faces resolutely towards the west and liberty.

Both brothers had had plenty of experience of night journeys in far-off New Zealand, but, in place of the Southern Cross, they now had the less-familiar Great Bear and the North Star to guide them.

Frequently they had to make detours in order to avoid isolated farm-houses. Once a considerable distance had to be traversed in order to pass a large village. The place was so shrouded in darkness that the fugitives were within a hundred yards of the nearmost house before they discovered the fact; for, although the sky was clear, a light ground-mist of ever-varying density made observation a matter of difficulty.

"It will be dawn in half an hour," remarked Malcolm.

"Yes, worse luck!" rejoined his brother. "We'll have to find somewhere to hide. That's the worst of these short nights. I wanted to cover a good thirty miles before daybreak, but it's doubtful whether we've done twenty. The question is, where can we hide?"

"Those trees," suggested Malcolm, pointing to a cluster of heavily-foliaged oaks.

"Not much. The Boches will make a mark on every tree within fifty miles of Düren. They'll take it for granted that every man of us will make for a tree-top. Long grass--*bonsor* if we can avoid treading it too much. Farm buildings--very doubtful. We'll carry on for another ten minutes, and keep one eye skinned for a suitable show."

Before they had covered another hundred yards the two men found that further progress was impeded by a broad canal. To the right the waterway was clear and uninterrupted, as far as the now-thickening mist permitted. To the left was a string of barges; beyond, looming faintly through the air, the outlines of a house and the uprights of a swing bridge.

"Lock-keeper's cottage," declared Peter. "There's a light burning. Friend Hans is evidently entertaining the bargees and ignores Kaiser Bill's lighting restrictions. We'll scout round and then take the liberty of crossing the lock bridge."

"One moment," remonstrated his brother. "Cover's what we are looking for. We aren't out to run up against a Boche lock-keeper. Can't we hide in one of these boats?"

Peter glanced doubtfully at the idle barges. There were four in a string, their bows pointing westwards. When the journey was resumed the coaly flotilla would be proceeding nearer the German-Dutch frontier--perhaps to Holland itself, as almost every ton of coal imported into that country, since the tightening of the blockade, came from the Westphalian pits and was exchanged for badly-wanted foodstuffs.

"Sit tight a minute," he said. "I'll have a look round."

Cautiously the elder Carr stepped from the bank upon the deck of the foremost barge. Even then his boots grated loudly upon the thick deposit of coal dust upon the grimy planks.

For some seconds he stood still, his ears strained to detect the first sounds of a disturbed sleeper. Reassured, Peter crept aft, where a slightly raised deck formed the roof of a small cuddy or cabin. The sliding hatch was closed, and secured on the outside by a padlock.

"It's pretty evident that the place is deserted," he decided, "unless Hans has locked Gretchen up inside while he clears out to see his pals. I wonder if there's a cuddy-hole in the other end of the boat, where the crew keep ropes and spare gear?"

Making his way for'ard, Peter discovered that there was a forepeak, but the cover was securely padlocked. No place of refuge there! He paused and surveyed the mound of coal glistening in the misty starlight. "I wonder--yes there was an old barrel on the bank; that will do."

Seized by an inspiration, Peter joined his brother.

"Look slippy!" he exclaimed. "We'll hide under the coal. We'll have to throw some of it

overboard first, and get this old barrel to form our trench props."

Silently the two men boarded the barge. At the after end of the cargo space, the roaming of the raised deck projected slightly. Here they set to work to remove a portion of the coal. Unless the stuff was unloaded there was little chance of discovery, since the bargee could not see the spot from where he stood to steer.

Working quietly and silently the New Zealanders removed a sufficient number of lumps of coal, and dropped them into the water without making a splash. In a very short time a hollow six or seven feet in length and three in breadth was excavated. The barrel staves, set slantwise between the sloping bank of coal and the after bulkhead, served as a roof, while, to camouflage their place of concealment, coal was piled on the boards until the new level was about the same as the original one.

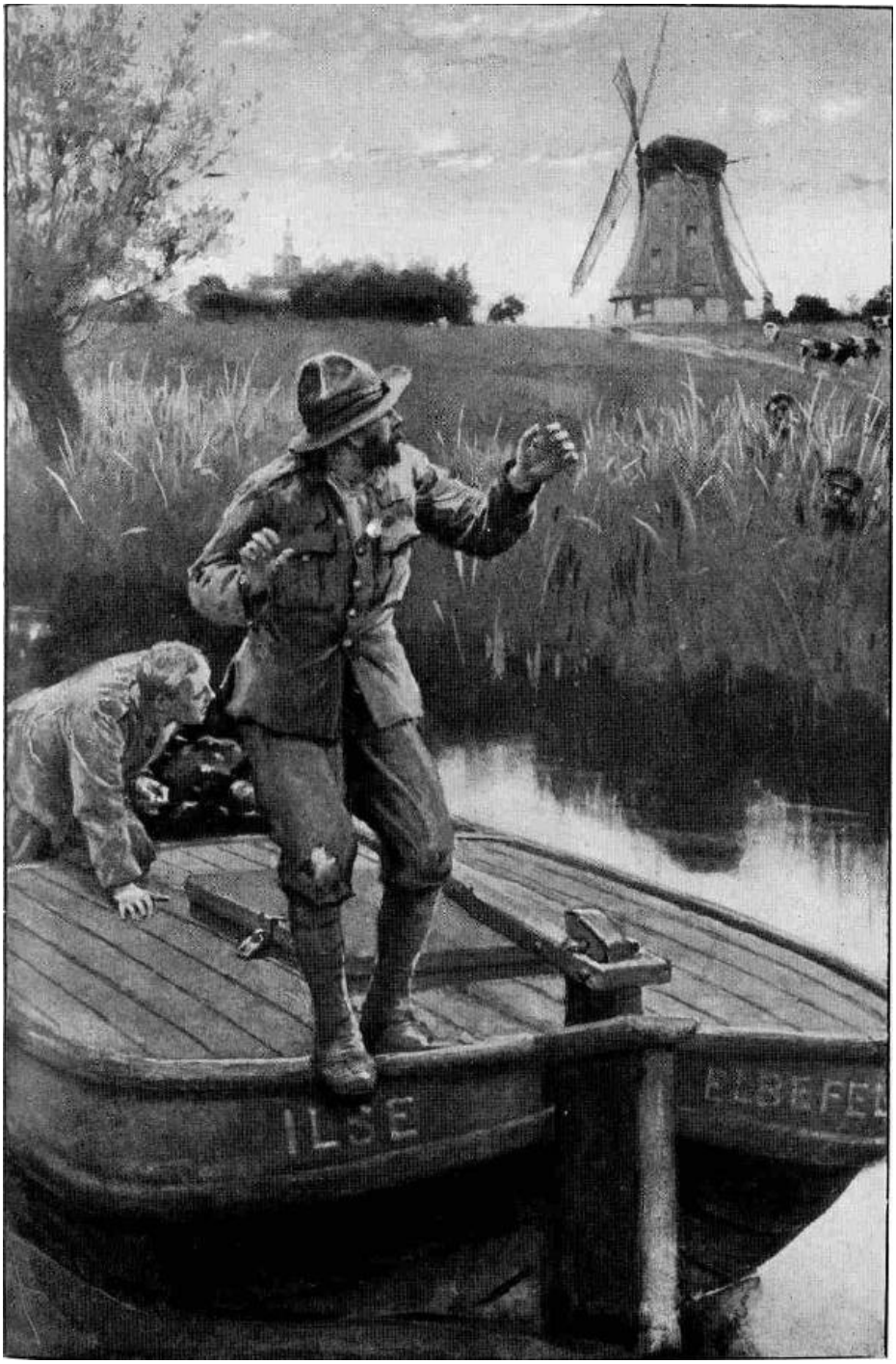
By the time they had completed their task dawn was breaking. The vivid crimson shafts of light and the rosy tints just above the horizon betokened the approach of bad weather.

"Spotted, by Jove!" ejaculated Malcolm, pointing towards the tall reeds that fringed the landward side of the tow-path.

Peter followed the direction of his brother's outstretched hand. Less than fifty feet away the reeds had been parted, disclosing the heads and shoulders of two men.

"Swim for it!" he exclaimed; but, as the Carrs ran to the side of the barge, with the intention of taking a header into the canal, a voice was heard calling:

"Not so much of a blinkin' 'urry, Diggers!"



[Illustration: "IT'S SPUD MURPHY AND JOE JENNINGS!"]

CHAPTER XXV

On the Barge

Pulling himself up just in time, Malcolm turned and looked again at the gap in the rushes as the two men emerged cautiously and crept towards the barge.

"It's Spud Murphy and Joe Jennings!" he exclaimed.

"Right you are, chum," replied the latter. "Thought as 'ow we were the farthest west of our little crush. You've been mighty nippy, mates. What's your move?"

"We've constructed a dug-out," replied Peter, pointing to the concealed lair, of which only the narrow entrance was visible.

"An' good luck to ye," rejoined the Irishman. "Faith we'll not be for keepin' ye company for long. Sure, a bargain's a bargain; but we'll jist be havin'a few wurrds wid yez before we carry on."

"You can try your luck with us," said Peter.

"Och, no!" replied Murphy. "Four's jist two too many. Will you have seen any of the bhoys?"

"Not a sign after we separated," answered the elder Carr. "Have you?"

"Only the Sargint, just about an hour ago," replied Private Jennings. "He'd lost touch with his chum an' was limpin' along. It's my belief he copped it from a splinter of a bomb. Anyway 'e wouldn't own up to it, and choked us off when we offered to give 'im a 'and. 'Ow much farther to the blinkin' frontier, Digger? It can't be much more, can it?"

Neither of the New Zealanders could give a definite reply, but, to cheer the men up, Peter expressed his opinion that another thirty miles would see them in Dutch territory.

"An' then it won't be long afore I'm in Blighty again," continued Jennings hopefully. "Three long measly years since I saw an English girl. Honest, I'll go down on me blinkin' knees an' kiss the shoe of the first girl I meet in Blighty, even if she's got a face like a muddy duck-board."

"You're speaking metaphorically, I take it," remarked Peter.

"I met a who?" enquired Private Jennings. "Lumme, I don't want to meet nobody while I'm on blinkin' German soil. Come on, Spud, let's be shiftin'. S'long, chums, an' good luck!"

As a matter of fact, the two fugitives, when they arrived at the canal bank, intended to hide themselves in a similar manner to that decided upon by Peter and Malcolm Carr. Finding themselves forestalled, their simple yet steadfast code of honour would not permit them to remain. The decision made at Düren Camp, that the escaping men should separate in pairs, was to be rigidly adhered to.

The New Zealanders realized the fact, and that it would be useless to renew their offer that the four should seek a common hiding-place.

"*Kia ora*, boys!" exclaimed Peter.

"And may we meet across the frontier!" added Malcolm.

Noiselessly the two Tommies lowered themselves into the water and swam with long steady strokes to the opposite bank. Creeping on all-fours across the tow-path, they vanished in the tall grass beyond.

"Jolly good sorts," declared Peter. "Come on, Malcolm; it's time we went to roost."

It was indeed. The daylight was rapidly increasing in strength. The mist was rolling away under the influence of a faint easterly breeze. Somewhere in the neighbourhood of the lock-keeper's cottage cocks were crowing lustily.

Malcolm backed into the coal-screened lean-to shelter; his brother followed, and, having deposited his bulky carcass in the hollow, began to pile lumps of coal over the entrance.

"Thank goodness they didn't whitewash the coal!" he remarked.

"Why whitewash?" asked his brother curiously.

"To stop thefts," was the reply. "I wondered what the idea was when I saw whitewashed stacks of coal in various railway sidings in England, so I enquired. A thief couldn't disturb the heap without leaving a tell-tale black gap in the whitened level of the stack. How about grub? I'm feeling hungry."

"And so am I," admitted Malcolm. "We're rationed on a four-days basis, aren't we?" The meal consisted of a Plasmon biscuit, a small bar of chocolate, and a slice of potato bread. The brothers ate in silence, their ears strained to catch the first sound of the returning bargees.

"We ought to have provided ourselves with water," whispered Peter. "We never bargained for being cooped up here, otherwise I would have brought a tin."

"I'm not thirsty," said Malcolm, "but isn't it cold?"

"Rather!" admitted Peter with conviction. "It's early morning yet, and the coal has lost its heat by radiation. Before midday we'll be hot enough, I fancy, with the sun pouring down upon our black roof. Hist! Footsteps!"

The sounds of heavily-shod feet crunching on the dew-soddened gravel drew nearer and nearer. Then voices could be distinguished. "Women!" whispered Malcolm.

The New Zealanders listened intently. The sound of footsteps ceased, although the voluble conversation continued. Then the thudding foot-falls drew nearer, while the unmistakable sound of a coil of rope being thrown upon the deck of one of the other barges was heard.

The clamour drew closer. Supposedly the string of barges was "manned" by women, the diminishing group halting at each barge to prolong the conversation before the crews boarded

their respective boats, until, by the clatter almost overhead, the fugitives knew that the last barge had received its complement--two, perhaps three, buxom and stolid German women.

Malcolm could hear the padlock to the cabin hatch being unlocked. Pails clattered, water sluiced along the diminutive after deck. Despite the dirty nature of the cargo, the crew were making determined efforts to keep the deck and Cuddy clean. Wood crackled in the cabin stove, smoke wafted for'ard, wisps eddying into the fugitives' hiding-place. Then came the appetizing odour of frying sausages.

An hour passed; still no indication that the barges were starting on their daily journey. Two boats, however, passed, proceeding in the opposite direction, each drawn by a horse. Malcolm could hear the lap of the water against the bows. That was a fairly sure indication, taking into consideration the direction of the wind, that the barges were going eastwards. With a following wind the ripples would be absent, or, at least, hardly perceptible.

As each barge passed there was a lively exchange of greetings between their crews and those of the stationary boats; but, in spite of the fact that the Carrs had picked up several German words during their period of captivity, the hidden listeners were unable to understand the conversation, beyond the knowledge that it referred largely to the air raid of the previous night.

Then a steam-propelled craft came up, fussily and noisily. Abreast of the foremost barge she reversed engines and manoeuvred until a heavy bump, followed by the groaning of rope fenders between the two craft, announced that the tug--for such was her rôle--as alongside.

"I hope they won't want to take in coal," thought Malcolm.

Moments of suspense followed, but there was no attempt on the part of the men comprising the tug's crew to remove any portion of the barge's cargo. Judging by the sounds, they were preparing to take the string of barges in tow, for Malcolm could hear a heavy hawser being dragged along the barge's waterways and made fast to the towing-bitts a few feet from the bows.

The engine-room telegraph-bell clanged. With the water hissing under her stern the tug forged ahead. Then, with a jerk, as the hawser took up the strain, the barge began to glide through the water. Then another jerk announced that barge No. 2 had started; another and another, until the cumbersome flotilla was in motion.

Already, cramped in their close quarters, the New Zealanders were beginning to feel the effects of the heat, as Peter had predicted. Overhead the hot sun poured pitilessly down upon the absorbent coal. The air in the confined space was hot and stuffy. Their throats burned with a torturing thirst--and the day was not more than seven hours old.

At irregular intervals the barges had to be passed through locks, and since the locks admitted only two boats at a time, and the hawser had to be cast off before the gate opened and secured again when the lower level was reached, progress was tediously slow.

Bridges, too, caused delays, for, in spite of vigorous blasts of the tug's fog-horn, the persons in charge displayed no great activity in manning the winches by which the obstructions were swung.

Early in the afternoon the flotilla approached a large town. The hum of industrialism was plainly audible to the two fugitives. The barges were constantly bumping into craft either tied up to the quays or proceeding in the opposite direction. There were swarms of mischievous boys on the banks, whose sole amusement seemed to be throwing stones at the irate bargees, until one of the women grew so furious that she leapt upon the coal that screened the New Zealanders' retreat, and picking up fragments hurled them at her tormentors.

It was another period of great anxiety. The barrel-staves creaked under the weight of the bulky German woman. Some of the lumps began to shift, while particles of coal dust, filtering through the interstices, floated in the already-stifling air, causing intense irritation to the fugitives' eyes and throats.

With feelings of profound relief the New Zealanders heard the woman striding back to her place beside the long tiller, while the next moment the already-gloomy dug-out was plunged into profound darkness.

The barge was entering a tunnel--one of several by which the canal was led underneath the town. Malcolm welcomed this new phase of the voyage in inland waters. The air was comparatively cool, a pleasing relief from the hot sunshine in the open; but before long the disadvantages of the tunnel made themselves apparent.

The din was terrific. The sound of the grunting and groaning of the tug's noisy engine was magnified tenfold, echoing and re-echoing along the domed expanse, while clouds of sulphurous smoke permeated everything. Yet, the while, there was the comforting thought that, unless the general direction of the canal had changed, every revolution of the tug's propellers was bearing the fugitives nearer the frontier and freedom.

On emerging from the tunnel the string of barges stopped alongside a wharf. The tug, its

mission accomplished, cast off and steamed away.

Malcolm felt anxious. Was this basin in the heart of a populous town to be the journey's end for the flotilla? If so, the brothers were in a very tight corner indeed.

Peter, too, was sharing in Malcolm's unspoken thoughts. More so when an unmistakably military command was issued at a few feet distant.

Peering through a gap in the barrier of lumps of coal the New Zealanders saw a corporal and three men armed with rifles standing on the wharf, with a crowd of interested spectators lounging in the background. Did it mean that the Huns had a suspicion that some of the escaped prisoners from Düren Camp had found a refuge on one of the barges?

Another order, and the soldiers stepped on board. The metal butts of the rifles clattered on the planks, and a spirited conversation ensued between the corporal--occasionally aided by his men--and the three women comprising the barge's crew.

During the conversation a lean and decrepit horse, led by a boy of about ten or eleven years of age, arrived at the wharf. In a leisurely manner one of the crew went forward and threw a rope, the end of which was fastened to the animal's traces. Most of this the New Zealanders could not see; while presently they heard the wretched beast's hoofs slipping on the cobbles as the barge slowly gathered way.

Although the soldiers remained on board, the Carrs' fears were not fully confirmed. The barge was about to enter another tunnel that happened to pass directly under a large and important munitions factory. With characteristic caution and forethought the Huns left nothing undone to safeguard their proceedings; hence, in the case of barges using the subterranean waterway, a corporal's guard was placed upon each during the journey through the tunnel.

Contrary to the New Zealanders' expectations, the barge, beyond stopping to land the guard, did not tie up for the night within the limits of the town; but, maintaining a two-miles-an-hour pace, held on until the lengthening shadows announced the close of another day.

Having made all secure, the women bargees left the boat. The sound of the led horse's hoofs grew fainter and fainter, until silence reigned supreme.

"How about it?" whispered Malcolm. "My throat is like a chunk of hot lava. If I don't get a drink of water I'll go dilly!"

"Wait till it's dark," suggested the cautious Peter. "If we remove the coal from the mouth of our hiding-place, and someone drifts past, there'll be trouble."

Peering through a narrow gap between the large lumps of coal, Peter made the discovery that the tow-path against which the barge lay was clear, and apparently right out in the country and free from the presence of buildings. The fact puzzled him. Why on two consecutive nights the barge should choose a berth far from a town or village required a lot of explanation. He could only suggest that the women manning the boat took care to avoid Populous districts, so that they could go ashore without exposing the cargo to the predatory activities of the war-tried inhabitants.

"Time!" whispered Peter at length.

Deftly the brothers set to work to remove the barrier, although once a large mass of coal slid noisily against the wooden bulkhead. When the opening was sufficiently enlarged, Malcolm crept cautiously out into the open, only to throw himself flat on his face.

The canal bank visible from the New Zealanders' shelter was deserted, but on the opposite side of the waterway was a large three-storied, red-tiled house. At one of the open windows sat two men smoking long, bent-stemmed pipes. From their elevated situation they could command the whole of the exposed surface of the barge's cargo. The wonder was that the sight of Malcolm's head and shoulders emerging from the hole had escaped their notice.

Quick to perceive that something was amiss, Peter forbore to question his brother. In deep suspense Malcolm lay with his face flattened against the coal, scarce daring to move a muscle, and fervently expressing a wish that the night would speedily grow darker than it was.

A quarter of an hour passed. Judging by the persistence with which the two smokers stuck to their seats by the open window, Malcolm felt certain that they had a special interest in the barge and its contents.

Presently Malcolm felt himself in a cold sweat, for the sound of approaching footsteps came from the tow-path. Although the new-comers trod stealthily, the stillness of the air and the conducting properties of the calm water carried the sound of their footfalls with disconcerting clearness.

Opposite the boat the footsteps ceased. The people, whoever they were, were intent upon something on the barge. Then, leaping lightly upon the waterways, the men, as they proved to be,

crept softly aft towards the place where Malcolm lay in the starlight.

CHAPTER XXVI

At the Frontier

A prey to the wildest apprehensions, Malcolm Carr flattened himself on his hard, uneven bed. Rapidly he debated as to his course of action; whether to regain his feet and throw himself upon the two men before they had time to recover from their surprise, or to keep perfectly still in the hope that he would be unnoticed. He could hear Peter shifting his position, ready to join in the imminent struggle.

"Wer da?" shouted a guttural voice from the window of the house across the canal. Immediately after came the "pluff" of an air-gun being discharged, and a pellet thudded against a post on the tow-path.

With muttered exclamations the two men took to their heels, while the watchers, leaving their post at the window, ran downstairs, presently to reappear accompanied by a large dog.

For a moment or two they stood looking across the canal at the barge; then, calling the animal to heel, they walked rapidly in the direction of a bridge about a quarter of a mile away.

"This is too hot a show for us, Malcolm," whispered Peter, as he emerged from his hiding-place. "That dog will be our undoing. Those fellows are evidently crossing the canal to inspect the barge in case the thieves have had time to take anything."

Clearly it was too risky to land and run across the fields; the dog would track the fugitives with the greatest ease. The question was how they were to put the animal off the scent in the brief time that remained before the watchmen, or whoever they might be, arrived upon the scene.

"You said you were thirsty," continued Peter grimly. "Now's your chance. Overboard and hang to the rudder."

Silently the fugitives lowered themselves into the water, and, swimming cautiously, gained the slight protection afforded by the bluff overhang of the boat's quarter and long, projecting rudder. Hanging on to a chain, and keeping in the shadow, the brothers awaited developments, knowing that if the now open entrance to their dug-out were spotted, suspicion would be diverted from the marauders to them. Since the news of the escape of a numerous body of prisoners from Düren must have been sent far and wide, the inference that the barge had been a hiding-place for some of their number was obvious.

Up came the two watchmen, breathing stentorously, for they were middle-aged and corpulent. They were in uniform; each was armed with an air-rifle and a short sword.

Malcolm could hear them walking along the barge, testing the locks of the fore and after cuddies, and examining the metal fittings of the winch and the tiller-head. One of the men even flashed an electric torch over the side, but it was a purely perfunctory action. Meanwhile the dog was sniffing on the track of the would-be thieves, and made no attempt to go farther than the spot where the men had been brought up by the canal official's hail.

Finally, after a considerable amount of argument, the watchmen whistled the dog, regained the tow-path, and walked briskly in the direction the marauders had gone.

"Peter," whispered his brother, "I'm a silly ass!"

"Eh?"

"I forgot about my ration when I went overboard. It's sopping wet."

"So's mine," added Peter. "I took mine deliberately. It couldn't be helped. If we'd left the stuff on the barge that dog would have discovered it. A packet with the word 'London' printed on it would give the show away absolutely. For one thing, the stuff's been soaking in fresh water."

"And so have I," rejoined Malcolm. "At any rate, my thirst is quenched, and we have to spend the rest of the night in wet clothes."

"I'm going to try my hand at house robbery," announced Peter. "Although I couldn't understand all the conversation between those two fellows, I managed to learn that they decided to go to the nearest village and get the police to make enquiries of the whereabouts of a certain Karl Hoeffer--evidently one of the two men who gave us an unpleasant five minutes. You're not to come; this is a one-man job. Make your way back to our hiding-place, wring out your wet clothes--over the

coal, mind--and wait till I come back."

Malcolm knew that his elder brother's word was law in such matters. It was useless to expostulate. As he regained the barge he could just discern Peter's figure creeping up the opposite bank of the canal.

In ten minutes Peter was back again with the best part of a rye loaf, a large sausage, and a piece of cheese, all wrapped up in a couple of blankets.

"'Nuff said!" he remarked. "Wrap yourself up and eat. I'll tell you about it later."

The blankets were dry and comforting, the food really appetizing, and, having made a satisfying meal, the brothers slept soundly after forty hours of unceasing vigilance.

As Peter had expected, he experienced no serious difficulty on his foraging expedition. The house was deserted, but by means of a stack-pipe he entered by the open window at which the watchmen had been sitting. Having raided the pantry, the New Zealander removed a blanket from each of two separate beds, taking care that outwardly the beds appeared undisturbed. To cross the canal without wetting the food and blankets he swam back with the spoils held over his head. By the time the things were missed, the barge, with ordinary luck, ought to be miles away.

With the first streak of dawn the sleepers awoke, feeling greatly refreshed. Malcolm had taken the precaution to fill a tin with water from the canal. The liquid was fresh to a certain degree, and men who have served in the trenches are not fastidious.

The main point was that the fugitives would be able to quench their thirst during the heat of the day. Their wet clothes were spread out against the wall of their retreat, so that the heat of the sun's rays, penetrating the absorbent coal, would dry them sufficiently for the men before nightfall.

Shortly after sunrise the remaining barges of the flotilla, which had been tied up for the night at some distance along the canal, came up and passed the solitary craft. Before her crew returned with the horse, the previously leading barge became the last of the group.

The second day passed much like the first, except that the heat was not so trying, and that the men in hiding did not suffer from thirst.

About four o'clock in the afternoon of the next day a longer halt than usual occurred. Making use of their observation-holes the stowaways saw that the craft had tied up alongside another barge which was fast to a long quay. Beyond was a row of tall, quaintly-built houses with picturesque red-tiled roofs and fronted by a line of closely-trimmed trees. Nearly fifty people were lounging about, regarding the new arrival with curious interest, while on the adjoining barge stood about a dozen men in grimy overalls, with planks, barrows, and spades, in readiness to commence work.

Like ants the coal-heavers swarmed over the heaped-up cargo, shovelling the coal into barrows and trundling them along the planks on to the quay, whence they disappeared into a large shed about a hundred yards away.

With feelings of satisfaction the New Zealanders saw that the for'ard portion of the cargo was the first to be dealt with, and that, before the man with the first load returned with his empty barrow, five others were on the way, leaving six on board.

"No use waiting to be dug out," whispered Peter. "Now's our chance, if at all."

With a mighty heave of his shoulders Peter sent the barrel staves and their superimposed covering of coal flying. Before the coal-heavers could grasp what was happening, the two men leapt across the intervening barge and gained the quay.

With lowered heads they charged straight for the nearmost of the waterside idlers.

Right and left scattered the dumbfounded spectators, and without any attempt at obstruction the fugitives gained the open and unfrequented part of the quay.

Not until they had put fifty yards between them and the barge did the onlookers grasp the situation, then, joined by the coal-heavers, who had abandoned their task, the whole crowd started in pursuit, yelling loudly in an unintelligible manner.

At the end of the quay the main street bore off to the left, and from that point there were houses on both sides. Those on the right had gardens of gradually-increasing length running down to the canal, which was here a considerably wide waterway. Everywhere along the canal wharves were barges, often double- and triple-tiered, but alongside the waterside edges of the gardens were several small pleasure-craft. Every house seemed to possess one. Another thing Peter noticed was that the nearmost of the houses on the canal side of the street was separated from the quay by a supplementary waterway that burrowed under the road.

Along the cobbled street the two men ran, Passers-by stood stock-still in amazement. A grey-coated policeman drew his sabre and attempted to bar the way, shouting peremptorily in a

manner that clearly indicated "Stop!"

"In here!" exclaimed Peter, and literally bundled his brother into an open doorway, then slammed and bolted the door.

"We've five minutes fresh start at least," he said hurriedly. "Come along through. There's a boat at the end of the garden."

Even as they made their way through a spotlessly-clean kitchen, to the consternation of a portly woman-servant, Malcolm could not help noticing the resplendant copper vessels on the shelves. Evidently the owner of the house had not conformed to the Imperial German Government's order to surrender all metal suitable for the manufacture of munitions.

At the farther part of the garden two men were sitting at a table. One was a rotund pleasant-faced man of about fifty who was puffing sedately at a long-stemmed, huge-bowled pipe. The other, holding a large cigar in his hand, was certainly not far off sixty years of age, clean-shaven, 'and dressed in a manner more like an Englishman than a German. Before the smokers could rise from their seats the two fugitives were past and dropping over the low wall into a boat.

"Push off, Malcolm!" shouted Peter, as he gripped the oars.

"What's your hurry, you fellows?" asked a deliberately cool voice from above. "Can't you behave yourselves in a neutral country? What's the trouble?"

Leaning on the wall, his grey eyes twinkling with suppressed mirth, was the elder of the two men who had been sitting in the garden. At his elbow was the other, gesticulating and protesting volubly at the bull-in-a-chinashop tactics of the intruders.

"Neutral country?" repeated the astounded Peter. "What do you mean? Where are we?"

"In Holland. To be more precise, in the town of Roermonde," was the surprising information. "You've done a bunk from Germany, I presume? I thought so. It's all right, Mynheer van Enkhuizen," he continued in English, addressing the Dutchman; "these are some of my compatriots who have escaped from Germany."

"In that case it does matter not at all," replied the owner of the house in the slow hesitating manner of foreign-spoken English. "It is of no consequence that your friends have trampled through my dwelling and over my garden. Excuse me. I will inform the noisy crowd also that it is not of any consequence, and then I will instruct Katje to provide food for your military friends."

"Come into the house," exclaimed the Englishman. "I'll hear your story presently, although I presume you are two of the men who got away from Düren. Eight of them have crossed the frontier up to the present, and I shouldn't be surprised if others do the same in the course of the next few days. My name? Oh, just Brown--of London! Yes, that will be all right. Von Enkhuizen, although his manner may seem a bit erratic according to British notions, is a genuinely sympathetic fellow. You've fallen on your feet, both of you."

For three days the two refugees enjoyed the Dutchman's hospitality. Then the Carrs were furnished with money and a ticket to enable them to travel via the Hook of Holland to England; and, with many earnest expressions of gratitude to their benefactors, Peter and Malcolm set out on their roundabout journey back to the firing-line in Flanders.

CHAPTER XXVII

The End of a Spy

"By gum, Peter, we'll have to make ourselves precious scarce while this trip's on." exclaimed Malcolm as he rejoined his brother in the steerage of the S.S. *Koning der Zee* after a tour of inspection.

"Eh? What's wrong now?" enquired Peter, busily engaged in overhauling the contents of a small kit provided by his friends at Roermonde.

"Nothing wrong," said his brother. "On the contrary, it's a bit of quite all right. I've just seen a delightful old pal, Konrad What's-his-Tally, otherwise Pieter Waas of Muizenburg fame. You remember I told you about him just before we said good-bye to Düren: how he diddled Fortescue, Selwyn, and me at the Cape and was collared on board the *Pomfret Castle*, and afterwards managed to join the N. Z. Rifle Brigade."

"I remember, but I thought he went sky-high when the great mine went off at Messines," remarked the elder Carr.

"There was a doubt about it," admitted Malcolm, "but the fact remains that he's on board this vessel. Except that he has bleached his hair, he has made no attempt to disguise himself. Suppose he imagined that it wouldn't be safe to trust to a false beard, or anything like that. The landing authorities would spot it. So we must keep well out of his way until we go ashore at Harwich."

"Why both of us?" asked Peter. "I've never met him, and he's never run across me as far as I know. I'm in mufti, and so are you. I don't suppose he'd spot you in that rig-out."

"I'm not going to give him the chance," declared Malcolm. "In spite of the fact that he's travelling first class and we're mere dirt in the steerage, I mean to keep below, out of sight."

The *Koning der Zee* was still berthed alongside the wharf at The Hook. "Blue Peter" was hoisted at the fore, while the Dutch national ensign floated from her ensign staff. Her sides were painted in red, white, and blue horizontal stripes, while amidships her name was displayed in letters six feet in height--in conformity with an arbitrary regulation made by an unscrupulous nation whose U-boats did not hesitate to torpedo at sight, despite the distinguishing marks of neutral craft.

The mail-boat's passenger-list was a light one. There were about a dozen repatriated Britons from Ruhleben, a score of Dutch merchants, the two New Zealanders, and the spy, Konrad von Feldoffer.

The latter, posing as a Gelderland potato-merchant, was on a highly important mission on behalf of his Imperial master in connection with the landing of United States troops in England. At first scorning the idea that Uncle Sam could render personal aid, the Huns were beginning to realize that the Americans were doing something great, and not merely "talking big". Von Feldoffer was, therefore, one of the first of a small army of spies entrusted with the risky task of sowing the seeds of discontent and enmity amongst the men from "across the Herring Pond".

The German authorities knew full well the beneficial effect to their armies once they could provoke unhealthy rivalry and bitter dissension between the American and British troops, but they forgot the force of the trite quotation of an American admiral: "Blood is thicker than water".

Konrad von Feldoffer was firmly convinced that, with a carefully prepared forged passport in his possession, he would be able to land without difficulty. He had never previously landed at Harwich, and with the slight disguise he adopted--bleaching his hair--he stood the remotest chance of being recognized.

He had reckoned without Rifleman Malcolm Carr. The latter was watching the people on the jetty when he saw von Feldoffer, preceded by a couple of porters, elbowing his way through the crowd of onlookers to board the vessel.

The late-comer was typically Dutch as far as his clothes and appearance went, but his face was that of Malcolm's acquaintance on the Muizenburg train.

A second glance confirmed the New Zealander's suspicions. Promptly Malcolm turned and bolted down the companion, rejoining Peter in the steerage.

"Bother the fellow!" exclaimed Peter. "He's done me out of the salt sea breezes. All right, I'll keep below; but really I don't see the use of doing so. It's not likely that a first-class passenger would invade the quarters of the steerage passengers."

Assisted by a funny but powerful little tug, the *Koning der Zee* drew clear of the wharf, and, slipping between the piers, gained the choppy waters of the North Sea.

Beyond territorial waters danger unseen lurked. All on board realized the fact--it was Germany's version of the freedom of the seas. Serving out the life-belts was in itself a significance. Yet undeterred, the captain of the *Koning der Zee* had sailed regularly since the memorable 4th of August, 1914, risking U-boats and floating mines to uphold the flag of Holland on waters that were hers by equal right with other nations of the world.

Less than thirty miles from the Dutch coast the *Koning der Zee* met her doom. Travelling at twenty-two knots, her bows struck the flexible wire bridle connecting a pair of mines. Like porpoises, the deadly cylinders swung towards the ship under the strain on the span. One struck the hull just below the water-line on the starboard side, nearly abaft the foremost funnel; the second bumped heavily under her port quarter. Practically simultaneously the deadly mechanical mines exploded. Calculated to blow a hole in the bottom of the most strongly constructed war-ship afloat, the mines simply pulverized the thin steel plating of the luckless Dutch vessel. Amidst the rush of escaping steam the *Koning der Zee* began to settle rapidly.

Well it was that the passenger list was a light one. Notwithstanding the fact that three boats had been blown to fragments by the explosions, the rest were practically intact. Promptly the undismayed crew bundled the passengers into them and lowered away--an easy task, since the vessel was sinking on a comparatively even keel.

The captain and the wireless operator were the last to leave, the latter striving in vain to get

the damaged transmitter into working order until peremptory orders from his superior obliged him to desist.

Within eight minutes the *Koning der Zee* had disappeared beneath the element which in name she professed to rule, leaving five boats tossing upon the choppy seas.

"You've got plenty of sea breezes now, Peter," remarked his brother as they sat on the stern grating of one of the life-boats. "And salt spray thrown in. I wonder what the next move is to be?"

"I don't mind very much, provided we are not picked up by a German ship," replied Peter. "Where's your pal the spy?"

"In there," said Malcolm, indicating one of the boats lying at about a hundred yards distance. "He was mighty sharp in nipping in."

The boats closed, their officers conferring with the captain as to what course to pursue. Since the conversation was in Dutch the New Zealanders understood not a word, but from the gestures of the skipper they concluded that the boats were to attempt to row back to the cost of Holland--a thirty-mile pull dead to windward, and in the teeth of a steadily-rising wind--unless picked up by another vessel in the meantime.

"It's a bit of a game," continued Malcolm, "when the spy is mined by his own people. I wonder what he thinks about it."

As a matter of fact, von Feldoffer was thinking furiously. He had been given to understand by the German Admiralty that instructions would be issued to U-boat commanders concerned that the *Koning der Zee* was not to be molested on the day arranged for the spy to cross the North Sea. On the strength of this assurance von Feldoffer started for England; but, although the U-boats carried out instructions, the floating mines, once launched, did not conform to the mandate of the Berlin Admiralty.

"Hallo, what's up now?" enquired Peter, observing that the attention of the Dutch sailors was directed to something on the northern horizon.

He was not left long in doubt. Rapidly the "something" resolved itself into a long, lean, grey destroyer, from the mast of which two flags streamed in the breeze--and those flags were not the Black Cross of Germany, but the glorious White Ensign of Britain.

"We heard the racket, so we came up to investigate," shouted the alert Lieutenant-Commander of H.M. destroyer *Angiboo*. "Come alongside as sharp as you can."

"No, thanks!" replied the Dutch skipper in English. "I'm making for The Hook. If you'll receive some English passengers I will be obliged."

"Think twice about it," replied the naval officer cheerfully. "The glass is tumbling down, and the Dutch coast is dead to windward. You'll never fetch there, unless I'm greatly mistaken."

"Very well, then, I accept," decided the skipper of the lost mail-boat.

With her quick-firers manned, in case a U-boat lurked in the vicinity, the *Angiboo* stopped until the last of the passengers and crew of the *Koning der Zee* gained her deck; then, quickly increasing speed to twenty-five knots, the destroyer shaped a south-westerly course to rejoin the rest of the flotilla.

Presently Malcolm made his way for'ard until he reached the foot of the ladder reaching to the destroyer's bridge.

"I'd like a few words with your captain," he said, addressing an able seaman.

The man eyed the erratically-clad New Zealander with tolerant amusement.

"A word with the owner, eh? Wot's wrong now, chum? Has your raggie pinched your dress-suit case?"

"Cut it out, my man," said Malcolm authoritatively. "In your lingo, 'stow it'. Request your captain to see Mr. Carr, of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade."

That did it. The intentionally-misleading use of the word 'mister' led the bluejacket to believe that Malcolm was a junior officer of one of the overseas contingent. For the first time in his life the young New Zealander received a Royal Navy salute.

"Very good, sir," said the bluejacket. "I axes your pardon, sir; no offence meant."

It was not long before Malcolm found himself in the presence of Lieutenant-Commander Sefton in the chart-room. Briefly he stated his case against the spy, Konrad von Feldoffer.

"You are absolutely certain?" asked the Lieutenant-Commander. "There would be a most unholy rumpus if I ran the fellow in and he turned out to be a neutral of unimpeachable character."

"I'll stake anything on what I say, sir," replied Malcolm. "If you will let me confront him----"

"No, no!" interrupted the skipper of the *Angiboo*. "We don't want the dramatic touch on board this craft. I'll send for the master of the *Koning der Zee*, and get him to% bring Herr von Feldoffer to me. We'll do the job as politely as possible."

Just at that moment the rest of the destroyer flotilla was sighted, bearing south-south-west. Until the *Angiboo* resumed station her lieutenant-commander dared not leave the bridge.

"Now," he resumed, "you make your way aft, and keep out of sight until I call you. I'll interview friend Feldoffer on the quarter-deck. Messenger, pass the word for the master of the Dutchman to see me in the ward-room."

Malcolm followed the bluejacket down the ladder. Then, with every precaution, he made his way aft as far as the after funnel. From this position he was within hailing distance of the diminutive quarter-deck.

Presently the messenger returned to the bridge and made his report. Lieutenant-Commander Sefton descended and proceeded to the officers' quarters aft.

While the Dutch skipper was searching for the passenger, von Feldoffer was anxiously keeping an eye on the bridge, fearful lest any of the officers were shipmates with him on the armed merchant-cruiser. He saw Malcolm ascend the bridge, but, the latter being in mufti and having his back turned towards him, von Feldoffer did not recognize the New Zealander. But when Malcolm came down the ladder the astute Hun made the discovery that he was in a very tight corner.

Deliberating with himself, the spy decided to "mark time" until events shaped themselves. It was a pure coincidence that the New Zealander and he were on the same boat; it might be that the latter's visit to the bridge was utterly unconnected with him. He hoped so; but still, things looked black.

A hand tapped him on the shoulder. Von Feldoffer started violently, and, turning, found the master of the *Koning der Zee* confronting him.

"I startled you, Mynheer van Gheel," remarked the Dutch skipper, addressing the spy by the name he had assumed before leaving Holland. "The English captain wishes to see you in his cabin."

"For what purpose, Mynheer?" enquired von Feldoffer uneasily.

"*'t Spijt me!*" ejaculated the Dutchman. "How can I tell, unless it be that your signature is required to the written report upon the destruction of my unfortunate ship? It is purely a matter of form, I should imagine."

Konrad von Feldoffer bowed, and, falling into step with the Dutchman, walked aft.

"Look out, Malcolm!" whispered Peter, who had joined his brother by the after funnel. "The fellow's coming this way."

Taken aback, Malcolm turned and faced the spy. The latter, betraying no sign of recognition, walked past him; then, before his companion or any of the bluejackets on deck could prevent him, he cleared the stanchion-rails and leapt headlong into the sea.

"Man overboard!"

Promptly a couple of life-buoys were hurled over the side. A petty officer proposed to dive after the suicide, but was instantly told to "Hold fast!" by one of the officers. A semaphore message was sent to the destroyer next astern to keep a look-out for the drowning man, but he was not seen again. Either his back had been broken on impact with the water, for the destroyer was making a good twenty-five knots, or else he had been caught by the blades of one of the two starboard propellers.

"Perhaps it's for the best," commented Lieutenant-Commander Sefton when the circumstances of the tragedy were told him. "It has saved the nation the cost of a trial and a dozen rounds of ball ammunition."

CHAPTER XXVIII

In the Firing-line Again

Ten days later Peter and Malcolm Carr found themselves told off to a draft that was about to leave Sling Camp for the Front. During that time Malcolm had been notified that the sum of one hundred pounds had been awarded him in recognition of his services in discovering the infernal machine in the coal-bunker of the transport *Pomfret Castle*. Other awards had been made to Sergeant Fortescue and Rifleman Selwyn.

"A jolly useful sum!" remarked Peter. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Cable it to New Zealand," replied Malcolm. "I don't want to touch it here if it can be avoided."

"Think twice, old man," said his brother. "Bank it in a British bank, and then if you do want to draw it in a hurry it's there. You never know your luck. If anything should happen to you out there--one has to consider such a thing--the money can then be cabled to the governor."

The draft from Sling was a large one. Report had it that another big "stunt" was imminent, and that New Zealand was to have the honour of being well represented in the impending operations.

Almost without incident the draft crossed the Channel, and once more Malcolm found himself on the soil of France. It was now late September. Normandy looked its best, the leaves displaying their autumn tints, and the apple trees bending under the weight of fruit.

And yet, only a few miles away, was the war-tortured belt of terrain, a mass of ruined buildings, even now being rebuilt, where Briton and Gaul were slowly yet surely wresting French soil from the Hun.

Most of the New Zealanders around Étaples were now under canvas, the weather being fine, but with a sharp fall in temperature during the night. Upon the arrival of the new draft the men were told off to various companies, and once more the two Carrs were separated.

Malcolm took the matter philosophically, knowing that in war-time a soldier cannot pick and choose his mates; but to his astonishment and delight he found that Fortescue and Selwyn were in the same lines.

"Yes, I'm back again," remarked the former, after Malcolm had related his adventures. "I had a good time in Blighty, and when I was passed out by the medical board I was offered a staff job at Hornchurch."

"And like a jay he turned it down," added Selwyn. "He might have had a soft time in Blighty; instead, he puts in for France--and just as winter's coming on, too."

"One would imagine that you were a lead-swinger, Selwyn," exclaimed Fortescue.

"Not so much of that, Digger," protested the latter. "Of course I couldn't hang behind when I've to look after big helpless Sergeant Fortescue."

"What happened after you got your buckshie at Messines?" asked Malcolm.

"A regular holiday--it was *bonsor*," replied Selwyn. "Nine hours after I got hit I was at Tin Town, Brockenhurst. Three weeks there and they pushed me on to Home Mead. Take my tip, Malcolm; if you get a buckshie try and work it to be sent there. Had the time of my life. The other boys will tell you the same. It is some hospital. Then back to Codford, where I had my leave."

"Where did you go?" asked Malcolm.

"The usual round; Edinburgh and Glasgow. Gorgeous time there, too; people were awfully kind."

When the young rifleman described his Scottish journey as the usual round, he was referring to the somewhat curious fact that a large percentage of New Zealanders go to Edinburgh when granted leave after being discharged from hospital. It is a sort of solemn rite, and few men from "down under" go back to New Zealand without seizing the opportunity of paying a flying visit to the "Land of Burns".

"So you saw a bit of Blighty, then?" remarked Malcolm.

"Yes, rather!" was the reply; "and now I'm going to see a bit of France, or is it Belgium this time?"

"Ask me another," replied Sergeant Fortescue. "All I know is that the division moves up to the front on the 3rd of next month, so it looks as if we're going to shake Fritz by the scruff of his neck."

"Hallo, there's Mike Dowit!" exclaimed Malcolm, as the stretcher-bearer passed by. "How goes it, chum?"

Stretcher-bearer Dowit stopped, crossed the road, and grasped the rifleman's hand. Being a man of very few words, he excelled himself by saying nothing.

"Ask him," prompted Fortescue, "when he's going to have another bath at the Estaminet Moulin Gris."

The stretcher-bearer flushed and shuffled his feet awkwardly.

"Mike's as shy as a *wahine*," continued the Sergeant. "I'll tell you the yarn. We were billeted at an estaminet that had copped it pretty thick. Roof practically off, and the outbuildings nothing but a pile of bricks; you know the sort of thing. Well, Mike discovered a tub full of water, as he thought, and early one morning he slipped out to have a bath. He had only just started his ablutions when Madame's face appeared at the only window left in the inn. 'Arrêtez!' she shouted; 'arrêtez! You no use soap. Soap na poo. You spoil ze beer--compree?'"

"I've only got her word that it was beer," declared Dowit stolidly.

"It's a great joke with the boys," continued Fortescue, after the stretcher-bearer had gone. "They chip him frightfully about it; ask if that's why he's got the D.C. M. I suppose you didn't know that it was awarded him, for gallantry at Messines--rescuing wounded under heavy fire? My word! Mike was hot stuff that day. It was a thundering good job when he slung that dud bomb at Featherstone Camp, or I mightn't be here now."

In the dead of night of the 3rd of October the New Zealand Division, in heavy marching order, silently relieved a Tommy division on the Flanders Front.

"Where are we, Sergeant?" enquired Rifleman M'Kane. "This spot doesn't seem familiar."

"It will be before morning," replied Fortescue grimly. "We're opposite Gravenstafel, and those are the Heights of Abraham. If we are not firmly planted upon them by to-morrow afternoon I'm a Dutchman."

The new position was certainly a novel one as far as Malcolm was concerned. The seemingly endless lines of zigzag trenches were no longer in evidence. Shelter was provided by the simple expedient of linking up suitable shell-craters, with which the soft ground was liberally besprinkled.

Hardly were the New Zealanders settled when the Huns began a furious bombardment. It was not a spasmodic burst of shell-fire, but a concentrated and deliberate fire upon the series of field-works fronting the village of Gravenstafel. Every man knew what it meant; the Germans were about to attack in force, while a similar operation was impending on the part of the British. The question was, which side would get away quickest? Would the serried wave of infantry meet in the open?

Gamely the New Zealanders endured their gruelling; until the guns lifted and put up a barrage behind them.

Sheltering in a dug-out were Sergeant Fortescue, Corporal Billy Preston, Riflemen Carr, Dick Selwyn, M'Kane, M'Turk, and two others--youngsters for the first time under shell-fire, who were the objects of undisguised solicitude on the part of the non-coms. Up to the present their attention was thrown away; neither Henderson nor Stewart showed the faintest indication of "jumpiness".

The dug-out trembled under the terrific impact of shells bursting within an unpleasant distance. Even the more seasoned men were inwardly perturbed. Save for a few disjointed sentences--conversation was far from being a success--the occupants of the shelter remained silent.

"They're lifting, thank goodness!" exclaimed Fortescue. "Wonder if Fritz will attempt a raid on a big scale? If so, he'll have the shock of his life."

"What time do we assemble, Sergeant?" asked Henderson, who was hesitating over the opening sentences of a letter he was about to commence. "At five, my festive," replied Fortescue. "It will----"

The sound of heavy footsteps descending the steps leading to the dug-out interrupted his words. Then a voice enquired: "All right, down there?"

"All seats taken; house full," replied M'Turk. "Sorry; but try your luck somewhere else."

The ground-sheet hung up over the entrance was pulled aside, and the voice continued:

"That's all right, boys; hope you'll have a full house after the stunt."

The men sprang to their feet and stood at attention. It was well that the roof of the dug-out was a fairly lofty one. Sergeant Fortescue saluted.

"Beg pardon, sir!" he exclaimed, for standing in the doorway, cloaked and wearing his shrapnel-helmet, was the Brigadier.

"Glad to see you so chirpy, boys," remarked the Brigadier. "Good night, and good luck!"

The next instant he was gone, to continue his flying visits to the men. It had been an anxious time, especially to the commanding officers, and, in order to satisfy themselves that the boys were still in a position to carry out the attack, the brigadiers made personal tours along the firing-line.

"He's some sport," declared Selwyn. "What's it like outside, I wonder? I'll go and have a look round."

Malcolm accompanied his chum. In the open air the cold, contrasted with the warmth of the dug-out, was intense. The wind blew chilly upon their faces. Overhead the sky was darkened with drifting clouds, between the rifts of which the light of the full moon shone upon the ghostly expanse of shell-craters.

The German guns were still firing hotly, directing their missiles a good four hundred yards behind the New Zealand lines. The British artillery was replying, but lacking the intensity of the enemy's fire.

"Hanged if I'd like to be with the ration-parties to-night," remarked Selwyn. "There'll be a few of the boys knocked out behind our lines, I fancy."

"Let's get back out of it," suggested Malcolm. "It's too jolly cold to stand here. What's the time?"

He consulted the luminous dial of his wristlet watch.

"By gum--a quarter to five!" he exclaimed. "The boys will start assembling in another fifteen minutes."

"What's it doing?" enquired Fortescue when the chums returned to the dug-out.

"Fine so far, but threatening," replied Selwyn. "It'll be our usual luck--raining in torrents, I'm afraid."

"Anyone know our objectives?" enquired M'Kane as he slowly adjusted the straps of two empty canvas bags that later on were to be crammed full with Mills's bombs.

"Eighteen hundred yards on a two-thousand-yards front, and not an inch beyond," replied Fortescue. "That'll bring us on to the hill, which is what we want. Dry ground during the winter, you know."

At last Fortescue gave the word. The men, grasping their rifles, filed out, to find the fortified craters filling up with silent khaki-clad Diggers.

"Keep together," whispered Malcolm to Selwyn.

"Rather!" replied his chum. "Dash it all, I wish we were off. I always loathe this hanging-about business."

Just then the German barrage redoubled in violence. As it did so the long-threatening rain began to fall--a cold drizzle.

The New Zealanders could not understand why the Huns were putting up such a persistent barrage. They could only put it down to the fact that Fritz had a good inkling of the impending stunt and was getting "jumpy". As a matter of fact, it was owing to another reason.

For an hour a handful of New Zealanders clung to the crater defences in the front line. These men had orders not to go forward in the advance, the attacking infantry being in the second and third line of trenches. Quite under the impression that the nearmost German pill-boxes were lightly held, the New Zealanders in the advance posts were afterwards surprised to learn that they had been within a few yards of hundreds of picked German troops. The Huns intended attacking at about the same time as the New Zealanders, and the hitherto deserted block-houses had been reoccupied during the night by swarms of German infantry.

At six o'clock the British guns opened a barrage, compared with which the German fire paled into insignificance. Eighteen-pounders and 4.5-inch howitzers, supported by the giant 12- and 14-inch long-range guns farther back, threw tons of metal upon the enemy lines, the heavier projectiles hurtling overhead with a roar like that of an express train. The earth trembled, and the sky was lurid with the flashes of bursting shells, as rapidly the strongly constructed pill-boxes were beaten into fragments of riven concrete.

So intense was the fire that the German artillery now replied but feebly and inaccurately, while, a sure sign that Fritz was "done" red and green rockets sent their distress signals from the enemy position for aid that was not forthcoming.

"Fix bayonets!"

The order passed along the line. So deafening was the roar of the guns that the click of the bayonets as they were fixed was inaudible. Here and there men gave a final adjustment to their

steel helmets or fumbled with their equipment, but for the most part the New Zealanders stood motionless, with firm, set faces, awaiting the command to unleash.

The British barrage lifted, the whistles blew, and out of their lines the khaki-clad troops surged.

CHAPTER XXIX

The Battle in the Mud

It was as unlike a charge as could possibly be imagined. With rifles at the slope, the New Zealanders sauntered forward towards their objective, keeping almost at the heels of the barrage, save here and there where a "pill-box", presumably deserted, was found to be chock-a-block with Huns. Almost before he was aware of it, Malcolm found himself confronted by a practically intact concrete block-house, which was so near the New Zealand outposts that it had escaped damage during the bombardment. Looming ominously through the misty, drizzling dawn, the pill-box might have accounted for scores of gallant New Zealanders, for it was crammed with Huns, and well provided with machine-guns. Yet not a shot came from that isolated fortress. Unaware that it was tenanted, a dozen men of C Company strolled past the grinning loopholes.

"Kamerad! Kamerad!"

The words, just audible above the clamour, caused several Diggers to stop.

"By Jove," exclaimed Fortescue, "the place is full of Boches! Out 'em, boys!"

With levelled bayonets Malcolm, Selwyn, and half a dozen riflemen advanced towards the door in the rear of the pill-box, while M'Turk and M'Kane, each brandishing a bomb, ran close to the wall immediately by the side of the machine-gun aperture. Here, secure from bullets from the inside, they had the garrison at their mercy should the Huns show any signs of treachery.

"Out you come, Fritz!" shouted Fortescue. "We won't hurt you."

Furtively a German poked his steel helmeted head through the doorway. With arms upheld he stumbled out, terror written on his face. Behind him, after a brief interval, came another; then more, close at each other's heels, until fifty-three Huns, without firing a shot, were prisoners in the hands of the New Zealanders.

"Who'll take them back?" asked Fortescue.

No one seemed at all anxious for the job. Every man whom the Sergeant looked at enquiringly shook his head. With the prospect of a scrap ahead, none would accept the task of escorting fifty demoralized Huns.

"Send 'em back on their own, Sergeant," suggested M'Turk. "They'll go quietly, you bet. We want to get on. Look where our barrage is."

Already the line of bursting shells was a couple of hundred yards away. The advancing infantry-men were almost invisible in the drifting smoke and rain.

"Off you go!" ordered Fortescue, pointing in the direction of the New Zealand advance posts.

Like a flock of sheep the Huns, with hands still upraised, shuffled on the first of their long trek to captivity--to some delectable spot in England, where, far from the sound of the guns, there is food in plenty for Hun prisoners of war, German U-boats notwithstanding.

At the double the New Zealanders hastened to overtake the rest of C Company. Away on the left sharp rifle and machine-gun fire, punctuated by the crash of exploding bombs, showed that there were other block-houses where a strenuous resistance was being maintained. Men, too, were already returning wounded, cheerful in spite of pain; others, lying in the mud, would never rise again, for machine-guns were busy beyond the Hannebeke stream.

Ordinarily a quiet, well-conducted brook, the Hannebeke stream had been rudely disturbed by the terrific bombardment of the British heavies. Where a shell had fallen in the bed of the stream the lip of the upheaved crater had formed a dam--and there was not one but many such. Over the low-lying banks the water had flowed, until for nearly a hundred yards in width there was water everywhere, hiding the tenacious mud, and acting as a camouflage to thousands of deep craters.

Into the morass the New Zealanders plunged boldly, only to find that they were quickly up to their belts in mud and water. When a man stumbled into a shell-hole, he simply disappeared, until, rising to the surface, he managed to scramble out with the aid of a more fortunate chum.

Here and there huge spurts of mud and water leapt towards the rainy sky as German shells burst indiscriminately in the swollen stream; while everywhere the slowly-flowing water was flecked with little spurts of spray as the machine-gun bullets ricochetted from the surface. When a man was hit when crossing that forbidding morass it generally meant death to him--death by suffocation in the pestilent mud of Flanders.

Looking like muddy replicas of Lot's wife, Malcolm and Selwyn at last emerged from the morass, Fortescue was ahead, Corporal Preston too, while M'Turk, with his chum M'Kane hanging on to his back, was just extricating himself from a deep crater.

"Thanks!" he exclaimed, as Malcolm gave him a hand. He was too breathless to say more. Setting his burden down in the shelter of a ruined pill-box, M'Turk bound up his chum's wound--a machine-gun bullet through the calf of his right leg.

"Now you stop there till I come back," he admonished the "buckshied" M'Kane, "unless the bearers pick you up. Just the silly thing you would do, to try and crawl through that muck. S'long. See you presently."

He overtook Malcolm, swinging along with prodigious strides despite the tenacious slime. "There are the swine who knocked my pal over," he shouted, pointing to an insignificant heap of stones about eighty yards to his right front.

"There's a blessed tic-tac in there. I'll blow 'em to blazes."

The fragments of concrete marked the former position of a pill-box which had been built over a deep dug-out. The German machine-gunners had lain low when the first wave of New Zealanders had swept overhead; then, hauling up their deadly weapon, they had trained it on the khaki lads still struggling through the Hannebeke stream.

Grasping a bomb, M'Turk edged cautiously towards the flank of the machine-gun emplacement; but before he had gone ten yards he stopped and stood upright with his left hand raised to the rim of his shrapnel-helmet. For quite five seconds he remained thus, then his knees gave way under him, slowly and reluctantly, it seemed, he fell in a huddled heap face downwards in the mud.

"M'Turk's down, by Heaven!" ejaculated Malcolm.

He threw himself on his hands and knees and crawled towards the luckless bomber, Selwyn following. With an effort they dragged the man on his back. He was beyond mortal aid. A rifle bullet had struck him fairly on the left temple, causing instantaneous death.

Slinging his rifle, Malcolm possessed himself of three of M'Turk's bombs. He would attempt to carry out the task the bomber had essayed when a chance bullet struck him down: to wipe out the viper's nest and to silence the deadly machine-gun that was loosing a fresh bolt of ammunition upon the floundering men making their way across the swollen stream.

He advanced rapidly. Time was the first consideration, caution second. Every instant instant meant death to his comrades in the mud.

Suddenly one of the machine-gunners caught sight of the approaching danger. With a yell he sprang to his feet and raised his hands. The machine-gun began to spit fire once more, and that decided it. The Hun who offered to surrender was a negligible quantity.

With splendid precision the Mills's bomb flew straight at the group of grey-coated men. One missile was enough. Malcolm turned and doubled after his comrades, and, again under shelter of the slowly-creeping barrage, was once more in comparative safety.

On and on pressed the now-exultant Diggers, until the steady advance was checked. Somewhere through the mist and smoke came a hail of machine-gun bullets. Men were dropping right and left.

"Take cover!" shouted an officer.

It was easier said than done. The muddy ground afforded little shelter, while the shell-craters were filled with water. The barrage had passed on and was "squatting" at about two hundred yards distance.

The obstacle was then revealed. Away to the left front of C Company was a concrete redoubt built around a heap of rubbish that marked the site of Van Meulen Farm. Bravely a number of New Zealanders rushed forward with bomb and bayonet, only to drop in the mud under the hellish machine-gun fire.

How fared the rest of the advance the men on this particular sector knew not. They were most unpleasantly aware that a formidable barrier lay athwart their course, and that it must be rushed before the troops could storm the heights. Not only was Van Meulen Redoubt strongly constructed and well armed; it was stubbornly held by some of the pick of the German army--men resolved to fight to the last cartridge rather than surrender.

"Why don't they send along the Tanks?" asked little Henderson, as he thrust a fresh charge into his magazine.

"Never mind about the Tanks, sonny," replied Sergeant Fortescue. "We've got to do our own dirty work."

For nearly twenty minutes the men maintained a hot fire, concentrating their aim upon the narrow apertures through which the machine-guns were delivering their death-dealing bullets. It was a thankless task. A machine-gun would be silenced for a few seconds and then resume its fire; for each weapon, in addition to the protection afforded by the massive concrete walls, was equipped with a steel shield through which a narrow sighting-aperture afforded the only vulnerable spot.

At last one of the battalions forming the reserve stormers came up, eager for the fray. If courage and sheer weight of numbers could win the day Van Meulen Farm was doomed.

"Come on, boys!" shouted a young officer. "I'll lead you. Rout the beggars out of it."

With a cheer the men leapt from their scanty cover. Bombers, Lewis gunners, and riflemen surged forward, heedless of the gaps in their ranks. The intervening ground was all but covered when the gallant young officer fell. His death, far from disheartening the men, added fuel to their burning ardour.

Into the machine-gun slits bombs were tossed in dozens, until the confined space within the redoubt was filled with noxious smoke from the loud-sounding missiles of destruction. Still the Huns held out. When one machine-gun was disabled another was brought up; but by this time the deadly weapon had lost much of the sting.

The entrance to the blockhouse was forbidding enough. A flight of narrow and steep stone steps gave access to a low doorway. On the metal-cased woodwork the Diggers rained blows with the butt-ends of their rifles; others, placing the muzzles of the weapons close to the stout fastenings, strove to blow them away. It was not until a dozen men, bearing a massive beam, appeared upon the scene that the difficulty was overcome. The battering-ram simply pulverized the already-weakening barrier. With a cheer, and preceded by a shower of grenades, the riflemen poured in to complete the work with cold steel.

Within was a terrible scene. In hot blood civilized men went back to primeval instincts and fought like wild beasts, clawing, tearing and gouging when it was too close work for the bayonet. The smoke-laden air was rent with shouts, oaths, shrieks, and groans, punctuated by the clash of steel and the whip-like cracks of automatic pistols. Like rats in a trap the Huns fought and died, while the survivors of the storming-party staggered out of the shambles and threw themselves on the ground in sheer bodily exhaustion.

Rifleman Carr had come off lightly. One of the first to force his way through the shattered entrance, he presented a sorry appearance. His right sleeve was torn away at the elbow, the left was ripped almost to ribbons. His Webb equipment was twisted and cut; he was plastered in mud and filth from head to foot, while his steel helmet bore the splayed marks of the impact of two pistol-bullets fired at close range. Nevertheless, with the exception of a slight cut across the cheek, and the mark of a Hun's teeth showing angrily above his left wrist, he was uninjured.

A burning thirst gripped his throat. He felt for his water-bottle. It was no longer there. Unconcernedly he reached out his hand and secured one belonging to a dead comrade. The bottle was full. The liquid put new life into him.

"Hallo, Henderson!" he exclaimed, catching sight of the man, who was vainly struggling to unfix the remains of his bayonet. "Seen Selwyn?"

"Half a tick ago," was the reply. "He's all right. Seen anything of Stewart?"

"Chuck it!" ejaculated Sergeant Fortescue. "What's the use of worrying about your pals when the job's not finished? Come along; if you can't run, walk; if you can't walk, crawl. We can't have C Company out of the last lap."

He spoke imperiously--savagely. A greater contrast to the mild-spoken, 'Varsity-educated greenhorn, who, a few years previously, was down on his luck in New Zealand, could hardly be imagined. A great responsibility had been thrown upon his shoulders. With the lust of battle gripping him, he found himself a leader of men.

C Company was widely scattered. Many had fallen; others had gone forward with other companies; platoons and units were mingled indiscriminately. After the fall of Van Meulen Farm Redoubt Fortescue discovered that he was senior non-com. of the remnants of C Company, while not a single commissioned officer was left standing.

The men resumed their advance. Scores of prisoners, making their way in the opposite direction, were visible and comforting signs that the day was still going well; while wounded New Zealanders, painfully making for the dressing-stations, were able to augment the news by the announcement that the Diggers were up and over the Abraham Heights. Beyond that there were

no indications of how the battle fared--whether the Tommies on the left or the "Aussies" on the right were maintaining equal progress. Mist and smoke and the deafening clamour of thousands of guns limited both range of vision and hearing.

The ground was better going now. On the slope, the mud, though still ankle-deep, was a hardly-noticeable impediment. Stolidly the handful of men comprising the remains of C Company held onwards, eager to renew a closer acquaintance with Fritz.

"Cheer-o, Malcolm!" exclaimed a voice. "Didn't recognize you."

Rifleman Carr glance indifferently over his shoulder. Dick Selwyn, his jaw enveloped in a bandage, had just overtaken him.

"Buckshie?" enquired Malcolm laconically.

"Nothing--just a mere scratch," was the reply. "I thought you were done in back there. In fact, I was looking for what was left of you."

"I might have been," rejoined Malcolm. He found himself wondering at his apathy in the matter. In the heat of combat the grim figure of Death stalking up and down amid his comrades hardly concerned him. The horror of it all would be apparent after the battle--if he lived to see it.

"Young Stewart's gone," continued Selwyn. "A shell copped him. Corporal Preston, too, and goodness only knows who else. They've played the very deuce with the boys."

"It'll be worse before it's finished," added Malcolm. "But I wouldn't miss it for anything."

Over the already-won ground, pitted with shell-holes and thickly strewn with khaki and field-grey forms, the men of C Company continued their advance, until they fell in with a swarm of Diggers preparing to rush another formidable obstacle to the achievement of the objective.

CHAPTER XXX

The Last Stand

"Who says we won't be in Berlin before Christmas?" shouted a man staggering past under the weight of a Stokes's gun, his burden increased by reason of the quagmire. "Not 'arf, you Diggers!"

The riflemen within hearing expressed their approval of the idea, for the obstacle that was holding up a section of the advance was a row of concrete pill-boxes surrounding the entrance to a deep and extensive cave--a formidable stronghold known as "Berlin". Beyond was a large wood, which, when carried, would be the final objective for the day's operations.

The New Zealanders settled Berlin redoubt most effectively, and in far less time than had been taken in reducing Van Meulen, Otto, and other concreted strongholds. Thirty rounds from the Stokes's mortars in the short space of two minutes played havoc with the garrisons. Then, with loud yells of triumph, the stormers rushed the position on three sides simultaneously, bombarded the pill-boxes with grenade and smoke-bombs, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing the scanty remnant of a once numerous garrison come forth in fear and terror, accepting their conquerors' assurances that their lives would be spared.

"See that the job's done properly, Sergeant," ordered a major of another company, addressing Fortescue, who was assembling the handful of his platoon.

Fortescue saluted, and, calling Malcolm and another man to follow, made his way into the redoubt. The three did not tarry long. It was a veritable slaughter-house. The floor was literally paved with hideously-mutilated bodies of Germans who had fallen victims to the deadly Stokes's bombs. No need to investigate lest a living Fritz was lying doggo with the dead. The survivors had only been too eager to seize the chance of leaving the place alive.

The operations at Berlin Farm had delayed a section of the line. Before the men could be sent forward a pioneer battalion, composed mostly of Maoris, whose skill at rapid digging-in had won the admiration of the High Command, came surging up to assist in the consolidation of the captured position. That, again, was a distinctly satisfactory sign. New Zealand meant to hold what she had gained.

As C Company, or rather what was left of it, were re-forming, Malcolm encountered Grouser Joliffe. The man, ragged and battle-worn, was grousing no longer. A supremely-satisfied smile overspread his face.

"Boys," he whispered, "I've been in luck. Copped a dozen of the dirty 'Uns back there, and not one of them had the courage to put up a fight--an' me single-handed. I sent 'em back, and then had a look round their dug-out. It was some show--not 'arf. Cigars, fags, and drinks no end. Some of the boys strolled in and helped me refresh; but I haven't forgot my pals. Thought I'd tumble across some of 'em still left. Here, take this."

He handed Malcolm a bottle of soda-water, and bestowed a similar gift upon Selwyn and Sergeant Fortescue, for two canvas bags, meant to carry a stock of bombs, were crammed with filled bottles of mineral water from the captured dug-out.

"Joliffe, you are a proper white man!" declared Fortescue, deftly knocking off the head of the bottle and draining the contents at a gulp. "But what have you been up to?"

"Mud-larkin', Sergeant," replied the man, with a solemn wink. He touched the tip of his bayonet. "Like spearing eels in the Waikato, it was."

The men went forward once more. Ahead, dimmed by the rain and drifting smoke, could be discerned the rearmost edge of Berlin Wood. It was quite unlike anything of the nature of a wood for the shells had searched it so thoroughly that hardly a tree-trunk stood more than ten feet in height, while every vestige of leaves and branches had vanished. The blackened and badly-scored trunks looked more like the columns of a long-buried temple than trees, while in many places the charred wood was smouldering, despite the water-logged condition of the ground.

Notwithstanding the terrific pounding of the British heavies, the wood was still strongly held by the enemy. Fallen tree-trunks lay athwart pill-boxes that were still intact, shell craters afforded shelter for dozens of deadly machine-guns. Trip wires and other fiendish contrivances abounded, while in several places *fougasses* had been constructed, powerful enough to blow a whole platoon in the air.

In cold blood even the bravest man would hesitate before entering the forbidding wood of death; but the New Zealanders never faltered. Into the gloomy sulphurous maze they plunged, with yells and shouts of encouragement.

So intricate was the going that, although several bodies of troops had passed well ahead, there were pill-boxes and other fortified posts left undetected in their rear. Fritz, lying *perdu*, while the crowd of Anzacs poured onward, would resurrect his tic-tocs and direct a withering machine-gun fire into the backs of the luckless men.

"Look out! On your left!" shouted Fortescue, whose ready eye had detected a sinister movement behind a prostrate tree-trunk.

Half a dozen men of C Company dashed towards the spot with levelled bayonets. For some reason not a bomb was hurled, nor was a shot fired either by the Diggers or the Huns.

In a skilfully-concealed emplacement were two machine-guns, with a crew consisting of an officer and twelve stalwart Prussians.

"Hands up!" roared Fortescue.

The German officer set the example, his men quickly imitating him, as with arms upraised he awaited the approach of the New Zealanders. He was a tall, bald-headed man with a prominent double-chin. His beady eyes were furtively taking stock of the scanty number who opposed him.

"Fritz looks greasy," mentally commented Malcolm, as he fingered the trigger of his rifle.

The German officer rapped out an order. Hands were dropped and rifles seized.

"Do 'em in!" shouted Fortescue. "The treacherous swine."

Although outnumbered, the Diggers did the work Diggers smartly and effectually. As the Prussian officer raised his revolver to fire point-blank at Sergeant Fortescue, Malcolm plunged his bayonet into the Hun's side, while Fortescue reciprocated the service by shooting a German who was about to deal Rifleman Carr a smashing blow with the butt of his rifle before the latter could disengage his blade.

"Now what's to be done, Sergeant?" enquired Joliffe, as he surveyed the scene of the struggle. Of the seven New Zealanders who had rushed the position only four were left standing--Fortescue, Malcolm, Joliffe, and Henderson. Dick Selwyn was lying with his back propped against a tree-trunk and a gunshot wound in his left arm. The bullet, fired at close range, had been almost as destructive as a dum-dum. The other man was dead.

"Got it this time, Malcolm!" murmured Dick faintly, as his chum knelt beside him, and with a queer smile on his face Selwyn passed into unconsciousness.

While Rifleman Carr was busy with first-aid dressings, Sergeant Fortescue was pondering over the situation. He had lost touch with the advance. It was a vain sacrifice to attempt to push on with a mere handful of men. He decided to sit tight and await developments. Reserves would be speedily coming up; of that he felt certain.

"Can we get him out of this, Fortescue?" enquired Malcolm, indicating his unconscious chum. Fortescue shook his head.

"No," he replied. "'Gainst orders. Sorry!"

It cost the man an effort to refuse, but the sense of discipline had the upper hand. He, too, knew that once a wounded man was left in the depths of the battle-swept wood there was little chance of his being removed before it was too late. Yet if the rule were broken, and every unwounded man took upon himself to succour his disabled chum, the advance would be jeopardized.

Out of the smoke stumbled a wounded man, hesitatingly, as if not certain of his bearings. His shrapnel-helmet had fallen off, revealing an unbandaged bullet wound extending over both eyebrows. From his waist downwards he was literally caked with plastic mud.

"This way, chum!" shouted Fortescue, seeing that the man was partly blinded by the flow of blood, and as likely as not dazed by the nature of his wound.

"Look out!" exclaimed the wounded Digger, as Joliffe and Henderson assisted him into the emplacement. "We've copped it properly up there. The boys floundered into a bog, and were shot down like rabbits. And the Boches are counter-attacking. They'll be along here in half a shake."

It was bad news. The main attack had inclined away to the right, while the thinly-held line between the New Zealand division and the English regiments on the left had been stopped, not by the Huns, but by the impossible condition of the marshy ground. Into the gap a strong body of German troops, who, having previously held the wood, knew how to avoid the treacherous swamp, came hurriedly, with the intention of driving a wedge between the assaulting troops. It was one of those minor operations which, if successful, might turn the fortunes of the day.

"By gum!" ejaculated Fortescue. "We're up against something. Any of you fellows know how to handle these?"

He indicated the two captured machine-guns, in one of which a fresh belt of ammunition had just been placed when the Diggers upset Fritz's preparations.

"Guess I'll have a cut at it," remarked Malcolm. Joliffe also signified his belief that he would be able to "work the gadget".

"All right, then," continued Fortescue. "Henderson, you and I will do a bit of bombing. How about you, chum? Can you bear a hand?" The wounded man who had brought the news of impending danger seized a couple of discarded rifles.

"I'm good for a few rounds rapid," he replied, as he examined the magazines of the weapons. "If I do a few of 'em in I don't mind overmuch. One of my mates told me he saw them shooting every wounded man of our crush they came across, so it's stick it to the last."

There was one alternative: to abandon the position. It meant leaving Dick Selwyn to the mercies of the Huns, for retirement through the mud would be impossible if hampered by a wounded man. Fortescue promptly dismissed the thought.

"Yes," he exclaimed, "we'll stick it out to the last! If I go under, Rifleman Carr takes command, then Joliffe. Now, stand by! Here they come!"

The foremost of the advancing Germans appeared in sight at a distance of about eighty yards from the devoted New Zealanders--bombers and riflemen in a compact mass--the advance guard of the formidable counter-attack.

They approached cautiously, almost furtively. Although assured by their officers that this part of the wood was not held, they appeared to have their doubts as to the success of their desperate measure.

Both machine-guns got off the mark almost at the same time. At that short range it was impossible to miss. Where men had been standing a second or so before was a struggling heap of writhing figures, while, to add to the slaughter, several of the bombs carried by the enemy exploded in their midst with devastating effect.

Back pressed the survivors, the wounded crawling slowly to the shelter of the fallen trees. Grouser Joliffe cheered. So far the Diggers had scored heavily.

Bullets whistling past their ears told them the unpleasant news that the Huns were developing an encircling movement. While the main body kept well back, skilled riflemen, taking advantage of abundant cover, were converging upon the little band of New Zealanders. Bombs, too, were hurled, but the distance was too great. They fell and exploded harmlessly.

Except for the moral effect, the machine-guns were now of little use. Better work could be performed by individual shooting, but the diverging fire from five rifles was a feeble reply to the converging volleys from ten times that number, while the emplacement, constructed to meet an attack from the westward, was ill-designed to ward off an assault from the opposite quarter.

For full five minutes the defenders lay low, replying cautiously to the hostile fire, yet conserving their energies for the time when the Huns would attempt to rush the scantily-held post.

Then came a catastrophe. A bullet, passing through an aperture in the concrete, struck Fortescue in the chest. Almost at the same time the already wounded Digger who had brought the news received a second wound in the right shoulder.

Malcolm Carr was now in charge of a garrison of four effectives all told.

With a weird attempt at cheering a number of Boches, mostly bombers, emerged from behind the tree-trunks and rushed towards the defences. Both guns quickly stopped the rush, but not before three men were astride the concrete wall.

Hardly realizing what he was about, Malcolm abandoned the machine-gun, seized a rifle, and dropped the foremost Hun. The second promptly lunged with his bayonet, and, although Malcolm parried, the blade transfixed his left arm just above the elbow. The next instant Henderson dropped the fellow with a bullet at close quarters, while Joliffe accounted for the third.

The three New Zealanders quickly slipped behind cover, just in time to escape a hail of bullets from the Huns, who had witnessed their comrades' deaths. Deftly Joliffe tied a strip of linen tightly above Malcolm's wound, for there was no time to lose. Although unable to use a rifle, Malcolm could still work the machine-gun, in spite of the throbbing and burning pain that shot through his left arm and down his side.

"We've settled a good many of the swine," exclaimed Joliffe. "When the boys come up they'll see we've died game."

Beyond a few desultory shots the attack had quieted down. It was ominous. The Huns, unable to rush the position, were bringing up a trench-mortar.

Suddenly the lull in this part of the wood (elsewhere the noise of combat was still intense) was broken by the rattle of rapid independent rifle-firing and the well-known battle-cry of the New Zealand boys. Bombs, too, were crashing in all directions, while Lewis guns added to the din.

Then, as swarms of khaki-clad figures dashed from between the shattered tree-trunks, Malcolm realized that aid was forthcoming in the very nick of time. His work accomplished, he dropped inertly to the ground between the bodies of his greatest chums, and everything became a blank.

* * * * *

Up the hill leading to No. 1 General Hospital, Brockenhurst--an establishment known as Tin Town--two men in "hospital blues" were slowly making their way. Both were wearing new, stiff-brimmed New Zealand hats, adorned with scarlet puggarees. The "blues" might be ill-fitting and sloppy, but it was a point of honour amongst the "boys" that their head-gear should be smart.

One of the men had his left arm in a sling, the empty sleeve being pinned to his coat; the other, in addition to wearing a bandage round his forehead, walked with a pronounced limp and leant heavily upon a rubber-shod walking-stick.

"Think you'll manage it, Malcolm?" enquired the man with the crippled arm. "It's a stiffish pull."

"I guess I'll do it, Dick," replied Rifleman Carr. "We've tackled some job for our first walk beyond the grounds; but Fortescue will be disappointed if we don't fetch there. How much farther is it?"

"Foot a bit stiff?" enquired Selwyn as his companion paused and rested one hand on Dick's shoulder.

"It gives me gip at times; suppose I'm a bit out of training, too," replied Malcolm. "What puzzles me is how did I get that buckshie?"

"What puzzles me," rejoined Dick, "is how any of us came out of it alive. There's Fortescue, with a hole drilled completely through his chest, alive and kicking. You came off lightly, my boy; but when they carted me into the operating-room I thought it was good-bye to my arm."

At length the chums reached the portals of Tin Town. Following an asphalted path between well-kept lawns they arrived at the corrugated-iron building in which Sergeant Fortescue was to be found. Being a fine afternoon, and most of the cases convalescent, the ward was almost deserted. The object of their search was soon discovered.

"Glad to see you," exclaimed Fortescue when the preliminary greetings had been exchanged. "I hear you're boarded for New Zealand, Selwyn?"

"Yes, I'm off to Torquay on Thursday," replied Selwyn. "Suppose it'll be six weeks more before I get a boat, and then cheer-o for Christchurch."

"Lucky dog!" commented Fortescue. "By the way, Malcolm, I've news for you. That boxing

Maori pal of yours, Te Paheka's his name, I fancy, is in the next ward. Do you know, he carried you right back to the advance dressing-station, and that you were both bowled over by a shell just the other side of Hannebeke stream? That's how you got it in the foot, and Te Paheka had a chunk taken off his shoulder. Yet he stuck to you and carried you in before he collapsed."

"That's news," declared Malcolm. "How is he? I'll look him up when we leave you. And now I'll tell you some news. I've been recommended for a commission, and am to have a staff job in Blighty until I'm fit to go out again."

"*Kia ora*, laddie," said Fortescue heartily. "C Company, or what's left of the boys, seem to be dropping in for plums. They've even given me the D.C.M. Goodness only knows what for," he added modestly. "They say it was for holding a captured post. But what else were we to do? It was a case of sticking it or going under. My word, our fellows paid the price; but they are great."

"We had a lady visitor this afternoon," remarked Selwyn after more blunt congratulations had been tendered and received. "She started by remarking how magnificent it was of the boys to come all the way from New Zealand to help smash Big and Little Willie; how loyal to the Mother-land, and all that sort of talk. We managed to enlighten her some; told her that we preferred to fight in Europe than to sit still and run the risk of meeting Fritz down under--for that's what it would be if Germany did get the upper hand. So we chuck in our little lot to help others, and at the same time to help ourselves. Well, so long, Fortescue, we'll look you up again to-morrow."

Te Paheka's olivine features were wreathed in smiles when Malcolm entered his ward. The Maori's fighting days were over. Never again would he use either bayonet or boxing-gloves, for his right arm was totally incapacitated. He, too, was "boarded" for Aotea Roa[1]--the Land of the Southern Cross.

"I am lucky, Malcolm," he said after Rifleman Carr had thanked him for his act of devotion. "Lucky to be able to bring you in. Golly, I can still drive a motor-car. When you come home, Malcolm, I'll be waiting for you at Lyttelton with the most top-hole car going. And you'll be there all right, with honours and distinctions. *Kia ora*."

"Thanks, Te Paheka!" replied Malcolm. "I'll do my level best to carry on, for the honour of New Zealand and the Anzac Brigade."

[1] Aotea Roa--"the white cloud"--is the Maori name for New Zealand.

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