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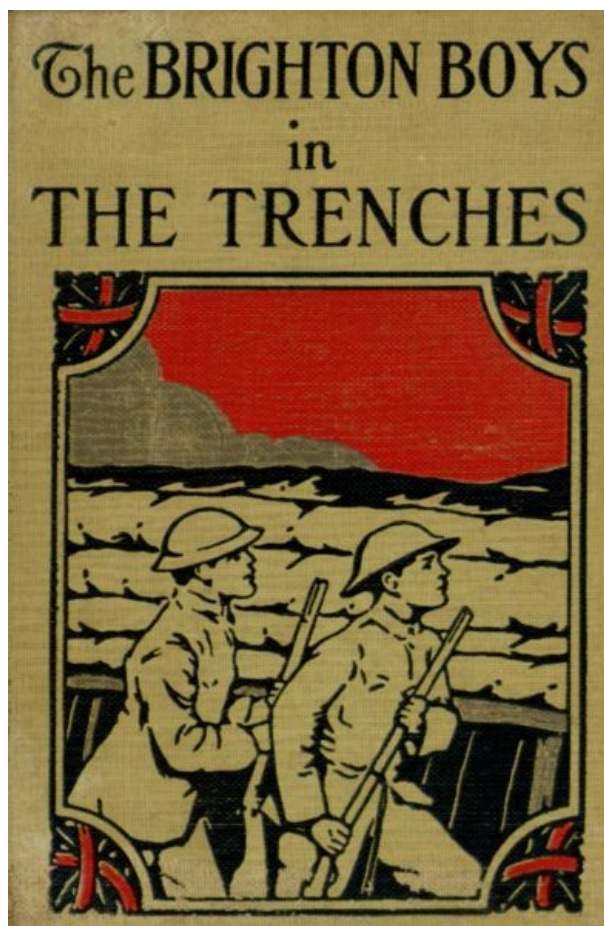
Author: James R. Driscoll

Release date: May 18, 2013 [EBook #42733]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Demian Katz and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net> (Images courtesy of the Digital Library@Villanova University (<http://digital.library.villanova.edu/>))

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THE BRIGHTON BOYS SERIES

BY

LIEUTENANT JAMES R. DRISCOLL

AS FOLLOWS:

THE BRIGHTON BOYS
WITH THE FLYING CORPS

THE BRIGHTON BOYS

IN THE TRENCHES

THE BRIGHTON BOYS
WITH THE BATTLE FLEET

THE BRIGHTON BOYS
IN THE RADIO SERVICE

THE BRIGHTON BOYS
WITH THE SUBMARINE FLEET

THE BRIGHTON BOYS
IN THE ENGINEERING CORPS



THE RED STREAKS OF FLAME STABBED THE SEMI-DARKNESS.

The BRIGHTON BOYS in THE TRENCHES

BY
LIEUTENANT JAMES R. DRISCOLL

ILLUSTRATED

THE JOHN C. WINSTON COMPANY
PHILADELPHIA

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CHAPTER I

THE INCENTIVE

With the days that the poet has termed the rarest, the longest, sunniest days of the year, there had come to Brighton at once sad and happy days.

For it was that time in early June when to those who have been faithful is given the credit they so richly deserve for hard study and achievement; the time also of parting from loved classmates and companions in glory on the field of sport, of leaving behind for a time, or perhaps forever, the dear old school and the campus, the custodians of so many delightful associations.

Golden moments are those, indeed, even though shadows mar the perfect glow of youth and hope and aspirations. But shadows there must be, for school is but a part of life's too brief journey taken through many unlighted places, as well as in the sunshine.

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Herbert Whitcomb, over-tall and manly-looking for his seventeen years, strolled alone down the broad boardwalk that led from class-rooms to dormitories, his hands in his pockets, his head bowed in earnest thought. He turned off suddenly into one of the clusters of spruces that dotted the spacious grounds and finding a bench sank down dejectedly, his comely face, usually expressive of good humor, now showing only sorrow.

It was just after final examinations, and other students, singly, in pairs and in groups, were among the trees enjoying the restfulness of the out-of-doors. Two standing within a few yards

could be heard talking.

"They have joined, but I don't know what regiment. Gosh! What a difference the war is going to make right here in good old Brighton Academy! There's Corwin and Joe Little and 'Fatty' Benson in the American flying squadron; and Jed Harris and a bunch of the fellows are in the navy."

"Jack Hammond and Ted Wainwright—they went underseas with the Yankee submarine fleet, didn't they?"

"You bet! There's dare-devil action for you! Fighting the sea wolves in their own element! Shouldn't wonder if those Brighton submarine boys blow up the Kiel Canal before they're through! Got brains, those fellows. Well, things are moving. As sure as shooting, we're going to make the world safe for democracy! I guess I'll have to get into the game myself. It isn't any fun sitting on the bleachers. I'm goin' to enlist."

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"Why not wait till you're of age and then let 'em draft you?"

"Not for me, kid. I want to have my choice of the branch of service I join."

"You've made up your mind, then?"

"Yep. Me for the Engineers' Corps. Believe me, there's no more important branch of the army ___"

The young men had started off and now their voices died away among the trees. Whitcomb suddenly sat up very straight, his hands on his knees, and gazed fixedly before him, seeing nothing, but in his mind's eye seeing much, for a thought, not altogether new, had come to him and he was beginning to bite down on it hard. The boy's clenched hand went up into the air and then smote the bench seat quite forcibly.

"Must've smashed that fly, or was it a knotty problem?" said a jovial voice, the branches of the spruces parting to let the speaker through; a red-headed, freckled, squint-eyed lad who was quite as homely as the one whom he addressed was good looking.

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Whitcomb greeted the newcomer sadly. "Well, old man, this is my last day on earth. It was my hopes I was smashing."

Roy Flynn, classmate, loyal friend, all-round good fellow, with laughing Irish eyes, threw back his head, opened a mouth that might almost have made a barn door jealous and very unmistakably chuckled.

"I'm goin' t' die with ye, then! What's the crime for which we're bein' executed?"

"Listen! Got a letter from the legal luminary this morning," began Whitcomb. "Contents nothing but words and to the effect that the cash is gone. It's now up to me right away to hustle round and get myself some more, somehow. That's not so bad, but it means no more school, or of Brighton, anyway. It means this, too: that I, Herb Whitcomb, have got to get back there among the more lowly where I belong and travel the back alleys awhile—it's only the lucky that can hit the highways. Much pleasure in the thought that some of my old friends are saying: 'Huh! Took a tumble, didn't he? Money ran out. Tried to fly too high in the first place, I guess,' and all that sort of thing. But least pleasant will be that you and I—"

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Roy interrupted with a sudden roar.

"'Whurrah! Whurrah!' as me old granddad used to say. Tin-can the blue stuff and the pessimistic rot! There's going to be nothing unpleasant concerning you and I—I mean you and me. And why, me lad? Because do I see meself letting the misfit circumstances of this changeable world make a monkey of me? Yes, I do not! Life is too brief, and sorry the day when one bids good-by to friends and fun; one's a fool who does and as me old granddad in Ireland used to say: 'Bad cest to 'em!' Am I right?"

"No doubt, if I only knew what you were talking about. I can't help being thick-headed."

"Listen, Herb. Ye won't go to work this summer and ye won't quit school! I'm talkin' to ye. Me old dad has enough for the both of us and I'll lend ye enough for to see ye through in grand shape, if ye will coach me along to keep up with ye. Are ye on?"

"Roy, I couldn't do that. I couldn't, really. You know a fellow has some pride, and I—"

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"Oh, sure, but tin-can it this once. Ye've got no business to shove it at me and ye know, me lad, I'm never goin' to say one word about this to a single, solitary soul. It's between us only."

"I know that, old man; I would be sure of that, but even then I couldn't—I—you see, I would know it myself, and I could never be quite happy if I weren't paying my own way."

"But ye'll be coachin' me and I'll be payin' ye wages. Now, do ye mind that? Are ye so blamed big-headed—?"

"'Fraid so. You see, I wouldn't be half earning what I'd need. And as for the summer—well, there's another hundred and thirty dollars due and ready for me, my guardian writes, so I might spend a week or so with you in the mountains; then hunt a job. Come on in town with me now, will you? I want to mail this letter to the legal luminary."

The two boys, arm in arm, made their way across the juniper and spruce covered hillside, then into the broad walk and through the high stone gateway to the street. The post office was half a mile away.

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Stepping along briskly and discussing future plans, they were almost past a little crowd, mostly

of students and small boys, collected on the sidewalk when quick-witted Roy, not at the moment speaking, caught a few words that made him halt instantly and turn. Herb gazed at him in surprise.

"—und vat I care for der law?" came a guttural voice. "Der American beebles vas fools to go to war mit Chermany, for vat can dey do? Der Chermans is fighters und drained up to der minute und you oxford dese American chumps vill haff any show mit dem? Uh?"

In a moment Herbert and Roy had joined the assemblage and had observed the speaker to be a big, large-girthed German possessing a very red nose, a glowering countenance and a manner contemptuous and self-exalted. One could read upon him, at a glance, that he held the unalterable opinion that there was no other country like Germany, no people to compare with the Germans and for all the rest of the world, no matter to what section he might owe his present prosperity, he had an altogether poor opinion.

The audience seemed strangely silent before the German's denunciations and Herb glanced about him. Two seniors of Brighton were there and two others of the sophomore class, each one a youth of possibly doubtful courage, more in love with the refinements of books than with the danger of engaging in too strenuous argument with a bearish, bully-ragging, irresponsible foreigner. The rest of the bunch were youngsters from the public school. [Pg 16]

One bright-faced, quick-witted boy among the latter there was who alone evidently had the courage of his convictions:

"Aw, gwan! What ye tryin' t' give us? Our fellers'll make that big stiff Hindenburg look like a chicken hit with a brick! Them Dutchmen ain't sa much!"

"You vas only a leedle kid und you don'd know noddings," spouted the German. "Chermans ain'd Dutchmens; dey vas ten times as goot. You fellers can fight, heh? Vere do you keep dese fighters? I ain'd seen noddings off dem; dey vas all crawled in a hole. Und der soldiers off der Vaterlandt, dey make 'em crawl in a hole chust like dat!" and he snapped his pudgy fingers.

Roy looked at Herb, who was gazing at the big man through narrowed lids, his face turning red. The lad of pure Celtic stock felt his own blood boil and his ready tongue found release. [Pg 17]

"Now, ain't ye got the ignorant nerve to stand right out here in America and talk like a fat tomat? De ye know that might not be quite safe everywhere?"

"Safe? Safe? Ach, I see noddings onsafe! I don't see no metals on nobotty roundt here vat iss going to make id onsafe for me. Und vat I tinks I says, heh? Und nobotty can stop me, needer!"

"Better not think too much, then, Dutchy," advised Roy.

"Say, young feller, you vas oldt enough to know bedder den to call me Dutch. I vas Cherman. Und chust you remember dot; see?"

"That's so, Germany. I guess it's an insult to the honest Dutch to call you that. By the way you fellows have been carrying on over there in Belgium, burning, looting, murdering women and children——"

"Dot vas a lie! All a lie! Newspapers, newspapers! Der American newspapers iss chust like der beebles, all liars! Und you belief 'em, py gollies, effrybotties. Efen Vilson, he ain'dt got no better ——"

"Hold on, there! You're going much too far! Speak with respect of the President of the United States, or don't speak of him at all!" This came, like a shot, from Herb, and the boy's eyes flashed into the little pig's peepers of the big foreigner. A cheer went up from the crowd and Roy slapped his chum on the back. [Pg 18]

"That's the stuff! Give him some more of that!"

The German took a few steps forward facing Herb, the crowd giving way. The man's arm was raised.

"Vat you got to say aboutt it, heh? I say chust vat I bleese. Who vas you? Purdy soon I ketch you py der neck und twist id like a chicken gets der axe, heh?"

"You really couldn't mean to be so unkind, could you? Now, honest." Herb was sarcastic. "Now, I'll tell you what we'll do to fix you. You come along down town and we'll just turn you over to the cops. They'll want to investigate you. How about it, fellows? Hadn't we better take him right now?"

One senior, scenting trouble, began to edge away, but the others responded by general acclamation. It might mean a serious scrimmage, but they were ready for it; all that had been needed to call them into action was a leader. [Pg 19]

But the big German proved to be the actual aggressor. Permitting his anger to get the better of his judgment and quicker on his feet than his girth would indicate, he made a rush straight at Herbert. No doubt he meant to end matters by a sudden defeat of the leader and thus intimidate the others. But like many German plans this one did not fully work out.

Herb merely side-stepped. As a most promising pupil he had long received special training in boxing from the capable athletic instructor. He was instantly out of the man's reach as the big arms and fat hands reached to seize him; he was just a mite too far away also when the ponderous fist, swung round in the air, aimed at his head. But the German was not out of Roy's reach.

The foreigner's artillery may have been heavier, but that of the American youth was handier and reached farther. The man's blow, that surely would have done damage had it landed, by its momentum had carried him half off his feet when Herb just stepped forward, shot out his arm and stepped back again.

The German got it precisely in the right place on the jaw and he collapsed like a clothes-horse with the props knocked from under it. [Pg 20]

It was a good deal like a fat pig doing the wallow act, for the man did not remain long quiescent. He rolled over to his hands and knees, then got to his feet and letting out a roar like a mad bull, commenced swinging his arms windmill fashion. Then there was another rush at Herb.

The incident was repeated, precisely and accurately, except that the blow on the jaw was this time harder and that the German lay prone somewhat longer. He arose this time to a sitting posture and through his little eyes regarded Herb with something akin to wonder. The boy, never hard-hearted, turned away. But Roy stood before the undignified foe.

"Now, you see, Dutchy, what is bound to happen to you if you get gay. Pretty much the same thing is going to happen to the German Army before long. If you don't stop shooting off your big mouth this'll happen to you." And the lad drew his fingers around his neck to indicate a strangling rope.

The growing crowd, many others having now joined it, set up a laugh and then a decided cheer at this; the German blinked at his opponents, felt his jaw, made a horrible grimace and finally, getting to his feet, made off slowly across the street. The crowd jeered after him, then turned with appreciation toward Herbert. But that worthy, hating laudation, beckoned to Roy, and the two walked quickly on their way. [Pg 21]

"One battle won, b'gorry!" Roy could not refrain from some comment. "Say, Herb, they were sure nice ones that you handed him and right where he needed them most, too—in his talker. Reckon that was about the first victory over the Germans, but guess it won't be the last."

"I'm going to try to help that it isn't, Roy."

"What you mean, lad?"

"That chump's words set me to thinking," Herb said. "It's up to just such as I am to take a hand; a bigger hand. I'm going right now to the recruiting office and enlist."

"You are? By cracky! Enlist, is it? That's the stuff! Well, you know what I told you about you and me. I'm going to enlist, too, if you do! I'll have to write for me old man's consent, of course, but he'll give it. Come on! Let's go see what we gotta do." And the youth raised his voice in impromptu song: [Pg 22]

"Boom a laddie! Boom a laddie!
Let's go get a gun,
Or a brick-bat and a shillalah
Till I soak some son of a Hun!"

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CHAPTER II

JOINING HANDS WITH UNCLE SAM

Captain Pratt, recruiting officer, glanced up to see two young fellows approaching, evidently with some intention of engaging his services. And for the big and important cause he was appointed to aid he was more than willing that his services should be engaged, heavily engaged, at any and all times.

The world was at war; his beloved country was mixed up in this contest, hopefully for the right and as humanely as it is possible to be when fighting. It required soldiers to fight and men and more men and still more men out of which to make these soldiers which were to win in a glorious cause for liberty and honor.

And so, because of the position of his office and the considerable number of students coming to him there, he may have been a little less careful about sticking to the precise regulations concerning very young applicants. The captain had a weakness for youngsters, being something of an overgrown boy himself at times, and this may have had much to do with his leniency. [Pg 24]

The upshot of it was that, a little while later, after some information had been exchanged, questions had been asked mostly on the part of the captain, and oaths had been taken, the military gentleman dismissed the two young fellows with this parting injunction:

"Now you understand. Both of you report to the commanding officer at Camp Wheeler as soon as you can arrange matters. Come to me for cards to him. I need hear nothing more from you, Whitcomb, as you say your guardian will be willing and anxious for you to enlist. I'll want a letter of consent from your father, Flynn. Flynn? That might be somewhat of a Celtic name, eh?"

"Yiss, sorr!" said Roy, standing very straight and saluting in the most approved manner, at which the captain laughed heartily.

"Well, go your ways, lads, and report to me as soon as you can get away from school in the proper

manner. I rather think that Uncle Sam can make very promising soldiers of you both, especially considering the shooting practice you've had."

"Say, Herb," said Roy, as soon as the two had got well away from the office, "that guy thought I could shoot, too, but I didn't tell him so. I only bragged you up." [Pg 25]

"Too much; I don't like it, Roy. But it's natural; you will blarney, you dear, old chump. You made it so strong that I guess he thought we're an entire regiment of experts. Well, you can't help it now. The only thing to do is for you to learn to shoot."

"But could I, Herb?"

"Of course."

"Glory be! Hearken, me lad! Come along. I'm goin' to get me a rifle and ammunition and you get your gun and we'll go out and blow the face off of nature. I'll buy your ammunition and you teach me; see? Come on."

In vain Herbert protested that it was needless to spend money for a gun; that Roy could practise with Herb's own, a splendid repeating weapon, of .30-caliber, won by the boy at the individual shoot of the Interstate Prep School Match a month before.

No; Roy must have his own gun.

From tiny boyhood, when a chummy father had put into the youngster's hands his first air-gun, Herbert had shown a marked genius, if it may be so called, for aiming straight and knowing just when to press a trigger. Then, with his first cartridge gun, a light target 22, which he had brought to school and taken on many a hike into the broad country, the boy had become, as Roy put it, almost unreasonably expert, knocking acorns and chestnut burs from high limbs, cutting tall weeds and hanging vines in half with the first shot, tossing a stone or a tin can in air with one hand and nine times out of ten plunking it fairly before it reached the ground. [Pg 26]

But with all this ability to put a bullet just where he wanted it to go, the lad was unwilling to use his skill in taking the life of any creature. He would not kill even a hawk or a crow, though sometimes sorely tempted to try a shot at such birds on the wing. Once he sat on a log, with rifle across his knees, while a fox leaped on a fence not forty yards away and stood balancing and curious for half a minute.

"We've got no real right to kill these things," he said to Roy, who was always with him. "They've got as much right to live as we have and they were here before we were. A fellow might shoot something if he were hungry, but not decently just for sport. These animals, birds and things, are getting too scarce as it is." [Pg 27]

The town supported a first-class hardware store and its stock of guns was sufficient for the most exacting selection to be made therefrom. When the boys reached their room in the dormitory an hour later and the new gun was unpacked, Herb took it up and toyed with it lovingly. It was one of the most modern of sporting rifles, also shooting a 30-30-160 cartridge, the first figure referring to the caliber, the second to the grains of powder by weight and the third to grains of lead. The workmanship, the finish, the design were perfect.

Herb, perforce, must make potent remarks concerning the weapon.

"Now you have something that you can rely on whenever you look over the barrel and press the trigger in the right way. It'll do the trick and never fail you if you treat it as it deserves; keep it clean. Remember to do that. We'll take the stock off, unlimber the breech, warm all the parts and run melted vaseline all through it; then, when it gets cold, that sticks in there as grease, which beats any liquid oil all to pieces. In the barrel only always use but a drop or two of oil on your rag or brush and with that brass-jointed cleaning rod you can clean from either end. If you use an iron rod, clean only from the breech end; I'll bet they'll tell us that in the army." [Pg 28]

"And, Roy, you've got to be careful how you shoot, what you shoot at and what's back of it around here. If it goes off accidentally some old time, or there isn't anything back of what you shoot at to stop the bullet, why, the blamed thing is apt to go on and kill a cow in the next county. These steel-jacketed bullets will punch through six inches of seasoned oak, twice as much pine, and clean through an ordinary tree of green wood. But say, Roy, you don't care how you spend your money; a thousand cartridges! I'll use about two hundred of them and I want to pay you——"

"You go plumb to smash; will you? Pay nothin'! Ain't you goin' to teach me how to hit a bumble-bee at half a mile? We'll start to-morrow and work regular until Commencement."

It was even so, except the bumble-bee stunt. Excellence generally follows determination where all else is favorable, and Roy possessed good eyes, steady nerves and faith in his own ability and that of his teacher. The result was that before the cartridges were half spent the one-time disinterested greenhorn was that no longer; he could put ten shots within a six-inch circle and do it pretty quickly, too, and he had completely fallen in love with what he called "the fun and fine art of firearms; hooray!" [Pg 29]

But however interested he became in his own efforts, it was as nothing to his intense delight over Herbert's wonderful skill. He ran back and forth between target and gunner like a playful dog chasing a thrown stick.

"Ye've got the center pushed into one big hole now!" he would shout, "and ye've got only one or mebber two outside the center and none near the ring! It's wonderful! I might shoot lead enough into yon old quarry bank to make a ten-million-dollar mine of it and never be as certain of hittin' the center as what you are each time you let her go. Shooters, like poets, are sure born and not

made."

The departure from dear old Brighton, the saying of farewells that might be final, the leaving of scenes that would always be reminiscent of happy days and worthy efforts with benefits for life, came all too soon.

With his one bag and gun case, his sole possessions, Herbert Whitcomb stood on the station platform waiting until Roy Flynn had checked his numerous trunks and boxes. He glanced again at the letter from Captain Pratt, the recruiting officer, introducing both boys to Brigadier-General Harding in command at Camp Wheeler. The captain had invited them to peruse it and emotional Roy had been greatly tickled by the contents. It read in part:

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"I write you about these boys because they are younger than we have been accepting them, those from the same school heretofore having been seniors. But these are manly fellows, athletes in training, spending much of their time out of doors on long hikes and week-end camping trips and, most important of all, they are both very excellent shots, Whitcomb excelling almost anything that I have ever heard of, as I have it from good authority. In view of the Special Inquiry No. 10, June 1st, I believed this would interest you."

Special Inquiry, eh? The captain had not explained that. It was probably a matter for higher authorities to explain and no doubt they would hear of it again. Surely it related to shooting, and most certainly the ability to handle a gun much better than the average man must be an important thing in relation to soldiering.

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Roy returned just as the train pulled in and the two went aboard. The boys were now on their way for a few days' visit to the elegant Flynn home and, from a previous experience, Herb knew he would be made most welcome.

After that came the journey and the introduction to Camp Wheeler.

CHAPTER III

[Pg 32]

GETTING INTO HARNESS

"Compn-eee, atten-tion!"

These were the first words of any significance that greeted Herbert Whitcomb and Roy Flynn when they alighted from a long train and took their first and interested view of an army encampment.

But all along—in fact, ever since they entered the train in another state, at Roy's home town of Listerville—the lads had witnessed many and constant sights that reminded them of the stern duty now before them. They had taken the oath to serve Uncle Sam from that very June day and they had traveled with many others sworn to the same earnest, fearless task.

With crude, small bundles in hand—for thus they had come, knowing full well that equipment for new duties would be given them—the boys, amidst a crowd of eager welcomers clad in khaki and many fellow travelers in plain clothes, filed in a slow-moving line across a tramped field, across a roadway, between fence posts and were ushered into a long, low building, one of many such that faced an exceedingly wide street fully a quarter of a mile long. Parallel to this ran other streets flanked by similar but smaller buildings, all of them being but one story high, with slightly sloping roofs.

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There was something plain, strong, durable and altogether business-like about this newly made little city that spoke of utility only, without frills or any effort at useless show.

The only thing of beauty to be seen anywhere near was the glorious Stars and Stripes floating from the peaks of many of the buildings; by far the largest flag waved in the soft early summer breeze from a great iron flagpole near the entrance end of the main camp street.

Two trim figures in khaki uniforms and leather puttees came and stood near the boys and conversed audibly.

"Quite a likely bunch of rookies this time," said one.

"Guess they'll get some material out of them, old and young. These two here are just kids."

"Look like promising chaps, though. Wonder when the adjutant and Colonel Fraley are going to get busy. And then—say! It's going to be some fun breaking in all these new men. Well, there's two things they didn't have to teach *me*—that's how to sleep and to have an appetite! Me for the mess whenever they toot!"

[Pg 34]

"Here, too! There's one thing, though, haven't you noticed, that the boys are generally deficient in? That's shooting. I think——"

"That we ought to practise more? Sure. And we ought to have better instructors; not men who know it theoretically, but fellows that can actually show some skill. Lieutenant Merrill can't hit a barn door; saw him try. Score was rotten. Then trying to show us how! I spoke to the captain about that and he said he was going to take it up with the colonel and he will tackle the general, I suppose. Cap said many of the men were complaining and wanted to get practice."

Roy had been listening intently to this colloquy and now he stepped forward and saluted.

"Beg pardon, but do you think the very best shot in the United States of America would be in demand, then, here?"

The two soldiers laughed and one said:

"Are you the champion rifle—?"

[Pg 35]

"Not I. But my friend here is all o' that. He can beat the chump who invented the gun. Take it from me, he can 'most knock the eye out of a mosquito at a hundred——"

"Oh, cut the comedy, old man!" Herb shouted. "They send a man to the guard-house here for less. We've got to learn more than how to shoot."

"Right; you do!" answered one of the soldiers, making a quick and evidently satisfactory appraisal of Herbert. "But we don't have a guard-house here; remember that. We go on the honor system. As soon as you fellows get assigned and get your uniforms, which'll take some little time——"

"We have a letter here for the commanding general that I'll bet he'll be dyin' to read!" declared Roy quickly.

"Oh, then, you'd better go to headquarters first of all. See that low building with the people sitting outside? Tell one of the aides there who you are; he'll fix you."

The Brighton lads were a little surprised and much pleased with the almost sudden absence of red tape. In a short time they confronted the camp commander and that personage proved to be far more kindly than his rather severe appearance and abrupt manner indicated. He seemed to take an especial interest in the boys, spoke to them briefly of their school and home life, uttered a short, though heartfelt "Too bad!" when learning that Herbert was an orphan and after an order to an aide respecting the two ended with:

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"You shall be enrolled at once and placed, boys. There is much for you to learn. I will keep you both in mind and a little later on I want to witness your skill at shooting. We have too little ability here in that art."

The "little later" proved to be long over a month, in which time both boys had become privates in Company H, Officers' Corps, as far as the simpler requirements of knowing how to obey commands could take them. But they had soon learned that Camp Wheeler was partly an officers' training camp; that they had to study and practise and drill and listen to lectures and practise some more and study some more for many, many hours each day and that they were always ready for the wholesome, plentiful food and the comfortable cot at night, finding the enforced silence, after taps were sounded, not a whit unreasonable.

There was some little time off and then leave on Sundays when the boys, sometimes with others of their company, or more often by themselves, walked to the mile-distant town and bought sweets, knickknacks, ice cream, sundaes and other toothsome articles of the kind, craving a little novelty after the rather plain diet of the camp. Some there were who craved a little more than novelty and who sought it in ways that the law of neither town nor camp permitted. For it was known that the section around camp was, so-called, "dry."

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Then Captain Leighton of Company H, as did all the others in command of such units, give the boys a little talk.

"You men," he said, "have the Y. M. C. A. and the Knights of Columbus as refining elements and spiritual aids. You have your chaplain, who is strong in sympathy and noble in precept. Above all, you have your integrity, your consciences, your pleasure in clean living as reminders of what is necessary in the conduct of an officer and a gentleman. Of this we have spoken before and also of that which is down deep in your hearts, sterling patriotism and the desire to win this war. And this does not mean drilling and discipline and method only. It means clean living; it does not expect of you only bravery, courage to face a foe, but manliness in every way. We all hope not only for good conduct in ourselves, but also to teach it by word and example to others. This all is the test of patriotism of a practical, battle-winning kind."

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"Our general has requested those of us now in command of you, as you later will be in command, to talk to you about these matters and particularly in relation to the tendency to obtain and partake of intoxicants. Liquor is a trouble bringer, a brain stealer, a disgusting habit maker and you want to get away from it as you would from a German with a bayonet, killing it first, however, with your moral automatic. And now, I want all of you who favor these sentiments to respond with three rousing cheers for Lieutenant Total Abstinence. Are you ready? Hip, hip——"

The chorus of approval rang out with no uncertain sound; it seemed to be unanimous, beyond a doubt. But Herbert noticed, glancing once around, that here and there some of the fellows expressed in their faces that they were not in accord with the prevailing opinion. They had in some way been adversely prejudiced; perhaps were the sons of saloon keepers, brewers or distillers; perhaps had come from homes where unthinking parents had admitted the stuff to sideboard and table.

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Among these dissenters was one Martin Gaul, a dark-skinned son of foreign parentage. He was morose, stubborn, and much inclined to be quarrelsome. Almost upon first acquaintance he had shown a marked and exceedingly unjust antagonism toward Roy. With Herbert, on the other hand, he had an inclination to be unduly friendly, even to the extent of toadying. But Herbert, ever loyal to his chum, treated this with cold disdain or deserved sarcasm.

Returning from the town one Sunday evening, the two boys overtook three others in khaki

walking slowly ahead of them. One was talking loudly, with much unnecessary laughter; the others were grumbling, evidently disposed to disagree about something; one surely had a very decided frown.

Herb nudged Roy. "Gaul ahead there," he said, "and Phillips. I wonder that Billy mixes in with that chump. Who's the other fellow?"

"Not of Company H. Some other bad egg from another bit of the alphabet," Roy remarked. "Come on, let's steer a course to leeward of them; the sidewalk mebbe can stand it." [Pg 40]

"No, let's hang back a minute; or cross the street. Gaul's in a mood, I take it, to start a quarrel with you. I think they've all been drinking."

But walk as slowly as they did, they could hardly help drawing nearer, and then suddenly Herbert, though having just counseled prudence in his friend, darted forward and seized an object held up between Gaul and young Billy Phillips. Too much of this passing had made the trio careless of discovery.

Phillips ducked and dodged clumsily, as though expecting seizure himself, but Gaul turned fiercely to confront Herbert, the half-emptied whisky bottle gripped in the latter's hand.

"Oh, you! Now that ain't a very nice trick to play on a fellow, unless you want a pull at it yourself. In that case you're most welcome, old top."

Herb did not reply to Gaul, but addressed Phillips: "Billy, you're a blamed fool to disobey orders in this way and go against common sense and decency. You know you're not that kind of a chap, in the first place. Time to cut it out." [Pg 41]

Roy Flynn took a hand in the conversation.

"Birds of a feather do not always flock together, it would seem," he said. "At least, not in your case, Phillips. Evil associations gather no moss and a rolling stone corrupts good manners. You ought to know that, me lad."

"Are you meaning to sling any insults by that?" Gaul suddenly exploded. "Mebbe you want a slam on the jaw, which you're liable to get!"

"Never a bit! But I reckon you're electioneering to elect trouble."

"You can't make no trouble for me, you red-headed Mick! I think I'll just take a fall out o' you, anyway." Saying which Gaul advanced upon Roy.

"You're on, me lad," was Flynn's rejoinder.

CHAPTER IV

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A FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT

"I want to warn you fellows," said Herb, stepping between the would-be combatants, "that this sort of thing is not what our officers would approve of. You have no reason to scrap, except a mutual dislike. Better agree to disagree. Shake hands and call it off."

"Shake? Not with that thing!" cried Gaul, and Roy vigorously shook his head. There was positive joy in the lad's face and voice.

"The only use I'll make o' me hands now is quite different," he laughed.

"Oh, well, then; go at it," said Herb, and in a low voice to Roy: "Get his wind first; then smash him."

The battle was short, sharp, and at first terrific on the part of Gaul. His style of fighting consisted in rapid rushes, swings and slams, if he could clinch, in the hope to conquer at once.

Roy, as quick on his feet as a cat, had no difficulty in avoiding his heavier opponent until the latter was partly winded; then suddenly Gaul got two awful whacks on the solar plexus that further deprived him of needed oxygen so that he staggered. In that instant's failure to come back Gaul got one big wallop, a right-handed, body-plunging swing fair on the side of his jaw and he was not even aware that the sidewalk flew up and all but embraced him. [Pg 43]

Herb, Billy Phillips and the other fellow picked Gaul up and tried to stand him on his feet, Billy jocosely counting ten quite slowly. Gaul presently opened his eyes and used his legs, then sat down on the bank bordering the open lots. Roy was far aside, using his handkerchief to bind up his skinned knuckles. Then Herb spoke:

"We're not going to report you fellows; we're not squealers. But you know this boozing isn't a square deal; Billy, you know that, after what has been said to us. The stuff's no good. What real fun can you see in getting half soused and having everyone else wise to it? You ought to have more sense."

"Doggone it, Herb, I have, and I'm going to give it the go-by! Owe it to you fellows, too. Never again for me! I don't know about Gaul, but I don't think Williams here——" [Pg 44]

He turned, but the said Williams was walking rapidly away and they took that for a pretty good sign, or at least shame for his act. Billy added:

"He's a good chap and you've got his goat. Bet he cuts the booze, too. How about you, Gaul?"

The fellow was himself now, but sore mentally and physically, and he made no reply. Phillips told him to come on, but he sat still, mumbling and thus they left him, Herb tossing the whisky bottle so that it smashed to pieces at Gaul's feet.

The next morning, after drill and practice, Herbert was much surprised and not a little bothered in mind to receive word from Corporal Grant of his squad that the captain wished to see Private Whitcomb. The boy surmised the reason and he did not wish to bear tales.

His worry was added to when Captain Leighton, saluting gravely, bade him follow and led the way across the street to headquarters. In a moment they stood before the commander's desk, and the general looked up with his customary cold stare, which suddenly changed to surprise.

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"This man boozing——?" he began.

"No, no, sir! Quite the reverse. He broke it up. Private Phillips, and Williams, of Company D, are the ones who confessed that they went to town and got some liquor."

"Yes. Speak-easy. We have notified the authorities and they will arrest the parties; if not, we shall send a squad and raid all doubtful places. But——"

"This man Whitcomb, General——"

"Yes, I remember him."

"Well, he took their bottle away and smashed it and talked Phillips and Williams into good behavior. I get it also from Phillips that Private Flynn was in some kind of a fight over it, Flynn also being against booze, but I can't learn the name of the other fellow; possibly they don't know him."

"Know him, Whitcomb?" General Harding asked.

"Yes-es, I—do." Herb hesitated. "But I'd rather not name him, sir. Flynn licked him awfully and I have a notion he was pretty well punished and——"

"We ought to be the best judges of that. But no doubt you are right." The general arose and reached out his hand to Herbert. "You did a good thing, my boy, and deserve the gratitude of the camp. It was no small thing to do. If you were not so young I would recommend you to your colonel for a non-com appointment, but as it is I have my eye on you in another capacity. Expert with a gun, are you not?"

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"Oh, I don't know, sir. I——, but please remember Flynn also."

"We are going after you fellows later and I'll remember you both. Thanks for your stand in this booze business."

But Herbert was not greatly elated over this incident; he considered that he had only done a simple duty, without playing at heroism, and it was merely carrying out his convictions to the letter. He regretted that Roy had not shared with him in being personally honored by the commander's approval, but Roy declared he had taken no part, except in fisticuffs.

However, another circumstance, a few days later, put a feather in the cap of each boy. It was a very different matter, indeed, in which they figured.

"Patriotism, to be worth while," their captain had said in one of his talks to the company in barracks, "must be of practical value and not consist in the mere waving of flags and cheering. The true patriot is willing at all times to do something for his country, to defend her against detractors, to fight her battles.

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"There is among our alien inhabitants throughout the land a treachery that is in league with our foes and this is making itself felt in so many ways, is trying to influence so many people who have to do with our war preparations that it is difficult to say where, when, and how it may crop out. It has even dared, snake-like, to rear its ugly and venomous head in or near our military camps, and all the watching in the world does not seem to keep it down nor stamp it out entirely. I only mention this to caution you against it whenever encountered, just as you should be cautioned against rattlesnakes in the mountains or sharks when swimming in tropic waters."

There came to the town, occupying hotels, cottages, empty school buildings, halls and specially erected shacks, a Woman's Social Betterment League from somewhere, fraternizing with an organization of the kind in the town and directing its very laudable efforts toward making life more enjoyable for the soldiers.

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There were those who said it was made up largely of faddists, well-to-do women and their followers who were looking for something new and amusing, but this was not entirely the truth. Others said that the camps had too much of the "betterment business," but the Woman's League workers did not preach; they exerted only an insistent, healthy influence.

Most of the inhabitants of Camp Wheeler, even largely the officers, fell for this sort of treatment when on leave; and among them, in time, were Herb Whitcomb and Roy Flynn.

The League gave several dinners and most properly conducted dances, the invitations being nicely managed so as to include everyone in turn. One Saturday afternoon the two Brighton boys were booked for a tennis tournament against several couples picked from other companies.

Herb never did find out how they were chosen to represent their company, nor would Roy admit that it had been his doings. The latter could play a fine game himself, but he very justly lauded his chum.

Herb's service was superb, his returns were nearly all well placed smashes, his net play was a revelation to most of the onlookers. Company H took the first prize easily and a young and blushing girl, standing by the general, tendered it to Herb and Roy, the latter looking right at her with a wide but most respectful grin. Herb did not know even what she looked like; he knew she was a girl only by the toe of her boot and all he heard was the final comment of the general.

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"Fine work, my boy! I used to be pretty good at tennis myself. Had the honor of playing with Colonel Roosevelt once when he was in the White House. Remember, lad, I have my eye on you. If you can shoot half as good as you can get a ball over the net——"

"Much better, sir; much better!" struck in Roy, and the commander smiled and waved his hand, the crowd cheered and an orchestra struck up some popular selections.

Following this Herb and Roy found themselves invited to a private affair on a Sunday afternoon, along with four other rookies. On the Saturday preceding the event the six were ordered to report to regimental headquarters.

They filed in, saluting Colonel Walling, who looked them over closely, then began asking questions as to their families, bringing up, school life and teachings and present ideas, though not one of them knew what it was all about. It proved to be a rather solemn occasion until the questions came to Roy Flynn. That lad needed no prompting, having caught the drift from the previous questions.

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"If me name is Flynn, sir, I'm neither Dutch, French nor Italian, and though me folks is Hibernian and so emerald green that a shamrock looks like a blue daisy alongside, don't believe nothin' else but what I'm so high-pressure American that the sky above has nothin' on me for true blue. I want most of all in this world to get to the happy hunting-ground in the next, but close second to that is the wish to see the Germans get it in the windpipe, proper and right. Do ye get me, sir?"

Colonel Walling had to laugh; being part and proudly Irish himself, he must have appreciated the lad's manner and remarks. Then he asked some questions of one other man, a young corporal in Company A, and running his eye over the bunch was about to indicate to Lieutenant Spaulding to take this man aside when in came Brigadier-General Harding.

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There was a moment's conference between the two officers. The commander's cold eyes scanned the crowd, but warmed a little when he caught sight of Whitcomb. Then, after a short consultation, Captain Leighton was called forward. Herb also was asked to advance and he heard the colonel say:

"Give them a broad hint; make them understand the possible situation. They must only keep their eyes open and keep mum."

The general added quickly.

"Better confine this to Whitcomb only; he'll know how far to include Flynn. We can trust them both, I think, but depend most wisely on Whitcomb. Eh, my boy?"

"Why, I hope so, whatever it is," Herb replied, turning very red.

They were all dismissed, Herbert being asked to accompany Captain Leighton. In a quiet corner of the barracks, which was his office, he gave the boy these brief orders:

"We suspect there is something wrong at Mrs. Thompson's, where you are invited to dinner. She was, we find, before her marriage, a Miss Heinig and we believe she was not born in this country. You might guess where, though we do not actually know. However, we want you to keep your ears open and use your wits and we trust you; the general, you may have observed, picked you out from the others for this duty. Flynn is going along; you may put him partly wise, if you like, but we think not altogether at first. Just give him some hints to stand in with you when called on, if you need him at all. Now, there may be some sharp brain work necessary, also the necessity of fully keeping your head under trying conditions. Are you at all fond of the girls?"

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"No," replied Herb. "Don't know anything about them. They're nice enough, I dare say; fine, in fact, to be sure, but you see I've always been an out-of-doors kid and something of a student and I'm only a boy yet. I respect girls, of course, because my mother was one once and I like to remember her as quite angelic. I think she must be an angel now. She's dead."

The captain leaned over and put his hand on the boy's shoulder and for a moment the two were not superior officer and private; they were man to man in genuine sympathy.

"My own case, too, my boy. I know just how you feel." He paused. "But to come back to the matter in hand. We can believe, with good reason, that most women are fine. There are some, however, that are treacherous, scheming, dishonest; outward show and charming manners do not always hide this fully. You will be up against something of this to-morrow, perhaps. Now, if anything transpires that is not all right in your estimation and you can fully handle it yourself, simply call your companions together—they merely have orders to act as a squad if called on and to take orders from you. But if you are at all doubtful about taking action just call me up; I believe the cottage has a 'phone."

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"But what will there be——?" began Herb. The captain shook his head.

"We think it best not to tell you all; it may cause you to act hastily and you may find out nothing.

CHAPTER V

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A DELICATE MISSION

It was a flower-decorated and most attractive dining-room into which the six young men were ushered after being most graciously received by Mrs. Thompson. There was a promise, indeed, of good things in the eating line to come and nothing could have been more gratifying to healthy youths who had long been absent from home cooking and daintily served luxuries, no matter how well fed they were with plain and nutritive stuff.

And then, as the boys stood for a moment by their chairs in imitation of their hostess, somewhere at a distance in the house soft music began to play. Suddenly the lady clapped her hands, the double doors leading to the hall flew open and six smiling young girls, dressed in pink and white and with flowing ribbons, entered.

Rapid introductions followed, the younger lads, and especially Herbert, being somewhat awkward in acknowledgment; to say that all were taken aback, though some agreeably surprised, was no exaggeration. As the genial hostess was busily engaged in wisely seating her guests, it was Roy Flynn's ready tongue that put all at ease. Addressing Mrs. Thompson and with a wave of his hand, he said:

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"Faith, me dear lady, it's the princess ye are at furnishin' delights, and all of us ought to agree with me. As me old granddad used to say, 'Bad cest to the lad who don't admire the lasses,' though ye might guess that hits me friend here, Mr. Whitcomb."

More the manner than the words caused a laugh and a flutter. A tall, dark-haired, pretty damsel, Mrs. Thompson's elder daughter, who proved to be a great aid to her mother in leading the general conversation, from her seat by Corporal Hern waved her finger tips across the table at Roy.

"Oh, you say that so nicely. But we shall try to keep Mr. Whitcomb from running away, though there is, of course, no telling what any of you terrible warriors may take it into your heads to do."

Roy arose and made a profound bow to the girl and struck an attitude.

"Flowers by the wall,
Buds at the table,
Joy over all,
Eat while you're able."

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He shot this off exactly as though he had committed it to memory. It began, then, to appear that the red-haired, homely lad would surely become the lion of the evening, for all the girls and most of the boys, themselves short in wit, appealed to Roy for a characterization of this or that thing rapidly discussed. And Roy was ever ready, so that the laughter and gaiety made the dinner a pronounced success.

Throughout this effusiveness, though appreciative of the wit and repartee, Herb sat almost silent and observant, though as yet ignorant of what he was particularly to observe. He was near the middle of one side of the table and by him sat the younger of Mrs. Thompson's daughters, an over-fat, giggling girl, slow of speech and evidently lax in ideas. She had been addressed as Laura. Rose and she were no more alike than a slice of ham and an ice cream cone.

Evidently Herb was expected to make himself agreeable to Laura Thompson, judging by the girl's manner, and the pink-flounced creature on the other side of him was all smiles and giggles for Terry Newlin, from Company I.

As the guests became more and more filled with good things and the hours grew longer the talk and laughter fell off a little, even Roy growing less verbose. Presently Rose Thompson, following a glance from her mother, made the request:

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"Now, you boys might tell us something about your life and duties in camp. Mr. Hern, you're a non-com and in command here, of course, you——"

"No; you see, we are off duty," replied the complaisant corporal, "and there is no need for leadership here. But if we should need to be commanded in any way, why, then, Whitcomb over there is to have the say."

There was a rapid change of glances between Rose and her mother, the latter making a quick signal with her eyes. Almost instantly Rose called to Laura:

"Say, kid, the corporal here wants to get better acquainted with you, I know. He said he admires stout girls most—surely you said that, corporal. Besides, I am just dying to talk with Mr. Whitcomb."

"Herb's scared to death already, so don't make him breathe his last quite yet, Miss Thompson," Roy demanded. He would have said this more hilariously, seeing Herb's face turn red, but something in the look his chum gave him shut him up. This also was not lost on Mrs. Thompson's elder daughter.

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The sisters exchanged places and at once Rose Thompson set about making herself more than agreeable to Herb. She was plainly bent upon drawing him out of his shell, was apparently determined to discover his brighter side. And the lad, always gentle and polite, unbent so far as to laugh and reply in kind to her sallies, but he did not lose one word being said by the hostess. Presently that lady echoed her daughter's recent request for camp news, doings and methods.

Terry Newlin was almost as ready as Roy Flynn; indeed, he talked more, but really said less. And he never thought twice what it was best for him to say. Now, pleased to hold the attention of all the fair ones, he began to spout upon the subject in hand. He rattled away about the grub, the cots, the drill, the study, the officers; and presently, surer of sympathetic hearing, began to enlarge upon the complaints, as he himself viewed them.

Rose Thompson saw that Herbert was trying to catch Terry's eye and she at once strove to prevent his doing so, for it was evident that the trend that Terry had taken much pleased the hostess. But Herb was not to be denied. He glanced across to Roy, pointed his thumb at Terry and his finger down and shook his head; then leveled a finger at Roy and another finger upward and nodded. Roy, never lacking, caught the drift.

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"Oh, box the corpse, Terry, and have the funeral over! Nobody's got any kick comin' at camp, and you know it! Why, company quarters are as good as home and no pig in the parlor nor hen nestin' in the bread-box, as Terry's been used to. Whurrah, lad! Ye give us all the blues!"

This silenced Terry, but not Mrs. Thompson. That diplomatic person saw the crucial moment was at hand to embark the spirit of discontent, and, looking her sweetest, she at once held the attention of the guests.

"But camp life must be really very crude, very uncomfy, very lonely, uninteresting and disconsolate, as Mr. Newlin has intimated. I can believe you are, most of you, actually homesick when you think of the real differences between camp and home, cold-blooded officers and mother love, plain fare and dainties, and all that. Now, isn't that so?"

A half audible assent from the girls went around the table. That kind of leaven was sure to work wonders. The boys listened as the hostess continued:

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"And it does seem a truly terrible thing that all this hardship, all this preparation, all this loss of time from studies, business, worthy pleasures at home should be thought necessary when there is really so little to be gained. Am I not right? All for death or loss of means, or both, for being maimed for life, made blind, made a dependent."

She paused impressively to let that sink in and another acquiescent sigh escaped, Herb noting with surprise that some of the boys joined in this, particularly Terry Newlin.

"And then," Mrs. Thompson continued, "what do we gain? What is it all for? Do we need to fear any European power away over here after this terrible war is over? Except England! Very probably England, who will fight always and against everything for commercial supremacy and her control of the seas. Are we not now fighting England's battles, and how will she thank us?"

"You poor boys away off there in those awful trenches, wallowing in mud, sleeping on straw, covered with vermin, with the din of bursting shells in your ears, the horrid expectation of death continually, seeing your loved comrades cut down, horribly wounded, dying or killed outright, your mind and body constantly suffering from these—surely you cannot disagree—"

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This last, in her most engaging manner, was addressed to Roy Flynn. The lad had risen and leaning forward, with both fists on the table, was glaring at the woman savagely; all the jollity in his round, red face had suddenly fled.

"Do you mean to try to make slackers of us; to preach the doctrine of discontent?" he demanded.

"No, indeed! Not at all, my dear boy. You quite misunderstand me, I am sure. Nothing could be more foreign to my thoughts. I am only deeply filled with sympathy for the lads who are going away to fight our battles, to bleed and die for us, while we, as it seems most selfishly, remain here in peace and security at home, able to do so little. And all for so little gain, probably for no gain at all. Our country is confronted by such a gigantic task. On us, soon, will fall the brunt of the effort to oppose the greatest military power on earth, and what can—?"

She paused a moment, noting Herbert's quick glance and apparent signal to Roy, who instantly resumed his seat, but refrained from again adopting his jovial manner and speech.

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"You see," Mrs. Thompson went on, "the Germans are so wonderfully able, are such a thoroughly capable race that it is well-nigh impossible to equal them in anything. They—"

Herbert decided that he must at last get into the conversation.

"Why do you so highly praise the Germans?" he asked abruptly. "We Americans refuse to believe that they are such wonderfully capable people. They are awful brags and try to make the rest of the world think they are the top notch of mankind, but in what way they show it I can't see."

"Young man, you are evidently not fully informed. You have not been in Germany, as I have. The German people are the most efficient—"

"No people are efficient who set the whole world against them," interrupted Herb.

"Mere jealousy on the part of other nations!" scoffed the lady. "But anyway, whatever you may think of the Germans, this fact remains: they have not invaded our country to war on us—"

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"Only because they couldn't," interposed Roy.

"They have not injured any of our people—"

"Oh! How about the *Lusitania* and some other boats?" chimed in Anthony Wayne Bartlett-Smith.

"Merely the fortunes of war as aimed at another country. Americans had no business to be on that boat when they had already been warned. How could the submarines choose between—?"

"Will you pardon me," Herbert suddenly requested, "for asking to be excused for a few moments so that I may call up our captain to ask at what hour we are to return? May I use your 'phone?"

The boy had arrived at a rapid conclusion, believing that drastic measures should be adopted. Half-way methods were distasteful to him. He was not certain that he had sufficient grounds for action, but anyway, that would be up to Captain Leighton. No doubt Herb could have the rest of the soldier guests with him, all except Terry Newlin, who seemed to be naturally disgruntled.

The bland face of the hostess went suddenly red and then very white, but she indicated the front hallway where the telephone hung. Then, as Herb arose, both he and Roy noticed that the lady nodded her head toward her elder daughter, who quickly got up and followed Herbert through the archway.

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As the boy reached his hand for the instrument there was a quick step beside him and slender fingers were thrust forward to push his hand aside.



SLENDER FINGERS THRUST HIS HAND ASIDE.

CHAPTER VI

HITTING THE MARK

"May I ask for what purpose, really, are you going to 'phone?" Rose Thompson asked.

"I told your mother what for, didn't I?" Herb replied.

"I know; yes. But your real reason?"

"Great Jehoshaphat! If you don't want me to use it I can get one next door, perhaps, or somewhere."

"No; use this one. But I have asked you a question. Now please answer. I want to know very much, indeed, and I know you will not refuse me."

"Won't I? There must be many a thing that you want to know right badly and can't. Well, I will use your 'phone as it's getting late." He had glanced at the hall clock.

"That clock is fast, very!" the girl declared. "And I must know. I must!"

She had interposed herself between Herbert and the 'phone and she looked very determined. It was not a pleasing position for the boy to be in, opposed by a gentle-appearing girl. Many a chap,

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even less tender-hearted than he, would have turned away, hoping for some other way to proceed, but Herb saw his duty first and clearly, the girl's attitude making him the more determined.

"Now, see here, Miss Thompson, you can hear me talk, can't you? I don't like to scrap with women, but I know my orders. Come, let me have that 'phone, or I'll have to take it, anyway."

She had put her hand against his breast and held him back. "When you tell me."

"To see when we are to return, I said. The captain told me to call him up about it."

"But that is not all. Tell me." Evidently she was playing for time.

"Oh, nonsense! Let me have that 'phone." And with a quick dive past her he did get it, and though she caught the cord and pulled it violently once, he held receiver and mouth-piece firmly in place.

"Give me the camp, please; Company H Barracks. Yes.—Captain Leighton? Whitcomb.—Return when?—Yes, we're all here.—It was indeed a dandy dinner!—I understand.—Yes.—Right away.—All right." He hung up the receiver.

"I suppose now, you are satisfied, Miss Thompson."

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The girl hesitated a moment, thinking, staring at him. "I think I am. And I think you are anything but a gentleman!" Suddenly she darted forward and dashed into the dining-room, Herb following with long strides.

"Yes, mother!" she exclaimed.

The hostess gave Herbert a look of such mingled hate and fear that had he been less immune would have turned him cold. She struck the table bell and turned toward the kitchen door. It opened to admit only a broad, very blonde face.

"Gretchen, you know my orders! At once; then remain! Laura, our hats and dusters! Rose, the suitcases are ready!"

Herbert knew that Rose had seen through his message and he surmised at once that all this had been planned ahead with German thoroughness, in case of failure to entirely convince all the guests. Perhaps it was the woman's first attempt at sowing discontent among the soldiers; perhaps the first of any of such bold attempts.

He saw that, with a good start in the powerful car which they had, the Thompsons could get over the State line and thus avoid immediate detention; possibly then go in hiding for a time and give the government authorities no end of trouble later.

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Perhaps the authorities would not even wish to detain the woman, but at any rate the boy resolved to see to it that Captain Leighton could come into touch with the situation, first hand.

To carry out this determination there was but one logical thing to do and to do quickly.

Herbert stood in the archway as Rose and Laura faced him. His service revolver, all the while in its holster under his coat, now was in his hand.

"The first person, except as ordered, who makes even an attempt to leave or enter this room will be shot; man or woman! Flynn, slip out and tell the servants this; then go watch for Captain Leighton, who will soon be here! The Thompson car, Bartlett; you go out and hold that! Newlin, you remain where you are; perhaps the captain may want to question you! You other fellows, go out of each of those other doors and lock them outside; then wait for the captain!"

Mrs. Thompson sank into a chair, her eyes, in fear, glaring at Herbert. Laura, in tears, knelt by her. Two of the other girls sat weakly at the table, one with her face in her hands; the other two, clasped in each other's arms, stood in a far corner. But Rose Thompson fearlessly faced Herbert, her head thrown back, her arms stretched down, her fists clenched, in precisely the most approved dramatic attitude for the occasion. And the boy had one fleeting thought that he had never seen a human face more to be admired.

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"This is a nice return for our hospitality! I think I could kill you!"

"Don't do it, please." He smiled. "I want to get a whack at your dear friends over in Germany first."

"Huh! They'll eat you up!" Rose retorted. "They'll——"

"They are not our friends——" wailed Mrs. Thompson, who was evidently not equal to this phase of the situation.

"Mother, hush! Don't be a coward! And don't lie! What if they are? We have a right to do as we please. Have what friends we wish. You coward, to threaten women!" she suddenly flashed out at Herbert. "But, pshaw! I'm not afraid of you. And I am going out that door! We all are! This is our house! Stand aside! Do you hear?"

Herbert merely shook his head.

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"I'm going out, I tell you! You won't dare to shoot! Poof! I'm not afraid of you, I guess! You would not dare to threaten men this way! But women—oh, you think you're very safe! Come, let me pass!"

"Look here, Miss Thompson, if you think I like this business, you get another think. But I know my duty just the same. And, honestly, you won't look half as nice laid out in a coffin, not even with a million flowers, as you do now. So don't tempt me to use this gun, for I will if you get gay!"

"I dare you!" the girl shouted.

"Well, if you really want to see how it feels to have a bullet go plowing through your anatomy, just make a dive for that doorway. Go ahead and try it." With a hand that wavered not in the least he leveled the pistol barrel straight at her. For one moment the girl stood irresolute, bravely weighing the chances. Then a wail from her mother and a cry of alarm from one of the other girls who thought she was going to start checked her. She stepped back and sank into a chair.

There came the opening and slamming of the front door, heavy footfalls, and Captain Leighton, with a sergeant and two men, entered the room, saluting. [Pg 71]

In twenty minutes the captain had heard Herbert's story, listened to Rose Thompson's impassioned admissions and Mrs. Thompson's weak effort at defense, and had disposed of the matter.

"General Harding is away and I am ordered to take care of this case. Good work on your part, Whitcomb. We have suspected Mrs. Thompson, *née* Heinig, of duplicity before. In the pay of German agents, no doubt. Well, Mrs. Thompson, we don't care to war on women. We can advise you, however, to cut out this sort of thing; or later, as certain as death, it will mean a long prison sentence. You will be closely watched from this on. You may go free now, but must break up and leave here at once. I have no doubt the State Department would recommend you for passports through Holland, if you would like to return to Germany and we surely would be glad to have you go. Now, men, all fall in and we shall return to camp."

As Herb passed out he summoned one more spark of courage to address Rose Thompson, who was glaring at him.

"You have your nerve, all right, but not just quite enough. If you had slipped out I wouldn't have shot at you for ten billion dollars. Good-by, and give my love to Kaiser Bill; I may get the chance to shoot at him some day and I'll do that!" [Pg 72]

Camp life went along the same routine: drill and practise and study. Herbert and Roy heard nothing more about the dinner incident, except that the captain once told Sergeant Jenkins who told Corporal Hern who told Roy that Mrs. Thompson and her daughters had, indeed, sailed for the other side, to what part and ultimate destination were not known.

Just prior to drill one morning Captain Leighton sent for Herbert.

"I want you to keep this under your hat," he said. "There is a call for expert shots to form several snipers' platoons, or perhaps companies, as yet uncertain as to numbers. Other camps are trying out men and we have picked some few here. The general remembers you as having been recommended in this particular and I am to try you out. You are excused from drill, so report at the range in half an hour."

"How about Flynn? He can shoot," Herb said.

"Can? Tell Lieutenant Mitchell to excuse Flynn from drill also. We'll find out what you boys can do." [Pg 73]

The Brighton lads naturally thought this would be a simple test of their own shooting before the captain only, but when they crossed the field to the meadow that faced the wide targets and pits they saw a dozen men already there and soon discerned several officers and the commander himself. As they stepped up to the group and saluted, General Harding greeted Herb and Roy almost jocosely.

"Ha! Ready to bat some more balls over the net, eh, Whitcomb? I hear you made some rapid returns and good placement shots down at Mrs. Thompson's not long ago. Now we are going to find out if you can really shoot as well as you play tennis."

The boys observed that all the other marksmen were lying flat, some with head, some with feet toward the target and they were seeking every means to rest their rifles steadily, to set telescope sights just so, to get their elevations of rear sight perfectly and then to delay shooting until satisfied as to every condition.

Herb was assigned a place and a target at two hundred yards; just behind him stood a flagman. The boy requested the latter to signal to the marker not to touch the target until he had fired ten shots, and this was done. [Pg 74]

Tallied scores were being shown the officers, and they paid very little attention to any one in particular. But Roy, standing back of Herb, said:

"The general keeps looking this way; got his eye on you, me boy. There goes your fresh target up; now give it to her! With that size bull's-eye it's a cinch."

Herb brought his gun to his shoulder and, standing, fired five shots in rapid succession, hardly four seconds apart. Then, slipping in another clip, he repeated even a little more quickly. After a few moments a big letter "P" was shoved up in front of the target, the marker, evidently having some difficulty in finding it, as perfect scores were indeed a rarity, even on a twelve-inch bull's-eye.

"Here comes the general and the whole bunch almost on a trot. The old man saw you do that!" announced Roy, and in a moment the commander had his hand on Herb's shoulder, though he

was talking fast to the other officers:

"Saw it all. Done standing. Quick work, too; no dallying." Then to the lad: "Can you repeat that?" [Pg 75]

Herbert nodded. "That's not remarkable; so can Flynn here. With practice 'most anybody ought to."

"But they can't! Few can. Now, do you think you could impart the knowledge; teach something of the skill you have in shooting? Because if you can we shall make you both instructors. What do you think about it?"

CHAPTER VII

[Pg 76]

THE MATCH

Brigadier-general Harding, grizzled, grim, but possessing that human quality without which no commander of men is entirely successful, gazed into the level, steady, smiling brown eyes of the boy who stood straight, tall and every inch a soldier before him.

"Anyone who understands shooting at all ought to be able to tell what he knows and how he does it," Herbert answered. "Shooting is a good deal like anything else that's lots of fun; you've got to love it and study it and have good eyes and then practise. And then, too, there's the gun. You've got to have a perfect gun to make A-1 scores and to do any fancy shooting."

"Well, that's a good gun, isn't it?"

"No; not very. I guess they make them so fast and so many of them that the boring tool wears and the rifling is not the best. Then, too, the sights may not be perfectly centered—you've got to look to that. The stock, too, is queer; it doesn't fit like a gun should." [Pg 77]

"I have been led to suppose that this is as good as a rifle could be."

"It may be as good as an army gun can be made on contract, cheaply and in great quantities. But I doubt even that. As a fine shooting-piece it is not to be mentioned alongside of the high-grade sporting rifles you can buy. If you wanted to go into a rifle match, or if you went after lions or elephants or grizzly bears you wouldn't pick out this; you'd get a gun with a reputation and that you could rely on perfectly. With a gun of that sort a nearly perfect score on a six-inch bull's-eye wouldn't be out of the way."

"But these guns are all inspected, I am told," argued the general.

"You can only inspect the shooting qualities of a gun by trying it carefully; the bore might look all right, but yet the grooves may keyhole a bullet or cut one side out of it and make it shoot almost around a corner."

"You keep your gun clean, of course? A dirty gun may give bad results."

"Perfectly clean! A dirty gun will never shoot straight."

The general turned to Roy Flynn.

"And you can do this sort of hitting, too? Let's see you." [Pg 78]

And Roy did it, not exactly punching a big hole in the center of his bull's-eye with a few only a little nearer the edge, as Herbert had done, but all his shots were safely in the black. Again the letter "P" went up and genuine admiration was expressed by the little coterie of onlookers. Roy, answering direct praise from Colonel Walling, indicated his chum.

"Owe it to him, sir. He taught me to shoot. Couldn't hit a flock of church steeples comin' at me before he showed me. I used to have a sort of bright idea that the harder you pulled the trigger the harder she shot, until he told me and which end to put to me shoulder. But I agree with him about these fowlin' pieces; they weren't rightly made for shootin' at all, but I think for beatin' carpet. You ought to just see me own gun and Whitcomb's."

"What calibers are your guns?" asked the general.

"They shoot a 30-30," Herbert said.

"Would you boys prefer using them?"

Both expressed themselves as most pleased to be allowed to do this.

"Then send for them; we shall have them bored for the government cartridge, if you are willing, and see if you can show them superior. Will you see that this is done, Captain Leighton? Now, Whitcomb, when instructing, how would you go about it, first?" [Pg 79]

"Show a man how to hold a gun and how to pull it hard against his shoulder. Then to see his sights, hunting sights at first, with both eyes open."

"Both open?"

"By all means, sir. That doesn't strain the sighting eye; it doesn't dim the object fired at; it permits, on the plan of the stereoscope, to get some idea of the distance of the target. I think that nearly all very expert shots open both eyes; all trap shooters do."

The officers all laughed outright and the general queried:

"How about that, Captain Pierce? You are an expert shot, I believe."

"Not that expert!" The officer addressed waved his hand at the targets. "Perhaps the reason is that I shut one eye. But the best marksman I ever knew, excepting present company of course, an old fellow in the West, used to open both eyes; he said no man could shoot excellently with one eye shut. And yet, general, our physical examiners condemn a bad right eye and admit a bad left one."

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"That's a question for them to settle at Washington. Well, gentlemen, have these scores all turned in for a general conference on the subject and we shall pick our quota of men for this new formation and recommend officers. I shall name Whitcomb in ours, for one squad, and as an instructor until they leave. Come, there is much else to do."

"Fine, fine, fine business, old scout!" caroled Roy when the two were alone. "I knew you'd catch the boss."

"But, Roy, it isn't fair. I couldn't get in a word—but you also deserve to be made a corporal."

"Cor-nothing. A corpse, mebbe. And if you don't have me in your squad, then, me for a deserter, by cracky! Say, I wonder what they are going to do with us as lead slingers, anyway."

But this query was to remain unanswered for many a long day, during which time the business of the camp, that of making expert soldiers, went on through the summer months, the boys seeing many changes take place in the make-up of the troops.

After a time some were sent to the South; others came: regiments of rookies, National Guardsmen, regulars or some companies made up of all of these, the purpose being for the experienced men to set the greenhorns an example.

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But almost unchanged, though increasing in numbers, the marksmen's platoon, at first so called, but growing at last under instruction into a full provisional company, went bravely on perfecting itself in the art of getting ready to knock over individual Germans at long range, or to pot a low-flying enemy airplane.

At this latter practice especially Herbert became the admiration of the camp. Airplane-shaped balloons were sent up on windy days for the men to practise shooting at as they were blown swiftly by, but the majority were unsuccessful in hitting them, though a degree of excellence on the part of many rapid-firing marksmen was gained.

A lanky, loose-jointed, slow-moving young fellow from the mountains of Kentucky, Jed Shoemaker by name, long practised in the truly fine art of barking squirrels and knocking the heads off grouse, alternated with Herbert in holding the record for puncturing and bringing down these make-believe flying-machines; and in several contests between the two at ringed targets on short range the Kentuckian led slightly in scoring, but at long range, over a hundred yards, Herb generally had a little the better of it.

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At these matches the utmost good nature was shown by both principals, though there were several rooters for Herbert who tried to belittle the mountaineer's shooting. But the big fellow did not let this mar the kindness in his soul nor lessen his natural generosity toward a competitor. He would not boast over his winning.

Every time Herbert made a particularly fine shot or won a match his opponent would slap him on the back and shout:

"Center! Right in theh middle, b'gosh! Good! That's theh dern time you-all seed yer sights fine an' wiped my eye! Good boy!"

And Herbert was not to be outdone in this matter. He recognized the Kentuckian's real worth and a warm friendship sprang up between them. Roy Flynn, ever jolly, bright and big-hearted, and strong-minded Billy Phillips, made up a quartet that always pulled together and that never permitted to go unchallenged any snobbish reference or slurs at the mountaineer's backwoods' crudity. An army camp is a mecca of democracy, and any departure from the "Hail, fellow! Well met!" scheme of things is almost unanimously condemned.

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Nevertheless, soldiers are but human, and in spite of their grim work they want something to laugh at, to make merry over, to relieve the tension of long hours of hard and almost constant effort. And such fellows as Jed Shoemaker, in appearance, manners, talk, could not help furnishing his companions with the desired means for hilarity at the big fellow's expense.

But the thing went further than this. There are in every big bunch of boys some who seem to get actual satisfaction out of turning jest to earnest, of making hateful reference out of happy chance; and such in the camp also took their whack at poor Jed.

Among this fish-minded, low-diving fry was Martin Gaul, he of the whisky-imbibing tendencies. He did not seem to be able to see the harmless, jovial, that's-a-good-joke-on-me character of the Kentuckian and so he turned what ludicrousness there was into bitter ridicule.

Whitcomb, Phillips, and Williams had agreed to say nothing about Flynn's scrap with Gaul, and Roy himself was the very last man to tell of it. Therefore Gaul came to recognize this and to gradually take advantage of it, exerting again his bluster and bullying tactics where he thought he could get away with them. Gaul was never jovial or good-natured, but in time became known in Company H barracks as "the grouchy one."

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Shoemaker, of Company D, now also an instructor in rifle practise and a newly appointed corporal in the marksmen's platoon, was talking to several men outside of barracks when Gaul

joined them.

"We-all," announced the Kentuckian, "are a-goin' tu have a leetle rifle match atween two picked teams, an' hit's goin' tu be a corker! Me an' Whitcomb's captins of theh two bunches, an' jedgin' from theh way some o' theh fellers is shootin' lately, it'll be a sight tu make yer eyes watter."

"If your eyes watered much there wouldn't be anything left of you, you big simp!" snapped Gaul. "You don't think you can get a bunch that can shoot with Whitcomb's crew; do you? Won't have a show." Gaul seemed unusually bitter.

"Mebbe not! Mebbe not! Cain't jest tell till they try. Theh's right smart fellers tu pick from."

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"Good land, fellow, where did you learn to talk? You murder the language like a butcher sticks hogs. Can't you speak English better?"

"Well, I hain't had no chanct tu go tu school none, er not much, anyway. Sort o' reckon I kin make me understood, though, some, even though I cain't spout like you-all, b'gosh!"

"You-all! Hain't! Reckon! Chanct!" Saints have mercy! If I had to talk like that I'd commit suicide. When you came here from where you hang up your hat why didn't you bring some brains, or don't they have 'em down there?"

"They has 'em, sure," laughed Jed, "but mebbe they don't try to use 'em none, for mighty few of 'em goes tu jail er Congress. When this heh war is over how'd you-all like tu come down theh in our mountings an' learn we-uns some o' your blame smart orneryness?"

This raised a laugh at Gaul and it very naturally made that fellow lose his temper. And with him to get angry was to want to fight, or threaten it, getting away with the bluff, if possible.

"What you want is a good, hard wallop, you lop-sided ignoramus, and mebbe you'll get it if you get too gay with me!" Had Gaul turned then and seen Herb and Roy standing observant across the company street he would have been less blustering, but now he had to talk loud to offset Shoemaker's wit.

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But lanky Jed wasted no more repartee on that evidently quarrelsome fellow, the sting of whose sarcasm he had repeatedly felt before. He only laughed, then grew suddenly grave. He thrust his long face almost against that of Gaul.

"I'm a-waitin' fer thet wallop!" he invited.

Gaul was more of a moral coward than a physical one; he could never have it said that he refused such a dare, especially from an ignorant guy who surely could know nothing of the manly art. And so Gaul made the mistake of drawing back for a swinging punch and in that second Jed's face was withdrawn and with one swift leap upward, which stunt previously no one would have given him credit for, he shot out two long legs the extremities of which caught Gaul in the chest and sent him to earth in a heap. The others had to lift him to his feet.

CHAPTER VIII

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GETTING OVER AND ON

This encounter, though witnessed by only a half dozen, gave Jed Shoemaker a new standing in the camp.

The shoot came off and it was a success in that a fine degree of nearly equal interest in the contesting teams was shown.

Shoemaker's team received about as much applause as did the boys that Herb led; and when the mountaineer's boys came out the victors by the exceedingly small margin of five in the total scores they got all that was coming to them.

Then Jed was seen to go across to the inspector-general, Colonel Short, and make a request, whereupon the individual highest scores were read out, Herbert leading in them.

In the cheering that followed it was plain that the Kentuckian was the leader; and when the two, Jed and Herb, advanced before the officers' stand and warmly shook hands there was another burst of applause, led by Captain Leighton.

The general, joined by certain other officers, came down from his seat and as the regimental audience filed away he summoned both teams to line up. He then addressed them:

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"Men, this final test of marksmanship is the crucial one in the selection of snipers—we used to call them sharpshooters in the old days—to form the first platoon, and others will immediately follow. I know of no better way than to pick by scores and general deportment, for the first platoon, thirty-nine men in all. Lieutenant Loring will lead you."

There was a very decided handclapping, for Loring, though young, was deservedly popular and had the distinction of having served as a regular and corporal with Pershing in Mexico and as a private in the Philippines.

"With the formation of the other platoons, to form the first company of expert riflemen from this camp and the first of the kind in the army, I believe, your commander will be Captain Leighton, now of our Company H."

The men all were pleased with this choice. Herbert noticed that even Gaul, who had scored fairly well in the shooting, vigorously clapped his hands.

"The sergeants of this first platoon," continued the general, "will be Berry and Small, and the corporals of the four squads are Whitcomb, Phillips, Shoemaker and Lang." [Pg 89]

Loud applause followed this combined announcement of non-commissioned officers.

The general further remarked upon the necessity of continued drill and training together in the new formation and added:

"Hold yourselves in readiness, men, for orders that may come from Washington at any time respecting new duties. Your squads, Lieutenant Loring, may be divided up in France, each serving on active duty with a platoon reduced to three regular squads and one of yours. It is the idea to place these men in certain positions where organized sniping is most effective, the snipers, of course, to be protected by the regular men. And now, I hope and feel sure that each and every one of you, when before the enemy, will give a good account of himself and do his duty in our great cause!"

And the general received the greatest cheering of the occasion.

Old Ocean! The rolling, billowy blue, apparently endless, with nothing but the paler sky, sometimes the gray, threatening sky, dipping into the dark water on every side. And the vessel; its never ceasing engines throbbing, turning, whirring, sending the great hull on and on and on, over swells, through shorter billows, sloshing into whitecaps, and the two insignificant humans up there at the wheel directing the mapped course of this great bulk of steel so that her road was as clear, as certain, as though with wheels under her instead of astern, she followed a turnpike on the solid earth. But by no means alone. Not far behind, so close indeed that the white divided waters were always visible, another transport, also full of troops, sailed the blue sea, and back of that still another plainly in sight in daytime and at times discernible at night. [Pg 90]

And on every side the greyhounds of the sea. Uncle Sam takes chances in sending his troopships over the ocean, for well he knows that, lurking in many places, the enemy submarines, the U-boats that have done most to make the history of this war so remarkable, and have added so greatly to its horrors, seek their prey like man-eating sharks ready to attack helpless swimmers.

The convoy vessels, with their sharp-eyed watchers and heavy guns, bring to port in safety the transport ships.

"Sorry for you, old chump," was Herbert's remark to Roy, as the latter stood by the rail in the wee small hours of night and made as though to cast his entire stomach into the briny depths far below. From bits of his strained conversation one would imagine that the boy might attempt to cast himself overboard so as to keep company with the stomach which so far he had been unable to detach, and so Herbert chose not to leave him. "Say, old man, what you want to do——" [Pg 91]

"Oh, you go plumb to thunder across lots with what I ought to do!" groaned Flynn. "You've told me about ten billion fool things I ought to do. There's only one thing I ought to do and that is die. If you felt like me you'd say: 'Here goes nothin',' and hit the briny kerplunk in about two seconds. Take it from me, Herb, it isn't just awful; it's worse than war. I'd rather go up to a forty-two-centimeter just as she goes off and feed me face with the shell comin' out of her than be seasick. I'd rather swallow shrapnel, time fuse and all, and have it go off and turn me inside out than have this darned old heavin' pond coax a ten-dollar dinner out o' me. Say, I feel it comin' again!"

"Forget it," said Herb. "You come on and lie down and that'll make you feel better. Try it, at any rate. Come on now, or I'll carry you down!" [Pg 92]

Much of this sort of dialogue went on every night, Roy finding, as did a few others, that the doctor's medicine was not effective.

It was a relief to the boy, as well as to Herb who had lost sleep remaining up with him night after night, when the ship entered a narrow harbor across a wide, unruffled bay somewhere on the long coast of France and warped up to a newly-timbered and planked dock having all of the earmarks, as it were, of American construction.

Indeed, a dozen carpenters who were unmistakably Yankee in get-up and movements, and who later proved it by their speech, were still at work on the office building that flanked the wharf. These fellows came in for a guying.

The boys in khaki leaning over the side, perched on cabin roofs, lifeboats, stanchions, railings and in rigging, feeling more than gay at seeing land again and the fact of having had a safe trip against possible dangers, had to let their exuberance be felt.

"Yip, yip, yip, yip! Get the dog-catcher's net! There's a son-of-a-gun from the land of the sun; eh, Yank?" shouted Roy, leading the fun, as usual. [Pg 93]

"Sure, those ginks are all from God's country!"

"Hey, Yank! Does your mother know you're out, over here?"

"Hush, fellers! Salute; that there boob's General Hatchet-and-Saw and yonder's Colonel Sawdust!"

"Dollars to doughnuts they're makin' better wages than John D—— right now!"

"Glory be! Wish I was a nail driver 'stead of a dough boy!"

"That good-lookin' fellow looks like he came from good old Pittsburgh! That's my city!"

"Huh! Don't see black soot on him! Most clean people come from Detroit!"

"No; St. Louis. We wash out there more than once a month, fellow!"

"In the Big Muddy, I reckon!" shouted the Pittsburgher.

"And you need it twice a day!" was shouted back.

"Hey, you wood butchers! Made any coffins for the Booches yet? Soon's we get there they'll need 'em!"

"Listen to him! Booches! Boshes, man; that's the way to pronoun——"

"Hi, yi! Can the college education! Everybody knows it's Bewches! Don't show yer ignor——"

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"Give him the Iron Cross! Boches, you simp! Ask these natives over here; it's their word."

"Bet you can't ask 'em anything; they'll mostly beat it when you try to buy eats!"

"Say, Yank, hey! You with the square! Had any frogs' legs yet? Or snails?"

"Oh, glory! Gimme some snails right now; nice, fat ones, alive, fresh and salted! I could eat thousand-leggers or rattlesnakes right now!"

"Hooray! Wonder where we mess!"

"Next week! An' I feel like we messed last in Noo York."

"Me! I'll be glad to get down on terra cotta again!"

"Aw, terra firma, you blamed ignor——"

"Listen to the perfessor! Say, can't you see a joke?"

"Say, fellers—everybody! Let's give a big hooraw for the noble land of France. Now, then, are you ready? Hip, hip——"

The yell that followed might almost have made the French think that the Boches had made a land attack from the sea, did they not know that now such was impossible.

And now, even if the mess had not been called for many hours after the landing, the khaki-clad boys would not have gone hungry, for as they fell in line on command and filed down from the ship hundreds of kindly-faced girls, lads, women and even old men, greeted them smilingly and tendered each soldier a dainty, ample bit of delicious food: meaty sandwiches, tasty little cakes, cups of milk and sour wine—looking surprised, indeed, when the latter was refused by many, Herb and Roy being among this number.

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Lieutenant Loring, standing near and noticing this, said to the boys:

"You are right, fellows, of course, morally considering the matter, but here it is a little different from our country. The water is generally vile and often you will have to endanger your health or go thirsty; besides, there is so little alcohol in this common wine, '*vin-ordinaire*,' they call it, that it is really not intoxicating. That may let you down occasionally for a drink of it when you can't get milk."

Again, when thousands of long cigarettes came their way, Herb and Roy were among a very few who refused them. The donors were taken aback, indeed. But the boys' messmates, those of their company, had long since acknowledged the sanity of the arguments against tobacco, even though failing in the practise of abstinence.

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CHAPTER IX

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FACING THE ENEMY

"Go to it, old scout! That's what we're here for."

Such was Corporal Whitcomb's grave remark to Private Flynn when out of the squad of eight expert marksmen stationed in a rocky pit to help protect a certain new havoc-wreaking, shrapnel-shooting field-piece, three were chosen to first go out and stop any attempt of the enemy to pot-shot the artillerymen who were working the gun very much to the hurt of the German trenches three hundred yards away.

A little rocky hill held by the American troops new in action gave a protection to the position of the wonderful gun that shelled the enemy trenches disastrously beyond and successfully prevented the setting up of German heavy ordnance in the vast plain in the rear.

It was, therefore, impossible to try to smash the new gun by shells; it was well-nigh suicidal to attempt to charge the position, and, therefore, it became a matter of sharpshooting, of night raids and of dropping bombs from German planes very high overhead.

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But the enemy were soon to learn that in the matter of marksmanship their best was greatly outclassed, and also that to escape injury from high-powered, .30-caliber bullets sent into the air their warplanes had to seek a very considerable elevation from which the dropping of bombs was

an uncertain thing. Moreover, there were powerful French-American airplanes not far behind the American trenches, and they had come out and up to meet these German planes, downing two of them.

Meanwhile, from its pit, successfully bomb-proofed and camouflaged, the new gun barked every few minutes, throwing out no smoke to disclose its position. From the hilltop there was an occasional rattle of machine guns and the crack of rifles, another squad of snipers, under Corporal Lang, being there on duty, backed also by a platoon of United States Regulars. And on the other side of the hill, Herbert learned, there was another pit that contained another one of the terrible new guns, similarly guarded by Billy Phillips' squad and more Regulars.

That first twenty-four hours had been "a corker," as Roy Flynn put it. There had been something doing every minute from the time the platoon had left the French training camp where Uncle Sam's infantry was getting the fine points from French officers relative to modern trench warfare.

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At nightfall the platoon had entered six auto trucks, called by the British "lorries," and had proceeded with a French guide toward the front, though going where few knew, and in fact the exact destination had been disclosed only to lieutenant Loring and Sergeants Barry and Small.

It had been very dark and rainy. The road, at first smooth, had glistened like a mirror; the occasional lights from road lamps and windows, closer together in the villages, had thrown a luster quite uncanny over everything. Then the lights had become less frequent, the road suddenly rougher, even rutty, the speed had grown less and they were always floundering along, or sometimes stuck in the mud.

There had seemed to be little else in that part of the world but mud, mud, mud! Yet the boys had been compelled to get out of the cars but little, even to ease the weight when stalled, for the motors were powerful and the trucks generally put up to give the best of service.

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Herbert and some of his squad had ridden with Lieutenant Loring and the guide in the first lorry and they had forged somewhat in advance of the other cars, being stuck in the mud but seldom, and had plowed through puddles, holes and miry hollows with a certainty that was admirable. Considering the number in the car and Roy's presence and the fact that the men had all slept well before starting, there had been little said; often they had covered miles without a word being uttered.

Once two long, boxed-in autos, going very slowly, had been met. The officer guide had ordered a stop to exchange a few words with the chauffeur of the cars, but dimly seen by the occupants of the lorry. When the guide had commanded the advance again he had said something, in a low voice in French, to the lieutenant. Loring had leaned over toward Barry and Whitcomb and whispered the one word: "Wounded."

On and on and on they had traveled. Down into a valley, creeping across a narrow, low bridge of stone; then slowly up and up for a time; on the level once more, evidently following the side of a ridge, as the horizon on one side between a blank space of black earth and the gray sky seemed higher than the car. And then, from over to the left, startlingly sudden to every one of those hardy young Americans, had come the sound of firing, the crack and crackle of firearms, followed presently by the tearing, resonant fusillading of a machine-gun that, at a distance, reminds one of the rapid rolling of a barrel down hill over stony ground.

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Again the guide had made a remark which Loring once more translated. "He says that's what he likes to hear. Do you? Well, I fancy we shall hear quite enough of it."

And then, half a mile farther on, during which time all had distinctly discerned the not very distant boom of cannon and once again the nearer firing of many guns, the French officer halted the car, waited until the others had come up and then informed Loring that from this on, for nearly a mile, they must proceed silently on foot.

The command had been issued; a rough formation had been made there in the rain and the muddy road; the men had been given extra loads of provisions to carry besides their army kits, and they had gone forward, not a sound being uttered. After a time rear sentries had received them, others had been passed, one facetious Irishman saying aloud to the lieutenant:

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"This is worse than the East Side in a raid in the gamblin' houses, bedad! An' the weather ain't so bad in the dear ould U. S., even in March, but nivver ye moind! Jest go git thim Huns, me lad. Jest go git 'em! I wisht they'd be comin' my way now an' thin."

Poor fellow! They learned afterward that he had been transferred to the trenches later and that the "Huns" had come his way. No doubt many of the enemy had been sorry for it and others had not gone back, but neither had he. The first little American burying ground at the bottom of the ridge was as far as he and some of his fellows got. The platoon to which they had belonged still held the trench, though against odds.

At night, the darker the better, is the time when there is an exchange of troops in the trenches, when fresh contingents take the places of those too long tried by the terrible strain of standing guard against the enemy's surprises, drives, raids, gas attacks, barrages, bombing and shell fire.

So the coming of the snipers' platoon had been altogether favorable, not the hardest of the enemy daring to risk chances of going against the little hill at a time when all the advantage would be on the side of its defenders, even though the Germans on this sector outnumbered the Americans two to one.

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The gun pits and their accompanying dugouts, with pole and earth-covered shelters begun by the

French and greatly improved by Uncle Sam's boys, were both crude and comfortable, the drainage on the hillside being far better than that of most trenches, especially those in low ground. There was mud, of course, though not so deep as if the rain water had been allowed merely to seep away. Then, too, the U. S. Regulars, under cover of night, had cut numerous poles from the young forest and on these had laid boards sent over the route of frequent supplies.

Handing copies of maps to each of the sergeants and corporals, Loring had detailed the squads to the positions they now occupied. With dispatches introducing him he went with the first squad, Whitcomb's men, to the first gun pit, sending the others on, with their dispatches, where he was soon to join them.

Into the north side gun pit, then, had marched Herbert's squad; they were put under the immediate command of Lieutenant Jackson, U. S. A., middle-aged, firm and as nearly silent as possible, and they at once had been assigned to quarters, told to rest and to eat. Loring had said a few words to Herbert, shaken his hand and gone away. [Pg 104]

After some hours Lieutenant Jackson came to Herbert; the latter noticed that he had not been sent for and that the officer seemed to be, while enforcing discipline, a thoroughly democratic fellow, aware of the conditions of war, yet displaying that comradeship which must spring up between men of sense in times of danger and of stress.

"Your boys, I am told, are all fine shots. Have they practised shooting at night?"

"Yes; much," Herb answered. "They have been taught to see their sights against the sky and quickly, without altering position of eye and barrel, keeping the cheek against the stock all the while, to put the muzzle end on the object to be hit and press the trigger. We hold both eyes open, as always, when shooting, but especially at night, thus seeing the object the more clearly. Nine times out of ten we can hit a black mark as big as a man a hundred yards, or over. It depends, of course, upon how dark it is." [Pg 105]

"See here, my boy, I'm going to leave the placing of your men, the selection of them for duty and the care of them, to you, the general rules of our camp here to be followed. You will fall into these quickly and you had better keep your young men as much to themselves as possible, fraternizing, of course, when off duty. My men, being regulars, are apt to regard you young chaps with small respect for their soldierly qualities. I will, however, issue orders for a contrary attitude; I myself feel very different; young chaps are the coming winners of this war, there's no mistake."

"Now you can see what we're up against," he went on. "The Germans out there, or as the French call them, the 'Boches,' can get at us in no other way than by raids and sniping. We have driven off two raids and we have lost three men by sniping—three good men, too. Now, it's up to you to see to it that these snipers get sniped; to lay for 'em and get 'em as they come. It'll be hunting men who are hunting you, and the best hunter and shot wins. Dangerous business, my boy. Somehow I think that you personally are equal to it, even though you've never yet been under fire and you may get nervous. But are your men equal to it? It's not like a charge or phalanx firing, nor company action. I've been there; in the Philippines and at Santiago. Private then. Your boys have all got to have their nerve with them, as well as their skill. I hope they have not made a mistake in sending you here before you were tried under fire. We shall see. But I suppose one place to get used to it is as good as another." [Pg 106]

"There is this about the situation also: You not only have to beat the Hun snipers' shooting, but you've got to see them first. It's pretty certain you can't always do that.

"And here's another feature: You've got to be good runners, for if you're hunting for snipers, night or day, you may suddenly run into a bunch of raiders. In some cases, too, you may be placed so as to hold these fellows off a bit until you can get word to us. You see there are many situations possible and there will be still more that you can't think of; circumstances totally unforeseen and sometimes mighty hard to comprehend in a hurry. Just the other day we had one.

"The gun boys were giving her a cleaning up—they keep her pretty nice, you see, just like a fire company does its engine; take a real pride in it. Well, they were working away, or five of them were—four were sleeping. My men were mostly loafing and sleeping, too, and some were on guard and lookout, one fellow at the listening point. I was making out reports and accounts—there's too much of that. There wasn't a gun to be heard for miles; all quiet, except for the big guns over on the French sector, ten miles away, that you heard a while ago." [Pg 107]

"Then, all of a sudden the men at post called out: 'Airplane high up! French machine coming back from the Boche line! They're shooting at her!'

"We heard several guns go off over in their trenches, but as she kept on we didn't think any more about her. It's a common enough sight and I had gone back to my papers and the boys to their duties.

"And then, it didn't seem to me to be five minutes before the awfullest kick-up of dust and rocks I ever saw, or hope to see, upset the whole bunch of us—it was right on the outside of the pit, though we've got it pretty well smoothed over now. It blinded one of my men permanently, poor chap; sent him back yesterday. And it laid another up for a bit; struck in the back with a big flying stone. Blew all my papers so far I've never been able to find half of them. You see this is war!" [Pg 108]

"That was no French plane; it was a Hun. He had painted his blamed machine so it looked like a Frenchman; mebbe it was a captured one in the first place, and then, when he got well over our lines, he turned and shut off his engine and dived right down over our pit. Did it so quick nobody

got on to him to shoot at him until he had dropped his bomb and if that had hit our shelter top it would have got every one of us and upset the gun.

"But they got him beyond just as he was going over their trenches; our gun men had luckily just slipped a shell in and the corporal jumped and sighted and let Mr. Birdman have it just once, and, by jingo, it got him! Busted twenty feet to one side of him, turned him clear over and dumped him on the ground; smashed the machine all up, of course. What it did to the man you can guess.

"Oh, this is war, my boy! Real war! As I said, I haven't been able to find half of those reports yet."

CHAPTER X

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WAR IS—WAR!

Yes, it was war. There could be no question about its being the real thing, with all the frills and thrills that go along with a gigantic, brain-taxing, muscle-straining attempt to kill an enemy and not be killed by him.

If Sherman designated the kind of war practised two generations ago as having a resemblance to the infernal regions, what would he call war as practised in this generation? A combination it is of dozens of varied Hades, with all the little devils of hate and villainy and slow torture thrown in.

Corporal Herbert Whitcomb, though a mere boy, had been placed in the command he held, however small, because of his wonderful skill in shooting, together with his manliness, strength of character and the reputation he had earned for doing everything well that he was set to do at the training camp back in the dear old United States.

With his introduction to the combined trench and gun pit on the French front and the duties he was compelled to assume as commander of a squad of snipers, he was at once impressed with the fact that this was war; and in a very short time thereafter that war is hell.

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Lieutenant Jackson, of the old Regular Army and a veteran of long service, who was in command of the pit and was Herbert's superior officer, had told him enough to render such a verdict and to impress him with the seriousness of the job before the Allies, the American Army and their small body of men, fifty-seven in all, in the pit. These comprised the platoon of Regulars, thirty-two men, four corporals, two sergeants and the lieutenant, the artillery squad of eight men and one corporal, and the sniper squad of an equal number.

The Regular Army men were generally rough-and-ready fellows, admirably fitted for any duty of war, except that only two or three of them were admittedly expert shots. These had tried sniping, but were too few in numbers to awe the German long-distance sharpshooters making attempts to kill off the artillerymen.

The men who handled the gun were a mixed lot. Three had been in the Marines, two were Regular Army artillerymen, one was a recently enlisted man who possessed a special talent for hitting the mark with a cannon, another was a fighting cook for this outfit; and the corporal, James Letty, had been a football star.

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Anyone could look over the platoon and see that they were a hard crowd to beat. Therefore, when Whitcomb sent Flynn and Marshall out on the first scouting and sniping duty, thus honoring them, and to Flynn said, "Go to it, old scout!" he felt most truly the importance of the statement that they were there for the purpose of warfare.

By "Go to it!" Herb meant that their first business was to let no German get into a position where he might drop bullets into the gun pit where the squad was operating so successfully as to actually threaten the maintenance of the German position at that point.

With Roy went Dave McGuire, one-time glove salesman in a city department store. He had shot one of the highest, very long range rifle scores at Camp Wheeler, and he possessed certain characteristics that did not seem to be at all in keeping with his former calling.

Herbert could not help wondering at the fellow's bravery. He possessed a manner that by some would have been termed "sissy;" he drawled his words and lisped a little, opened his mouth to speak with drawn lips, seemed to have the idea that army life should be on the order of a social gathering; and his khaki clothes, by long habit, were put on and worn with scrupulous neatness.

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Could he stand the strain of being shot at, of living long in a muddy hole in the ground, under the constant expectation of something or other happening that might cost him and his companions their lives?

Not far down the hill several piles of heavy stones offered the American riflemen excellent shelter for observation and marksmanship. There were some shell holes also and at one spot a partly wrecked bomb canister of heavy sheet iron within which a man might crouch unseen by the enemy beyond.

All of these places offered a fair view of the zigzag German trenches for a distance of more than five hundred yards where the trench dipped behind a wooded rise of ground. Beyond this the enemy had their hands full opposing the extension of the American trench which wound about from near the gun pit to and also beyond the wooded slope.

Herbert saw his two boys go out on the hill with a feeling of nothing else than sorrow. To be sure

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this was the game of war, but he could not help feeling a marked aversion for the possibilities uppermost in this death-grapple business.

For his men particularly and for all his fellows in battle, companions in discomfort, danger, suffering, perhaps death, was the lad concerned. Especially did he feel this now regarding Roy. His chum, ever bright, smiling, jesting, never grumbling nor down-hearted, was going out there to be the target for men trained in this wholesale killing business and eager to play their part. It was true that the boy could hardly be caught napping and he would probably give a little better than he was sent, but still there were the chances of warfare, often more potent, more death-dealing than the best laid plans.

Herb had never since babyhood known anything of a mother's teachings that to the many well-balanced, gentle-dispositioned lads often mean so much for good. His father had well cared for him when he was a little fellow and then he, too, had died without ever having rightly influenced the boy at a time when this would have counted best. And though Herbert's inclinations had all been healthy, clean, vigorously manly and honest, it is doubtful if he had said or thought a prayer a half dozen times in his life, or that he really knew how to pray in the commonly practised manner of those who habitually turn to a Higher Power.

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But now, watching Roy and Dave ascend the stepped slope out of the pit and by Herb's order begin to slip off cautiously, screening themselves behind various obstacles and making for the objects of shelter below, the young corporal was suddenly overcome with a dejection very unseemly for an officer engaged in fighting. Unseen, the boy bowed his head against one of the timber stanchions of the shelter.

"Oh, God, if you're willing, if it isn't laid down in the Book of Fate otherwise, don't let that chum of mine get killed! He's too fine a chap; he brings too much happiness to others in this world and does too much good generally for him to become the victim of a bullet or bayonet, or anything like that! And the other fellow, too; he seems like a good sort of fellow. Most of my men are; all in this pit are worth being kept alive. I'm sure of it! But, of course, some of us must get it; be killed or wounded some way. So don't think I mind being one, if that would spare the percentage and spare these other fellows who have homes and people to mourn for them. Anyway, God, above all, no matter what may be going to happen, see to it that we all do our duty and give us what ought to be coming to us if we don't."

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CHAPTER XI

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A DOUBLE SURPRISE

Roy and Dave had come back unharmed from the first sniping expedition of the squad against the enemy's snipers. The former was elated at having seen a German who had crawled out of the enemy trench some distance into "No Man's Land," as the space between the opposing trenches has been nicknamed, stick his head and gun above a fallen tree trunk, shoot at Roy, and upon Roy's returning the compliment go down quickly, not to reappear. The German's bullet had chipped a bit of stone off not five inches from Roy's nose.

"Think sure I got the sucker and I hope he was Kaiser Bill himself! I kept watchin' for him, Herb, for about half an hour and he never showed up. Now, who'll get out there to bury him, I wonder?"

"Let us hope somebody does tonight," Herb said.

"Hope that? Cracky, me lad, not so fast! If they got that far they'd forget the dead one and try to make one of us live ones a dead one. But, say, if some of us can sneak down there and lay for them when they do come out for him, we could take 'em prisoners easy. How 'bout it?"

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"Don't seem like fair and square fighting," said Herb.

"But *they* do these things!" Roy argued.

"Two wrongs don't make a right."

"They will make a capture, though, sure as you're a foot high! Try it and let me in on it."

"But it will be your time sleeping. Well, maybe we can plan it. I'll talk with the lieutenant."

That night it came on to rain, harder than it had yet come down since the squad had been in France. Everything was soggy and soaked; the atmosphere seemed like a big sponge surcharged with endless dampness. Slickers were in demand and all guns and revolvers for those going forth were well cleaned and oiled.

Out of the pit and through the intense darkness Corporal Whitcomb led a party of six others, one-half of his own men and two Regulars of the platoon, all prepared for dealing a surprise. But, along with the enemy, they, too, experienced the unexpected, which in this case might better be called simply a streak of luck.

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Long before dark, though compelled to dangerously expose himself, Herbert had drawn up a rough but effective map of the slope between the pit and the German trenches, actually going over some of the ground afoot and being shot at several times from the trench, but from a safer place covering the rest with his glass. Especially prominent on the map was made the fallen trunk where lay the German victim of Roy's superior marksmanship. And when Roy showed this map and his plan of action to Lieutenant Jackson the latter said:

"That's the stuff! It ought to earn you a commission. Hope you can carry it out. Yes, take Murphy and Donaldson, if you want. We'll lay low up here ready for a counter-raid if you signal us."

Now, down the slope the men followed, single file, until they had covered nearly half the distance; then Herb felt a touch on the arm. Dave McGuire saluted and whispered:

"Have a notion that—ah—these fellows are expecting we shall undertake something like this and—all—are going to lay for us. Maybe we might divide up, go two ways—ah—and get the drop—ah—on them, as they—ah—say, corporal." [Pg 119]

"I have already planned for that; but thanks, old man. We'll do that very thing."

One group of four went a little to the right of the fallen tree and sought places of hiding; the other two, with Herbert, went to the left and found an old shell pit into which they all crawled. The instructions from the lieutenant had been for all to pull some grass and leaves to partly camouflage themselves.

The wisdom of this was shown not half an hour later when a low-flying airplane suddenly rose, sailed over the spot and threw a rather uncertain searchlight upon the slope, surely not detecting one of the hidden Americans.

The gun in the pit did not fire a shot at the flying-machine. The enemy might have been suspicious of that, though they must have believed that the birdman offered too uncertain a mark on which to waste shells in the dark, and then the flier's report gave them an assurance of safety.

The boys lay waiting long and not too patiently—for who can easily endure such conditions? There was no let-up to the cold rain, which after a time became half sleet. Lying on the cold, soggy ground, chilled and uncomfortable, the boys after a time grew restive. Roy, with the four on one side, cautioned silence. Herbert wondered how the fastidious McGuire was putting up with all this. Then, suddenly: [Pg 120]

"Hist!" from one side. "Hist!" came from the other and at once the silence was more impressive than death itself. For, perhaps, as they all thought, death might soon follow.

Up the slope beyond and slowly approaching came the sound of many heavily-shod feet, and dark figures began to loom in the blackness, coming straight for the tree.

The American youngsters lay ready as pumas to spring amongst fat deer; they hardly breathed, the tense situation holding every man to the duty expected of him and in which he now gloried, eager to act.

More and more gray figures came dimly into view until, around the fallen tree, nearly a score of men stood silently, only one of them occasionally uttering an exclamation, or a word or two. Herb knew that Ben Gardner, once a buyer of toys in Europe, spoke German fluently and he had kept Ben beside him for a purpose. Asking him afterward what remarks the leader of the Germans had made, Gardner explained: [Pg 121]

"Well, first he asked: 'Where is he?' and then: 'How can I believe it?' and once he said: 'Where could the American have been to kill him with the first shot?' When they explained this to him he only grunted about ten times. It must have been a stumper."

But in Corporal Whitcomb's mind was a more engrossing question than any normal actions of the Germans could have further created. Greatly outnumbered, was he to give the signal to act on the offensive, or to let the chance go by and run no risks?

Had he known then that a German division commander, a general of note, had been examining the trench at length and hearing of the death of Godfrey Schmaltz, once big game hunter and one of the best shots in all the Fatherland, had risked the chance to come now and inspect the place and manner of the great marksman's defeat, the young corporal would have hesitated not at all and have risked everything. But now he seemed disposed to wait too long. Gardner, however, must have guessed the situation more clearly. He nudged Herbert and whispered: [Pg 122]

"Big gun, I believe! Better get him! Now's our chance!"

And Herb, his mind suddenly set to the task, gave the signal—the flash of an electric handlight into the mist.

The seven were all on their feet in an instant and advancing upon the enemy. At the same moment Gardner shouted in the German tongue:

"Hands up, or death to all instantly! You are our prisoners!"

Herbert called to Roy and Martin Gaul, who were nearest, to quickly disarm the Huns; and the way the few guns were snatched from the men and tossed aside must have much surprised them. One big fellow struck at Roy, and the man got a blow in the face which staggered him.

There was an attempt at a scurry among the German officers when the ambush was sprung and the order given them. It was a palpable effort to shield or to effect the escape of one of their number, the general.

Dave McGuire saw this, having come around on that side in the movement to surround the huddled enemy, and he acted with the speed of a hawk. Shoving his pistol into the face of the nearest Boche, the young fellow began lisping some words in English which were probably poorly understood, if at all, but he did not get very far with his speech. [Pg 123]

Dave's arm was knocked aside and a Hun officer leveled a pistol at him, fully getting the drop on him. By all rules of the game, this was a signal for surrender on Dave's part, but Dave wasn't

abiding by any rules just then. The Hun officer suddenly felt in the pit of his stomach a boot that had the force of a Missouri mule back of it and when he rose from the mire he found himself a prisoner.

Dave made the others believe, seeing their companion fall and the American's pistol again threatening them, that there was nothing left them but to accept the situation; and though the general, much to his credit for pluck, made another attempt to get away, he also got Dave's foot with equal force, but on the shin, and he couldn't have run then to save his life.

Meanwhile all of the other six had performed quite admirably and impressed upon the German officers and men the fact that they were at the mercy of the Americans.

"Tell them to keep mighty quiet, Gardner," Herbert ordered, and this also was conveyed to them in words the prisoners clearly understood. "And to head up the hill and step lively," the corporal added. [Pg 124]

They headed up and stepped. Two lagged a little, but one of the Regulars, Murphy, prodded those grumbling Huns with his brawny fist and they fell in with the others. As though by previous drill, the captors arranged themselves about the prisoners with instant comprehension of the entire situation. Ready to pour in a murderous fire with the first movement in an attempt to escape, and believing that such an attempt might be made at any moment, two of the squad marched to the right and two to the left of the captured Germans, while Herbert and Donaldson followed in the rear and Gardner led the way, walking backward up the slope, now and then urging the captives to step along quickly.

They had covered two-thirds of the distance to the gun pit when one of the general's aides or staff suddenly gave a low order, and turned and rushed boldly upon the nearest American. Half the number of Germans, with something like a roar, followed his example in what, against a less determined resistance must have been a successful break-away for most of them. [Pg 125]

But half a dozen revolvers barked and just as many Teutons went to the ground, two never to rise again by their own efforts, for the distance was short and the American boys were ready. The Huns fell back again into a bunch, the general unwounded.

And then out came the raiders. The firing proved a signal and they knew that their commander was in danger. From the German trench the soldiers climbed; and though they could not be seen, the rapid commands, the rattle of fixing bayonets, the tramp of hasty feet were very audible. Herbert listened for a second and then shouted:

"Never mind picking up those fellows, but get the rest up to the pit! Rush 'em now; rush 'em! Flynn," he called, "go for the pit like the Old Scratch was after you, and tell Lieutenant Jackson the enemy's out and coming!"

Just then the entire bunch of captors and captives found themselves in what was equal to the glare of day; a searchlight from the German trench had found them.

The sharp roar of the American gun in the pit jarred the earth, and instantly the darkness was over everything again. The Yankee artillery-men had found the searchlight and with the first shot. [Pg 126]

But that moment of white light had shown some morose, ugly, hate-bearing faces and booted figures huddled in a group, and on the ground some lying prone, others in a sitting posture, while about them stood a number of grim fellows, with pistols in hand. And the light had shown on the hill Roy Flynn going up the grade at a speed that would have done credit to most sprinters on the level. Roy had been the hundred-yards man at Brighton for three terms.

Lieutenant Jackson had his Regulars down the hill into the center of No Man's Land almost before the Germans had all climbed out of their trenches, and when the latter came on in the darkness they were received with such a withering fire that the survivors broke and fled back in a hurry.

"By jingo, corporal, you certainly have done yourself and all of us proud!" was Lieutenant Jackson's remark to Herbert a half hour later when the prisoners had been questioned, disposed of and a guard set over them, and in their warm dugout shelter the squad of snipers were gathered about the trench stove. [Pg 127]

"All you fellows," he went on, "ought to be promoted for this night's work; that's a fact. I don't want to take a bit of the glory away from you; I want you to make out and send in with mine a complete report of your work in capturing these——"

"I'll be perfectly content to have you do it all, Lieutenant," Herbert replied.

"But I won't. You can write better than I can. When they hear you've snared this big chump, General What's-his-name, they'll tumble over themselves to get you a commission. You deserve it. We're all finding out what the Johnny Bulls tell us: the non-coms and the subs have about as much to do with this scrap as the generals and colonels."

CHAPTER XII

HUNTING BIG GAME IN NO MAN'S LAND

There was nothing of self-consciousness about Corporal Whitcomb over the capture of a high

commander of the enemy on almost the first night of his experiences at the front. As Roy Flynn put it:

"Herb's never chesty; wasn't at school, though heaps o' duffers who couldn't stay with him in anything, indoors or out, would swell up like poisoned pups. That's Herb."

Just then the object of the conversation walked into the dugout.

"When are they going to send his nibs, General Sauerkraut, to the rear, Corporal?" asked Sniper G. Washington Smith.

"As soon as the patrol arrives; to-morrow at the latest. I believe he talked some to Gardner last night; tried to bribe him. Flynn, your turn on guard duty, now, over the prisoners. Relieve Watson. The lieutenant wants one of our men with three of his over them all the time. Gaul, you go on to-night.

"Have most of you fellows washed, shaved, and eaten breakfast?" continued Herbert. "If so, we'd better all go out on the hill again for a little while and try to head off those snipers from the other side. Letty says they are getting busy after the big gun. Two bullets flattened on his sight guard a little while ago; one of them must be closer than they've been yet."

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"Ain't *you* the feller to get him?" queried Martin Gaul.

"What's the matter, Gaul? Anything getting on your nerves?"

"No more'n on yours or anybody's. Show me the man who's in love with all this. That old gun up there would drive a stuffed dummy crazy, and bullets droppin' in here every now and then and expecting them Boches to drop in, too; and dirt and filth and crawlers and cookin' your own meals, and cold nights——"

"Do you think that's showing the right spirit? All of us are putting up with the same discomforts, the same nerve strain and we're getting sport out of it, or at least the consciousness that we must sacrifice comforts for the cause. You are the first I have heard complain. Best to chime in, old man, and cut out the kicks."

"Mebbe you'd kick, too, if you were sick," Gaul said.

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"Sick? Well, now, that's different. What's the matter? Just how do you feel?"

"Sore all over. Cold, I reckon. Head aches. Pain in my face, too. Got no appetite."

"Sudden, then; eh? Saw you eating a while ago as if you never expected to get any more. You know the grub lorries get here once in so often and enough. But turn in on your cot now and cover up warm. Geddes, you heat Gaul a cup of tea and take and dry his shoes. And put on dry socks, Gaul. I'll get you some pills. Get ready, fellows! Geddes, you join us when you can. Are all your guns clean? Remember, you want your gas masks along. There's no telling when the Boches may let go some of that stuff."

Sneaking, crawling, seeking every bit of cover, getting into pits made by formerly exploded shells when the Germans had driven the French for a time a year before from this same spot, the five snipers worked over the slope and sought by every means to locate and fire upon those of the enemy who were at the same job.

Herb lay behind a pile of débris once tossed up by a shell, his gun over a mass of pebbles in which he had, with a stick, pushed two narrow grooves, one for his weapon, the other as a peep-hole. To get him, a bullet would have to hit exactly in this groove, in line with it; otherwise the stones would deflect it upward.

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The lad studied the entire landscape all the way to and beyond the German trenches, a third of a mile away. If, in the equal number of hiding places below, there was a decided motion of any kind he should have been able to see it.

He heard no shots from his men now scattered over the slope; evidently the Hun marksmen were not out, or were keeping very still. He lay silent, alone, under the warming, welcome sun of late autumn.

It had been a beautiful day, following almost a week of incessant rain. The sun shone in a sky almost without clouds. All along the trenches for a long distance there was not a sound of firing, not an impression on the ear that even slightly suggested two opposing armies seeking to shed each other's blood.

Far over beyond the hillside a bird, welcoming the sunshine also, caroled a lively ditty over and over again. Herbert guessed it was some kind of a linnnet and wished that he might calmly arise without a sense of danger and go to spy on the singer. A plucky, little feathered adventurer it must be, indeed, to boldly invade this area of killing and to give such small heed to the deafening boom of great cannon and the frequent crackle of rifles and machine guns.

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McGuire it was who crept on hands and knees or advanced in a stooping posture, according to the depth of the sheltering stones or bushes between himself and the enemy, and when within speaking distance of Herbert, began a desultory conversation.

"I—ah—know they are on the—ah—hill," he announced, meaning, of course, the Germans. "Saw one, if not—ah—two, or more. They are lying just as low—ah—as we are and are—ah—taking no chances, I presume. Is it not a most beautiful day?"

"A ripper, sure!" was Herbert's reply. "You ought to keep mighty well down, McGuire. 'Tisn't safe to show yourself too much."

"Do you—ah—know," said the ex-glove salesman, "I do not believe those fellows can shoot well enough to—ah—hit me this far away. It is very fine shooting to do so." [Pg 133]

"They are not all poor shots, by any means," asserted Herbert.

"I think I—ah—would take chances with the best of them and how greatly I—ah—hope for the opportunity." The young man smiled in the very sweet but sad sort of way that must have helped him sell many a pair of gloves. He turned about and crept to a pile of stones and began another survey of the hunting field.

Herbert wondered where the German marksman could have been located that had harassed the gun crew earlier in the morning and that he had come out to locate and drive off. There were plenty of hiding places, to be sure, but the fellow must disclose his position now if he began shooting again. And it was the business of the sniping squad to stop this.

To the right three of Herb's men had located themselves, this offering the likeliest situation for protection to the gun. It was too far away from the German trench to be in danger from rifle fire, but here enemy snipers could venture out.

Over to the left the ground was clearer of long grass, low bushes and rocks and still beyond that, in No Man's Land, perfectly bare. [Pg 134]

The young corporal had about given up the idea of snipers immediately opposing his position. He was thinking of returning to the pit to perform certain duties falling constantly upon a leader of even a few men, for he must do all in his power for their comfort and well being, when he heard a low exclamation come from McGuire. Herbert even recognized the halting "ah" somewhere in it, though he did not fully catch the words. But he saw the man quickly level his gun over the stone pile and fire.

There was no answering shot, and for some little time McGuire lay there inert. Herb could not fully see the precise object of the ex-salesman's marksmanship; he was aware only of a shell pit and its tossed-up earth pile, and a gun muzzle sticking above it. This gradually was lowered.

"Lay low, McGuire!" Herbert cautioned, seeing the fellow beginning to rise up and peer over his stone pile in an effort to see what effect his last shot had taken. And then he was aware that McGuire was not looking in the direction of the shell pit.

Far beyond and to one side of the shell pit, easily a distance of three hundred yards, a German sniper was crawling flat on his stomach in an effort to gain a better shelter; perhaps he believed himself unseen. He was almost hidden from Herbert. [Pg 135]

McGuire's gun spoke again; the fellow had risen on one knee to shoot with a clearer view. The crawling German rolled over, appeared as though he were trying to tie himself into a knot and then suddenly collapsed and lay still.

Twice again and in rapid succession McGuire fired; Herbert saw all this, but not clearly, though he was about to shoot also on a chance. The other had the nearer and better view and he was now on his feet.

One of the enemy, on his knees and still farther below, had leveled his gun, but before he could pull the trigger he had pitched forward, where he lay still; another, too, had bravely risen to his feet and was taking an aim at McGuire when he also went down.

And then there was a crack from the rifle in the near shell pit.

Out of the corner of his eye Herbert saw McGuire fall to the ground; he knew by that momentary instinct that is never failing what this meant. But he did not then turn his head. Instead his eyes were leveled along his pet gun barrel and beyond to where merely the helmet, the forehead and the eyes of a man showed above the shell-pit mound. [Pg 136]

Herb had to make quick, sure work of it. But with the crack of his rifle, knowing just where that bullet would go, the boy could not resist a sickening, pitying sensation, for proof of his accurate aim came when the German half rose out of the shell pit and lay prone across his fallen gun.

The corporal, himself now almost unmindful of danger, stooping, crossed to where McGuire lay, and knelt beside him. A glance told him enough. With something like a sob Herbert began to work his way back to the gun pit.

"Dead instantly," was his remark to Lieutenant Jackson. "But he died a hero's death. Outshot the German snipers, as he said he could, and got three of them before a fourth got him. Poor chap, he was as brave as ten tigers and as gentle as a lamb. Our first man to go."

"There will likely be others, Whitcomb. You must get used to it. The fortunes of war, you know."

But a fellow of Herbert's make-up never could, nor did he ever, get used to such a thing. Though not the less determined to do his duty, he was now more than ever down on and disgusted with the whole useless, hateful, miserable business of war. [Pg 137]

Down the slope toward the German trenches lay four dead Germans, perhaps some of them not quite dead; possibly still suffering, bleeding, dying slowly, and where they could not be reached because of the unremitting desire of both sides to take every advantage of an enemy. There was no such thing as the white flag for purposes of succoring the wounded in No Man's Land.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TRAITOR IN CAMP

Corporal Whitcomb could not sleep. There was no particular reason for this, except mental worry and a too vivid imagination. Was the life in trench and gun pit getting on his nerve? Was he, a mere boy, too much over-wrought with his responsibility? Not so; the sort of happy disposition that he possessed never balks at nerve strain nor breaks with the effort of duty, no matter how urgent, or disappointing the result.

Despite the trials upon his sense of justice and naturally gentle regard for humanity he knew only duty and strove with an intense effort to perform every task entrusted to him.

The squad had been but five days in the gun pit so far, and it seemed like twice that many weeks. There had been the almost incessant hammering of the big gun on the trenches and distant works of the enemy and at the airplanes venturing overhead, four of which it had brought down in this time, added to three others since the long-barreled wonder had been set in place. It had been a surprise to the enemy and a masterly bit of work to place these several weapons in such close proximity to the enemy's lines and the duty had fallen upon well-picked troops and expert riflemen to guard these guns.

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There had been the constant sniping, night and day, by successive numbers of the sharpshooters' squad. There had been fifty-seven men in the pit when Herbert came, his own included; now there were but fifty. Three lay in the graveyard beyond the hill; two were sick; two, badly wounded, had been taken by the last patrol to the base hospital at LaFleche. Besides these, nine altogether, mostly of the gun crew, had so-called trench feet, from standing long in cold water and mud and not caring immediately for the first consequences of frost bite.

But it was a very different matter from the impressive call to duty that bothered Herb Whitcomb. It was simply that he could not help feeling doubtful of one of his men.

When Martin Gaul had qualified for the snipers, with a very fair score at the rifle ranges, Herbert had frankly requested that he be assigned to another squad, but the officers making the drawings had refused this.

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Before Gaul had been three days in the pit he had begun to grumble; once he had shown the white feather by remaining behind a nearly perfect shelter, instead of venturing out to hunt for enemy marksmen. And yesterday he had developed his old-time grouch and ready excuses.

Returning to the dugout, Herbert had found Gaul much better and even inclined to be facetious. Learning of McGuire's death, he had expressed no sorrow, as the others had done, or would do when they got in.

There had been all along a warm fraternal spirit shown among the members of the rifle squad, each one showing a generous sympathy for and an interest in his comrades, but Gaul had been the exception; by his own choice he had withdrawn from the human touch and brotherly affections naturally springing up between men living the same strenuous existence.

Was it a sense of impending danger that troubled Herbert this early night? Some materialistic philosophers tell us that there are no such things as premonitions, while others, perhaps wiser, insist that, logically, we possess a sort of sixth sense that is not always easy to analyze. Therefore, we may receive an impression and only half guess its meaning or hardly know that we have received it.

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Herbert rose from his straw bed, pulled on his shoes and walked softly into the adjoining earthen chamber separated from that of the snipers' squad by a vertically cut mass of clay and a short partition of boards. He knew that the lieutenant labored therein over his reports, the small deal table lighted by a dim oil lantern.

The officer in command looked up quickly, but Herbert put his finger to his lips, even before saluting. Then he spoke in a whisper. "Do you sort of feel something in the air? I don't know what makes me feel that way, but——"

"I reckon I've been feeling something of the kind; yes," answered the lieutenant. "At any rate, I didn't seem to want to get sleepy at my usual hour. This sort of thing bothers a fellow at times."

"I think we must hear things we don't know we hear, or get a notion of them in some way," offered Herbert.

"Well, as a Southerner—and we are quite religious in our parts, my boy—we give the Almighty credit for that sort of thing."

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"Yes, of course." Herbert sat, deeply thinking for a moment. "Lieutenant, I have wondered lately about the strategic wisdom of our position here, to use the words of Brigadier-General Harding and of Captain Leighton, of our company. They often gave us a talk about that. It has struck me of late that a very few of us are defending a point of great importance, one that the Boches would like to capture and destroy. How about that, if I may ask?"

"A natural and a wise question, Corporal; very," Lieutenant Jackson made answer. "But rest easy. You came through at night and could not see much on the way. Right back of us, not a quarter of a mile and on the other side of the ridge, one whole division is in barracks, not in billets, as the French term them, but in good, old American log houses, shielded by sand bags on this side and roofed the same way. And a mile beyond, on each side, there are some more infantry regiments; I don't know just how many, but enough. And there must be almost half a division in the trenches,

nearly two in all, guarding this one quiet sector and ready to start toward Berlin when the order comes." [Pg 143]

"I suppose putting these men in barracks is to save crowding the trenches," offered Herbert.

"Exactly; and it's a great scheme. But even without them I have a large idea that the Huns couldn't get enough men on this ground to push us back an inch, much less get our trenches. And heaven help them if they try it!"

"We don't want them to get this gun pit."

"They'll have to go some to do it! We're always ready for them."

"Might they not want to attack now, especially; to recapture their general?"

"Let them come. Two of your men and two of mine are out on the slope against surprises. Three quick shots near will put us wise and the 'phone will bring as many as we want to help us in ten minutes."

"Thanks for your information, Lieutenant. I'm going to try to nap a bit. Good night."

"Good night, my boy. Some sleep we've all got to have."

But as Herbert passed into the outer corridor, he turned softly and in the darkness walked noiselessly away from his quarters into the next hollow dug in the hill, this being more enclosed and better roofed than the others, as it was the store-room for ammunition. [Pg 144]

The boy paused and stood for a long time silently; why he did so he could not then nor afterward have told. Surely there seemed to be something in the air, though he could hear nothing except the audible breathing of sleepers on every side, the scratching of the lieutenant's pen, the occasional rustle of paper as one of the prisoners' guards turned the pages of a magazine he was reading and once the yawn of the other guard as it drew near the time when he was to be relieved.

These two guards, Herbert knew, were in the center and at the far end of the section where the Germans were confined; his own man, Gaul, was nearest the partition of the supply chamber.

The corporal settled back upon a stack of hand-grenade boxes and leaned his shoulder and head against the wall. He was as wide awake and alert as a cat at night, but physically tired, nevertheless. For he had been through much the night before and since and without a moment of rest.

Breaking in almost imperceptibly on the night sounds the low mumbling of an indistinct word or two came to his ears; the prisoners talking among themselves, probably; what else? Leaning forward, Herbert put his eye to a very narrow opening between the partition boards. The reading guard had the back of his head turned that way; the other man was nodding, half asleep, a punishable offense. Squinting sidewise, he saw a hand and arm reach out from the other side of the partition and a hand reach up from a man sitting on the ground at the edge of the bunch of Germans. He had a glimpse also of something white that passed from one to the other. [Pg 145]

Herbert almost stopped breathing; his ears caught every fraction of sound that disturbed the still air. Seconds, perhaps half a minute, passed. Then suddenly a whispered word:

"More!"

Again the hands met; again the white thing passed.

"Right! I'll do that!" was again whispered. Then the figure on the ground collapsed and all was silent for a time. Herbert slipped away into the corridor, waited a moment, then walked noisily back to the prison section and going straight to Gaul, standing by the partition, said: [Pg 146]

"I've been thinking you're not fit for duty. I'll stand guard here awhile and you go back to bed. Give me your gun and revolver."

"But I feel all right, Corporal," Gaul protested.

"I mean this as an order, Gaul."

The fellow handed over his weapons. Placing them aside, Herbert covered him with his own pistol. "Now, hand over that paper you just received from the general here, and be quick about it!"

Gaul went white and stammered:

"I—I didn't get—"

"Don't lie! Hand it over, or I'll bore a hole through you! You hear me!"

"But, honest, I—you are wrong, I—"

"Oh, well, then, blast your ugly carcass, I'll just fill you full of holes and take it, anyway."

Gaul, scared, visibly trembling even in the dim light, with shaking fingers fished into an upper blouse pocket and brought forth a bit of scrap paper with torn edges and thrust it at Herb. The corporal glanced at it, then ordered his man to march down the corridor, following to the lieutenant's quarters.

"Please read that; it came from the captured German general to this fellow. He first asked for more, then agreed to do something." [Pg 147]

The officer held the paper near the lantern.

"It's a scrap torn from some book, I guess. German print on it. Oh, on the other side. What is it? Pretty poor writing, by jingo! Wait; it says:

"Set loose if men come. See as I shall get loose of hand bands. Then see in fight I escape free. Then come to trenches by night and inquire by me, General von Lutz, and I pay 5,000 marks quick and you mak safe.' And down farther are more words: '10,000 marks I will mak it; hav no dowts.'"

A broad, solemn-looking grin covered the lieutenant's face and he nodded his head several times.

"Might have expected this, really. Always had my suspicions, but hoped otherwise. Well," turning to Gaul, "did you really think——"

"If you suppose, Lieutenant, that that Dutchman could buy me, you fellows get another think. I was only strafing him a little. He wanted me to do this, but you don't think I would? Why, Corporal, you know me better'n that. Haven't I always——?"

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"Corporal, it would have been better to have got up a pretended alarm and observed what this man would really have done. But I guess we have it on him all right, after what you heard. Anyway, we'll send him back when the patrol comes for the Huns. Take him and put him under guard now."

CHAPTER XIV

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LIFE AND DEATH

The night wore on. Clouds overhung the sky and it began to drizzle. Roy Flynn, on duty in No Man's Land, felt that in a little while he and Watson would need their slickers and he was about to return for them, believing that his comrade and two others on the watch could be certain of any improbable attempts of the Huns to make a raid, when a strange thing happened.

The ground was suddenly lighted up as though by flashes of fire; a tearing, ripping sound came to the two riflemen, and they saw bits of earth, stones, grass, bushes, torn, blown, lifted, and whizzing by them. Myriads of bullets sung mournful snatches of promised death and howled in derision of life as they struck the rocky earth and bounded onward.

"Back to the quarry! There's no place like home!" yelled Roy to Watson, and firing three shots into the air he turned to see the two Regulars who had also been out on the slope running for the pit. Watson also started and Roy felt conscious that, go as they might, he would not be the last to get under cover. And then suddenly he knew he would be the last and as the pain in his hip seemed to shoot up into his very vitals he wondered, as he pitched headlong, whether he would ever get under such cover again as would protect him from the barrage. Would he, indeed, have a chance to get behind some very nearby shelter while the innumerable bullets paved the way for a German attack on the pit? And, even so, would the coming Huns not find and kill him?

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It was hard going. He held to his rifle, believing that it might be the means of either saving his life or of avenging it at the last moment. Once the barrel was struck by a bullet that glanced harmlessly, but with a wild shriek, as a flattened bullet will.

Then the stock was struck and splintered, and even amidst the awful danger, the near certainty of death in a veritable rain of lead, the boy felt one swift regret for an injury to his beloved weapon. Such are the vagaries of the human mind.

Roy dragged himself forward toward a rise of ground. It was terribly painful going, but he must get out of this first; see to his wound.

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"If I've got to pass up, or down," he said aloud to himself, "I want to do it according to Hoyle and not as Hamburger steak or mincemeat. Let us proceed where we can estimate on repairs, if the works are worth it."

He got on, suffering from time to time bitter stabs of pain just below his hip when his limb twisted. Not able to lift the lower portion of his body from the ground by his uninjured leg because of the agony when the other dangled he was compelled to drag his entire weight on his elbows, gun still in hand, but the lad's pluck and spirit never left him.

"A turtle's got nothin' on me for getting down to it. Wish I was a snake. Then I could bite a Hun. Mebbe this little thing——" thinking of his pistol—"might do it yet; drat 'em! Here's this little old heap of earth, and—oh, glory be! It's a shell pit! Like home and mother! In we go! Whurrah! That'n nearly got me!"

It had almost. A conical mass of iron ripped clear across his back, cutting the cloth like a knife, but doing no other damage. The boy spread himself out, feeling a little easier, and lay still for a moment. The cold rain fell on his face and he pulled his hat over his eyes.

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"But ye don't sting quite like those Boche hailstones," he said. "Well, I've luxuriated enough now. Go to it, m'lad, and look to your hurt. If not, the rain'll help to make this slope all unnatural blue with me arterial fluid; me ancestors way back to Brian Boru would have it that it's as blue as indigo. Better look to see the damage; but how can I?"

How could he, indeed? Was there nothing for him but to lie there and let his blood ebb away, unless his comrades missed him in the pit and the barrage fire ceased? And then a fear seized

him. Would they tell Herb and would that loyal friend risk his life to reach him?

The bullets fell thicker and faster now, the rattle of the guns at the German trench had increased and no man could steal out from the pit and hope to survive. Perhaps Roy could drag himself out again and up the slope in time to keep his friend from attempting—

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The boy struggled to get his arms fully under him and then to sustain the weight of head and shoulders. But the former effort had been too great; the reaction now was final. He sank back on the soggy ground and the hem of his blouse stretched across the wound, his weight firmly holding it. This and the coagulating effect of the cold earth must have stopped the flow. But the lad lay white and still, no longer gazing up at the black sky, nor conscious of his hurt, nor the curtain of lead and iron above and about him.

"Flynn? Where is he?" was Herbert's first question of the men who had leaped into the welcome shelter of the pit.

Watson glanced around. "He was with me; yelled to me. Must have been hit! I was; my heel's off, and one hit my pocket fair. And there's what's-his-name, wounded, though he got in. Flynn must have been hurt bad, or he'd made it!"

One of the Regulars limped away to his couch, a bullet had cut his side and broken a rib, but this was a minor matter. The other man who had been out on the slope had lost his hat; a shot had struck his gun also. A barrage fire is truly a curtain of missiles, a shower of bullets that, like rain, reaches in time every spot in the area against which it is directed.

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"You musn't go out, Corporal! My orders, please! You couldn't live to reach Flynn now, and he may be dead or out of harm's way in some shelter."

"But, Lieutenant, think of it! He may be suffering, dying out there, unable to help himself, bleeding to death! If I could only try to reach—"

"No! A thousand times no! You are too useful here; have done too much of value already to run a risk of that kind. Just wait a bit until our fellows down there in their trench start a fusillade. I wish Letty could get at his gun and perhaps he can."

And Letty did. The telescopic-looking weapon stood on a revolving iron base at such a height as to be within zone of the enemy's fire when the gun was being used; and though it took but an instant to elevate, aim and shoot with accuracy under ordinary conditions, it now was likely to be pelted thoroughly by the barrage. So Corporal Letty called on his men to sand-bag the gun clearance space, standing by to pull bags away where he would indicate it; this gave him a chance, after he had timed his fuse, to slip in a shell, elevate and let her go straight at the line of barrage guns.

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"There goes Susan Nipper at last!" exclaimed Smith, who was a reader of Dickens and had named the big gun after a noted character in "Dombey and Son," which name stuck.

"Yes, and a few of them placed like Letty knows how to place 'em will fix their feet good and proper. Hit 'em again, old girl!"

And the old girl did. She was a termagant, altogether too violent of tongue and slap to suit those "laying down the barrage," as they term it, and after a lot of the German machine and rapid-fire gunners, who had believed they were so strafing the Americans as to have rendered the big gun useless, had felt the effects of her bursting shells even fifty feet away, they lay down on their jobs.

But this was only a little sooner than they expected to do it, anyway. As soon as the firing ceased, out of their trench and up the slope came the Boches, more than two hundred of them to oppose less than quarter their number in the pit. But the pit boys were on the job.

It took the clumsy, heavily-booted Huns quite a while to get up the slope and Susan Nipper paid them some compliments as they came, but when ordered to do a certain thing by their superior officers they tried hard to do it, or they died trying.

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Yes, they died trying, and the Americans, experienced now in the fighting game, saw to it that this program was carried out.

Two things the Boches had for an objective: the recapture of their general, made a prisoner the night before, and the destruction of the terrible gun of American manufacture.

Lieutenant Jackson lifted the little 'phone in his quarters and spoke quite calmly into it.

"Jackson talking. North side gun pit. The Germans are coming; from the sound and what lights we have been able to use I think there are a great many of them. You heard the barrage, of course. They're hot foot after these prisoners of ours. Better come a-runnin' some of you and if I might be permitted to suggest it, have a company or two make a detour over the hill and below the pit; this might cut off the Huns when they go back and get a good many of them. What's that? Oh, yes. We can hold them awhile. Eh? Sure! Good-by."

Rapid orders quickly followed, the Regulars, however, knowing well their places and having already had experience in repulsing two small raids, much to the enemy's discomfort. But Herbert's squad was a little green in the matter.

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"Get your men out there on their bellies, on the hillside, so you can pick off all the Huns you can get a line on! Letty, got your Colt spitters placed? Good! Now, boys, line up at the trench and use your guns first, but hold your bayonets till the very last; they'll outnumber us, as you know. Make use of your revolvers; that's the game! Every man of you ought to be good for about four

Germans at close range, counting the misses. A revolver will reach farther than a hand grenade or liquid fire. Give it to them a little before you see the whites of their eyes and make every shot tell! Go to it!"

They went to it, with a muffled cheer that the Germans must have thought was an expression over a game or a joke, perhaps; anyway, it seemed apparent that, until two powerful searchlights were thrown upon the advancing enemy, they had believed they were taking the Americans entirely by surprise.

But when the beams of light suddenly glared upon them, to be followed instantly by the staccato of the three machine-guns and the crack of rifles, the first phalanx of Teutons became demoralized for a moment, with more than half their number struck down. [Pg 158]

The second rank also had suffered, but their purpose now was a big one and with that dogged determination for which the German soldiers under training and supported by each other in close touch are noted, rather than a dashing bravery that sweeps all before it, they rallied and returned to the charge.

On they came again, in open formation, and at a run, the darkness enveloping them, except when the flashes of gun fire illuminated dimly the surroundings. For they had instantly shot out the searchlights and their objective was now the black hillside in the center of which they knew the gun pit and dugout lay. And they meant to penetrate that spot and wipe it out past further injury to them.

Is it not best, even when the most graphic recital seems necessary in the portrayal of a battle scene, to draw the mantle of delicacy over those details of horror that follow a close conflict between forces long trained and superbly fitted to kill?

It suffices to say that the Americans found their Southern leader, experienced in the choice of weapons with which man can do most injury to his fellowman when he so desires, was right concerning the revolver as a most effective means of defense and offense. [Pg 159]

Even in the dark the pet American weapon worked wonders. An arm drawn back to hurl a grenade or bomb was pretty sure to drop limp, with its owner down and out, and a flashing bayonet in the hands of a chap tumbled over by the same means was hardly a weapon to be feared, even against vastly inferior numbers.

After the machine-guns and rifles had performed their work the ready revolvers, each hand holding one trained in its use to practical perfection, did a work that was more murderous than anything the Huns had so far witnessed.

It is not pleasant to think even of enemies going down in such numbers. The death of one man, forced into a death grapple by the red-tongued furies of war, is enough to draw pity from all who are humane, but when dozens, scores, in the space of a few minutes are made to suffer and die for a cause not rightly known to them, and others also, because of the inhumanity of a power-mad despot, it is beyond the full telling. [Pg 160]

If the raiders were slaughtered and turned back from their purpose, they did not make their effort entirely in vain, as was proved shortly after the Americans had seen the last of the dusky backs of the remaining Huns disappearing down the slope and the defenders of the pit had turned to take account of the results.

When they counted their own dead and wounded, could they be greatly blamed for being overjoyed upon hearing, half way to the German trenches, several more shots fired and a clear American voice call out: "Surrender, all of you!"

The lieutenant's suggestion had been adopted and all that were left of the raiding companies, fully a hundred men, were cut off in their retreat and so swiftly disarmed and thrust back over the hill that no rally to their relief from the farther trenches could be made.

But however ill the wind that had blown those raiding Huns to the attack of the gun pit, leaving death and suffering in their wake and many more of their own to care for, it was indeed ill if it blew no good.

Part way down the slope a German helmet, knocked from the head of a soldier boy by a fateful bullet, rolled into a certain shell pit and lay by a prostrate form. [Pg 161]

In the retreat, with the glare of a renewed searchlight upon them, the vengeful Huns would have thrust a bayonet into every one of their enemies that might possibly have been alive, but the helmet deceived them; this must be one of their own who had fallen in the first fire. And so they went on.

After the supporting force and their prisoners had gone to the rear, there crept into the renewed blackness of the night figures that searched everywhere for the unfortunate.

"Here's a Boche, Corporal, that looks as if he was asleep, not dead. A young fellow, from the get-up of him, but can't quite see his face. Red-headed—and, hello, look here!"

Herbert, with his one free hand, the other having had a Boche bullet cut across the thumb, flashed the electric torch on the occupant of the shell pit. Then, with an order, he was down on hands and knees and with knowing fingers feeling for possible heart beats.

"Bring a stretcher, quick, two of you! It's Flynn! Dear old Roy! I believe he's alive! Yes, yes; he's still alive! Come on, you fellows, quick!" [Pg 162]

WING SHOOTING WITH A RIFLE

The blessed, the brave, the indispensable Red Cross! Just back of the pit, exposed to the vicious German fire and yet intent only upon the duty of mercy, the panting ambulances were being loaded with their precious, their pitiful human freight soon to be billeted in warm, clean, homey hospitals far in the rear where German shells, even from the biggest guns, might seldom reach. And laboriously through the mud the springy cars went away, one at a time.

"Herb, I'd like to have been with ye to help stop those devils, but I couldn't. And if ye can't, how can ye? Now I mebbe never can. It's a fine, good, hard, tryin' old world, it is, Herb. As me old granddad in Ireland used to say: 'Whurrah, me lad, but life's mainly disappointin'.' I know what they'll do to me, me boy. They'll leave me go round as if I was playin' hop scotch as long as I live, but faith, no longer. Me leg'll have to come off, Herb; I know it will. But what of it? It's all in the game."

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"I don't believe it, Roy, old man; I think not," the corporal made answer, sick at heart.

"Come see me at the hospital, Corporal," groaned Smith, rolling his eyes, that told of suffering, toward his chief. "That is, if I'm still sticking round there when you can get relieved. If I'm still above ground I'll look for you."

"Say, Corporal, I want to thank you for being good to me; always jolly and kind, even when I felt like grumbling. Will you do me a big favor? You see I can't write with this arm; never can, I guess. Won't you just drop a line to dad and mother? You have my home address and it would come better from you than anybody else; and you might say that I didn't run and hide when the Boches were coming. I think dad always believed I would do that. Will you?" Such was Geddes' request.

And all Herbert could do was to take their hands and press them, nod rather violently and perhaps get out a very few words like: "Oh, you'll be all right. See you later." Had he attempted more he would have quite broken down; and that, he believed, would not have been exactly the part of a soldier.

They were gone and the boy turned to his chief. "Lieutenant, there's only four of us left out of the nine; one dead, three wounded, one a traitor. This is war! But there's something more to be said; it is, how to get back at those devils down yonder? Of course, we're after them, too, but they had no business to start this war."

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"I don't think those poor chaps did start it and I don't believe the most of them would have started it, either, if they'd had any say in the matter. They are mere puppets, even the higher commanders, working in a vile system that makes monkeys of them at the behest of their ambitious and conscienceless rulers, or the one ruler, Kaiser Bill. But as long as these fellows have made their bed as practical slaves, let them lie in it as victims, however the fortunes of war may swing, and we have to teach them a lesson about coming over here too readily; got to get back at them.

"To-morrow the communicating trench between our pit and the lower trench will be completed; that is a less distance across No Man's Land and some of us can join those boys down there in a counter-raid to-morrow night.

"And, Whitcomb, don't be too down-hearted; I see you are. Those fellows will mend up and we must expect some to be killed. We lost seven in all and eleven wounded. What is left of you can do very efficient work yet. The Huns are not done sniping and I will ask for some more men to refill your squad, along with two other squads of our command to take up the losses. And say, my boy, keep your eyes open for enemy airplanes; it'll be good flying weather in the morning and I've a notion they'll try again to do what the raid failed in. But Susan Nipper will wing 'em if she gets a show!"

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It turned out precisely as the lieutenant predicted. The morning dawned clear and still, like an Indian summer day in the dear old United States and the men in the pit and those in the trenches below praised heaven for smiling upon them and Old Sol for drying up a bit of the bottom ooze where the trenches were poorly drained. The pit did not suffer so much, being on high and sloping ground where, even had the bottom been level and not drained, the rain water would have soon seeped away.

Herbert and Watson went out on the slope to watch for snipers in the early morning. But no snipers were in evidence and, strangely, they were not shot at even once; at that time this section could truthfully be called quiet. Not so?

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Well, considering that one airplane engine makes as much noise and keeps it up longer than the shooting of a machine-gun, and that now no less than three airplanes made their appearance low down and came on at a tremendous rate, the quiet sector suddenly took on a different character. And then Susan Nipper commenced to talk out loud and to do things spitfire fashion.

At the very first shot, timing the shell fuse long or short, the foremost plane was hit precisely in the center; a long range wing shot with a single projectile at that. The German taube went to pieces and to earth as though it had been a dragon-fly smashed with a brick-bat, and there could hardly have been enough of the propeller and engine left to take up with a pitchfork. As for the poor driver and bomber, they passed into the other world without knowing a thing about it.

But this was no check to the other machines, for the quality of mind that makes or permits a man

to go aloft at all makes of him no coward under any circumstances. On the two came, straight for the side of the hill, at such a furious speed that Corporal Letty had time only for one more shot at them. Hastily timed, this was a clean miss, the shell bursting high in the air beyond. And the gun squad was making a record to get in another shell as the machines, one a little above and behind the other, swept almost over the pit.

Two of the gun squad were working the Colt rapid-fire gun now, but they did not seem to swing it fast enough, all their stream of missiles being wasted.

Watson, farther down the slope than Whitcomb, now held to his shoulder a rifle that was hot with repeated action, and yet he, too, had scored no hits. Though an airplane, if not over three hundred feet in air and flying steadily ought to be scored on, its height makes it look mighty small and hard to hit, and moving objects are no cinches for a single bullet. As the disappointed fellow stopped to slip in still another cartridge clip he heard a yell from Herbert.

"Lookout, Watson! Dodge!"

Watson did dodge just in time. He saw a conical-shaped thing descending toward him and, a baseball player of skill with an eye for sky-scraper flies, he gauged correctly where that thing was going to hit and he got away from that place. And when the thing did hit and tore up the earth and gravel and stones Watson was glad he had dodged.



HE FIRED TWICE IN QUICK SUCCESSION.

Another was flung down at him, but it went wide, and a third was started toward Herbert, who stood, spread-legged, gun to shoulder.

There is an art in aiming at a moving object that probably estimates its speed and direction, the speed of the bullet and allows for all of this. Herbert's skill with his little .22-caliber at objects tossed in air stood him in good stead when at rifle practice in the training camp and, however excited and eager with the necessity of shooting straight, it did not fail him now.

He fired twice in quick succession, meaning to hit exactly under the fish-like belly of the machines, directly below where he knew the driver sat and the first shot he believed he had missed. He felt pretty sure of the other; he even thought he saw the direct result of it in a glare of light, a shower of jumbled sparks and stars, and then, there was sudden blackness.

"What in thunder—how'd I get here?" was the corporal's question of Lieutenant Jackson, who stood over his cot, smiling a little. But that was not an important matter just then; there were big comments being saved for Herbert's return of wits.

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"Great Jupiter, my boy! By jingo! I never saw shooting like that! None of us ever did! The next minute they would have played havoc with things in here. Letty couldn't get at them and Watson couldn't and not one of my men, but *you*—oh, *you* could beat Doc. Carver! Wonderful!"

"Say, if you'd make it a little clearer to me I'd know what you're referring to," Herb protested. "Let's see; it was—oh, yes; I think I remember: taubes, weren't they? Where'd they get to?"

"They got to earth, you bet! Can't you recollect? You must have been worse stunned than I thought. You got 'em both, boy; got 'em both. Hit the first one so that it went down into the hill

above and your second bullet started something going in the hind machine and it blew up and tossed those two fellows out and it turned turtle. She lies out there, looking more like a dump heap at home than anything else. You were hit by a fragment. You're a dandy!"

"You are that!" echoed Letty, from the opening. "I'll bet those Boches down there will study awhile before they send on any more fliers here! Feel better, Whitcomb?" [Pg 171]

"Pretty much. Head aches. Any bones busted? Guess not. Sore in spots, though. Well, getting out in the air and sunshine would feel better. Want to see what happened," said Herbert, rising from his cot.

"Wonderful! Wonderful shooting!" repeated the lieutenant.

"Yes, and four Boches the less!" declared Letty.

"Is it true? Poor fellows!" said Herbert.

"Poor nothing! They'd have got my gun if you——"

"Hadn't murdered them, poor chaps!" put in Herbert. "This business of killing makes me sick. But I must get out; they'll be sending others to drop some more bombs."

"You're a queer chap," said Corporal Letty, and Lieutenant Jackson once more reiterated: "Wonderful shooting! Wonderful!"

But the Germans sent no more airplanes over on that day, nor many a day thereafter; they are brave, but rarely foolhardy. And as they appeared to have lapsed into inactivity for a time, probably seeking some surprises to spring, it seemed up to the Americans, true to their reputation for originality, to do some more surprising themselves. [Pg 172]

The day wore on uneventfully. Watson and Herbert were replaced on the slope of No Man's Land by Gardner and Rankin, and the latter once so far forgot himself as to walk uprightly for about ten yards. Whereupon half a dozen whiz-bangs, or very light shells, from a small rapid-firer, came his way. Letty saw whence they came, trained Susan on that whiz-bang slinger and it went out of commission, along with three men working it. Rankin, meanwhile, had hunted cover.

Reinforcements arrived, as asked for. They were Regulars and more than anxious to get into the fighting, the actual work of getting into touch with the enemy. And, expert with revolvers, they were chosen for the night's work.

Herbert went to the lieutenant. "We fellows all want to get into this thing. We know something about work with pistols; perhaps we are as handy with them as with rifles. It's a cinch that we can do some good."

Lieutenant Jackson hesitated. "If we lose any more of you boys, and you in particular, Whitcomb, we won't be as sure of holding off attempts to get at Susan Nipper. But, nevertheless, this once, as it is to be an effort to demonstrate pistol work almost exclusively, I expect you fellows ought to be included. Sergeant West is to command; Corporal Gerry will lead. There will be about forty men and they will start from the lower communicating trench at about three o'clock to-night. Each man will carry two revolvers only, and six more rounds of ammunition and go as light as possible. There will be no barrage, as we want to surprise them. So be ready." [Pg 173]

CHAPTER XVI

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"OVER THE TOP"

Had the entire bunch of fellows, from Regulars to Draftees been planning for a football game or a very strenuous social lark of some kind, they could not have appeared more happy, in the beginning, over it. The fact that the raiders had first in mind the killing of the enemy, men like themselves sent to cut down their opponents, proved what custom will do. For custom is everything, and men in a body can fit themselves to observe almost any procedure and to twist it whichever way that gives the greatest satisfaction.

In times of peace we regard the murder of one person as something over which to get up a vast deal of excitement and much indignation, but in warfare we plan for the killing of thousands as a business matter and read of it often with actual elation. Such are the inconsistencies of mankind.

"Say, Corporal, if I don't get at least a half dozen of those Huns during this little picnic you can call me a clam! These little get-theres have got to do the job!" Rankin stood gazing lovingly at his two service pistols, held in either hand, as he spoke. He was admittedly the best revolver shot amongst the gun-pit contingent. [Pg 175]

"I'll run you a little race as to who makes the best score on real deaders!" spoke up a youthful-looking fellow who was one of the recently arrived squad of Regulars. "I sort of like to punch holes with these small cannons myself."

But Herbert heard no other boasts of the sort from the men contemplating the night raid; indeed, there was very little talk about it at all, except that some were curious as to how the program might work out, or what the hitches might be, and some, though determined to do their duty, seemed to be a bit nervous as time went on.

The boy, having now gone through enough in the crucible of death-dealing to sear him against

the fear of possibilities, even of probabilities, regarded this raid only as a matter of duty, of necessity, and with very little thought about it, resolved to do his part to the very best of his ability.

"Over the top!" This has become a familiar phrase now since a large part of the present method of warfare consists in those in the opposing trenches finding a way of getting at each other over No Man's Land, often not more than twenty yards across and on an average perhaps a hundred and fifty feet, though the turns and twists of the trenches make it difficult to draw an average. [Pg 176]

Open attacks, except by large bodies of men in what is termed a drive, are not generally successful in the military, the strategic, sense, for there are more men lost in getting across barbed wire entanglements, machine-gun and rifle fire than will pay for what they gain. A section of trench which is part of the enemy's system will very likely have to be given up, unless the entire trench is soon after taken, which may result in a general drive.

The military tactics compel that which the scientific boxer adopts and calls his art, that of self-defense. Anyone can wade in and hammer a foe if he does not care how he is hammered in turn, but often the hammering he gets is more than he can give, unless he studies to shun injury. In this case often the weaker fighter will outdo the stronger if the former avoids being punished while getting in some hard cracks on the other chap's weak spots. [Pg 177]

And just so with trench fighting. The opposing armies are precisely like two trained-to-the-minute prize fighters with bare knuckles and out for blood; they are watching each other's every move, dodging, ducking and delivering all sorts of straights, hooks, swings and upper-cuts, all sorts of raids, bombings, grenadings, shellings, air attacks and what not?

But the raids at night are the best card that, so far, the opposing platoons or companies have learned to deliver, and they often result in a knockout blow, at least to that section of the trench attacked. The raid must be delivered as a surprise to be most effective and thus may be compared to the fist fighter's sudden uppercut or swing to the jaw.

The night came on cold, still, with gathering clouds, and the men in the lower portion of the communicating trench, and mostly within an offset that had also been dug and roofed over with heavy poles, brush and sod for camouflage, gathered to partake of the evening meal and converse in low tones.

Two enemy airplanes bent on scouting duty, started just before dusk toward the American lines, but with glee the boys heard Susan Nipper begin to talk again and the planes disappeared, one veering off out of range, the other being knocked into the customary mass upon the unkind ground. [Pg 178]

Whitcomb, Gardner, Watson, and Rankin chummed together, as was their habit when all off duty together; not at this time cooking, as there was no place handy where a fire could be camouflaged. The men now all ate their grub cold, which was not so bad for an occasional change; the tinned meats, fresh fruit and fresh biscuits made at the barracks well satisfying a soldier's appetite.

Hot coffee in a big urn was sent down from the gun pit, and the lieutenant added a good supply of chocolate candy recently shipped over from the good old United States for the boys in the trenches and appreciated as much as anything could be. After this many indulged in pipes and tobacco, but they were careful to keep the glow of their smoke well out of sight of the prying eyes of the enemy, for who can tell when a squirming Hun may wriggle himself up to almost the very edge of his foeman's trench and spot those gathered within, or overhear their plans!



**"MAYBE I'LL HEAR THEM PRONOUNCE MY
DOOM."**

All this while there had been someone at the listening post, that point of the zigzag trench which was nearest the enemy. The job is an exacting one and the listeners are frequently relieved by those men most alive to the interests of the trench.

Presently Sergeant West came to the snipers and addressed Whitcomb:

"Corporal, you fellows are all wide awake and with your eyes sharpened. I'd like to have one of your men on relief at the listening point."

"All right. Rankin has got ears like a rabbit for hearing, even if he is a pretty boy. Go to it, old man!"

Rankin got up and stretched himself. He seemed more than usually serious.

"Maybe I'll hear them pronounce my doom," he remarked and turned away.

"He seems extra solemn tonight," said Gardner. "Wonder if we'll all come out of this business skin whole."

"All? I'll wager not all of us will. Those Huns can fight; I'll say that for them. But it's the only good thing I can say for them," Watson commented.

"That's where you're wrong, old man," Gardner replied. "As you know, I spent a year in Germany
—"

"Or in jail? 'Bout as leave!" Watson jested.

"— after I left school. Dad sent me over with our buyer to get on to the toy importing business, and I'll say this for the doggone Germans. They are rough, they are brags, they are all a little crazy; but they are wonderfully painstaking, remarkably thorough and persevering, and here and there, now and then you come across some mighty fine, good, upright, altogether decent chaps whom you may be glad and proud to have as friends. It is all wrong, unfair and a little small to consider all the people in any land unworthy; don't you think so? You remember what Professor Lamb used to say at school—"

"Professor Lamb?" interrupted Herbert. "Say, man, what school did you attend?"

"Brighton Academy. Best school in the—"

"Here, too! I was a junior when I enlisted; Flynn and I. Put it there, old chap!" Herbert thrust out his hand.

"Now, isn't that funny we didn't know that before about you?" Gardner said. "Yes, Watson here and I were classmates. We were chums at school, and have been chums ever since; enlisted together."

"And we're mighty glad to be under one who has the same Alma Mater," put in Watson.

"Or, as poor old Roy Flynn would say: 'We're all the same litter and bark just alike; mostly at the

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moon'," Herbert quoted.

"Flynn, too, eh?" questioned Gardner. "He, like many another fitted for some very different task, came out here to be unfitted. I have thought, ever since the days in camp back home, that he was admirably cut out for the law."

"A man doesn't need both feet to talk with," Watson suggested.

"And he may not lose his leg at all," Herbert protested, hoping against hope.

"It won't still his tongue, I'll wager, if he does."

As the night wore on conversation grew less and many of the men dozed, sitting on the ground and propped against the dirt wall, or each other. One little fellow slept and even snored lying across the stretched legs of two others, until they tumbled off to rest their limbs. Others knew only wakefulness and either stood about or paced up and down between the narrow walls of the trench, stopping now and then to exchange a whispered word with their fellows.

The sniper squad took turns in making pillows of each other. Once, when they were shifting positions for comfort, Watson remarked rather sharply: [Pg 182]

"We can't yell 'Hurrah for old Brighton!' but we can all pull together, by gum!"

Rankin, who had been in turn relieved from duty at the listening post and who was very wide awake, remarked:

"Mebbe we'll all pull together for the other shore before this night's over."

Herbert waked up at that. "Pull yourself together, old man. You were telling a while ago what you're hoping to do with those guns of yours and——"

"If I have any sort of a chance," Rankin said grimly.

"We can't call you fellows together with a bugle," Sergeant West announced, in a stage whisper. "But it's a few minutes of three o'clock; everything is as quiet as a mouse. Two of our men are over there to give an alarm. All get ready. There'll be no falling in, no formation. Keep well spread out. Orders will be given only by signals. Three of us have whistles and we hope they won't get all three. One short blow means follow the leader; two means all return; three means retreat in a hurry, but with prisoners, if you can get them; a long-continued blast means retreat for your lives. I guess all understand. But no signals will be given until after we attack. We must go across absolutely without noise and we must go quickly. Get the fellow at their listening post, or any sentinel first. It's our first raid in this sector and they will hardly expect us. Now, boys, follow Gerry. He knows the lay of the land." [Pg 183]

And over the top went the forty odd, wishing they could do so with a cheer, but keeping as silent as an army of cats after an army of rabbits—only the prey they sought was by no means as harmless as rabbits, and this fact made the need of silence greater.

Not a word came from the scouts, and if the men in the enemy's trench were apprised of the coming of the Americans they were not able to communicate with their fellows before the raiders had scrambled through, or rapidly pulled aside the barbed wire, squirmed over a pile of sand bags and leaped into the German trench.

Not a man hesitated, and the first signal of any kind they heard was the bark of Gerry's revolver as he sent down the foremost and lone Hun he encountered just as the fellow tried to raise his gun. [Pg 184]

At short range the handier, expertly used revolver won and it was so throughout the mêlée that followed.

As the Americans landed, some few dashing on and into a wide shelter or dugout lined with berths and concrete-floored, in which fifty men reposed or waited for night duty, the short, sharp, rapidly repeated bark of the ready pistols sounded almost like, though less regular than, a machine gun.

But the revolvers were used only against those that opposed them; the foeman who indicated surrender, who was without a weapon or who dropped it, or who held up his hands was fully disarmed and pushed aside between guards, quickly signified by Sergeant West.

It was not all surrender, however; at the very rear of the dugout a dozen men quickly leveled their Mausers and discharged a volley, point-blank, at the Americans who had entered, the most of them being still in the trench fighting the Huns who had rallied from either end.

The snipers' squad, all light and active young fellows, had been the first into the trench; the first into the dugout, they were in the fore when the volley came. Herbert, a gun in both hands, leaped to prevent two Germans from seizing their guns; Gardner on the other side held up three men; Watson blazed away at a commander who blazed away at him, without making a hit, and half a dozen Regulars behind were coming on to perform a like duty. But it was Rankin who saw more of the resisting squad at the far end of the dugout. [Pg 185]

The young man, a gun in each hand, became transformed instantly into a sort of fire-spouting mechanism; the red streaks of flame from his weapons stabbed the semi-darkness almost with one continuous glare and when the twelve shots were expended every man of the opposing force

had fallen. But not alone! The last to stand before that burst of fury aimed true; and as more Regulars rushed into the place to make good the surrender of the other Huns some stumbled over brave Rankin's body.

The whistle sounded once, twice, thrice. Was the work so soon completed? That meant hurry, but with prisoners and, of course, the American wounded and dead.

As though long drilled for this work, knowing precisely what to do and being not once confused, the boys hustled the Huns before them, some guarding against any possible flank attack; and Herbert, feeling for the moment like a young Hercules, lifted Rankin over his shoulder and, climbing again the ramparts of the enemy's trench, staggered rapidly back again over No Man's Land, keeping up with his comrades. And a little behind him came other stalwart fellows, carrying also their precious human burdens, some groaning, some quiet, two limp and fast growing cold.

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Then came rest, though there was readiness against counter-attack, which did not then occur. With the coming of dawn a few new men guarded the communicating trench and the raiders returned to the gun pit. Herbert listened to Sergeant West's terse report to Lieutenant Jackson:

"Very successful, sir. Captured twenty and left about thirty-five enemy dead and wounded. Two of ours dead; four wounded. Got a lot of their guns and smashed a machine-gun they were trying to use in the trench."

Then he added in an altered voice:

"Want to recommend every man for bravery, but especially Corporal Whitcomb, Privates Gardner and Watson for holding the dugout against odds until more men arrived, and Corporal Long and Privates Finletter, Beach, Thompson and Michener for capturing the machine-gun. If I may mention it, we would all be glad to make another raid at any time."

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Herbert saluted. "May I add to that, Lieutenant? Thank you! I want to tell you what Rankin did before he died." And with a voice a little unsteady at times the boy related briefly the heroic work of the young fellow who had shot faster and truer than eight or nine men against him and had made it possible for the few Americans in the dugout to take the prisoners they did.

"I think this, more than anything that has occurred yet, shows clearly the superiority of the Americans' expertness with the revolver and what may be done with it against odds, if men are taught to shoot accurately and with great rapidity," he added.

"I am going to report that to our captain," said Lieutenant Jackson, "and I hope it goes to Washington. I know what I'd do if I had the say. I'd give each man two pistols and a lot of training and omit a lot of this liquid-fire business and grenades. A poor shot can do nothing, nor can a man attempt it who is unfamiliar with the weapon, but an expert could stop half a dozen men with bayonets before the latter could get near enough to use them."

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CHAPTER XVII

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HERBERT'S LITTLE SCHEME

"Keep an eye open for anything the enemy may spring on us," cautioned Lieutenant Jackson, at the daily conference of the officers under him, their men now occupying the gun pit and the trench near, which had been enlarged from a communicating trench. In all there were now a platoon and three squads of new men. "They have all sorts of schemes. We must have only the sharpest-witted fellows at the two listening posts," continued the commander.

"For this duty I would like to pick Corporals Whitcomb and Kelsey and Privates Marsh, Ferry, Drake and Horn, with two others that may be selected later. Experience and practice will do the best work in this duty and it will be well for you men to arrange regular watches, as they do on shipboard. Whitcomb, I know you are thinking of sniping duty, but send your two men out on that, alternately, and you will have some time for it also. Yes, go ahead, Corporal. Got another idea?"

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"I was just thinking this might work, Lieutenant," offered Herbert. And briefly he outlined a scheme that made the rest of those present open wide their eyes. It was a little bit of strategy that was worth trying.

"Fine, fine!" declared the lieutenant. "They'll be most apt to attack the trench and you can work it best there. Get ready for tonight; it'll be as dark as pitch. Sergeant"—to West—"you are in command in the trench, but in this case give the matter over to Whitcomb and the two of you can put it through according to his plan. We shall look after the gun up here with half our men and I'll ask Lieutenant Searles, beyond, to back you up on that side. So, go to it, men!"

The carrying out of a strategic move in the army is nothing like that in any other organization; the action is settled by one or two heads, planned in detail by whoever is put in command, and the rest merely follow orders. West, Whitcomb and Townsend went at the matter with all the energy they could show and the help of some others who were handy.

Just before dark a German airplane, reconnoitering high in air, and purposely let alone by Susan Nipper, discovered a long section of the trench very poorly guarded and manned. This ruse, if not found out as such, is an instant temptation to a raiding party, and the Germans are never slow to

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seize an advantage.

Massed and ready at one end of the trench near the gun pit, West's and Whitcomb's men were waiting patiently, and in the dugout were more than a dozen stuffed figures posed as though sleeping, a few others propped standing in the trench. A small number of bombs were set to go off with the pull of a string.

The Germans came across silently, a hundred strong, prepared to inflict all the damage they could and to capture prisoners; especially to capture prisoners, for there were promotion and the Iron Cross ahead for those who could bring in Americans.

Hidden in a shell hole, almost in the middle of No Man's Land, his head covered with bunches of grass, and thus successfully camouflaged, a volunteer spy from out of the ranks heard and saw the Germans dash across and into the American trench and he at once gave the signal to the waiting fifty. Without a second's hesitation they went over the top and dashed toward the enemy's trench section, to which the spy led them, he having been able to tell from what direction they had come. [Pg 192]

Herbert led the men and without much trouble they found the breach in the wire through which the raiders had come. Swiftly the Yanks ran forward, leaped over the sand bags down into the trench, and an astonished German on duty there got tumbled over so quickly that he knew not what hit him.

Corporal Whitcomb instantly comprehended the exact situation and to further carry out his plan acted accordingly. To the left a right-angled bend led to a communicating trench that could be held by half a dozen men; a little to the right of this another cut led to an elaborate shelter, a guard to which had been standing in the entrance-way. To a dozen men Herbert ordered:

"In there, quick, and hold them up till you hear the signals, and don't come out until then!"

The guard had alarmed those in the dugout, who were the remaining men of the trench contingent off duty and sleeping, and the Americans had a lively time of it, but of that nothing was known until later. [Pg 193]

"Here at the bend line your men up!" Herbert said to Sergeant West, "and fire when I signal! Carey and I will watch them."

Finding nothing but stuffed figures, the German officer must have suspected a trap in the American trench and he signaled his men to return quickly. This they did, retreating across No Man's Land exactly as they had come. Hidden behind sand bags a little to one side of the wire breach, Herbert saw them come and he waited until twenty-five, or more, in a bunch had leaped into the trench.

At Herbert's signal a volley rang out at the trench bend, followed by groans and curses from the Germans. By this time others, thinking only of getting back into shelter, and not comprehending that their enemies were within the German trench, leaped in also and met much the same fate.

Those not yet in the trench began a retreat along the inner line of wire entanglement and over the sand bags away from the shooting and going into the trench at a point farther along. Here they must have encountered more of their fellows and at once formed a plan of reprisal. Anticipating this and also an attack from the other side over the more easily sloping rear of the trench, Herbert leaped back, gave the signal as agreed upon for the retreat with prisoners, and the men got busy. There were a dozen or more of the enemy unhurt in the trench. [Pg 194]

Meanwhile, the Germans in the dugout had put up a fight, and had thrown some hand grenades at the entrance among the Americans, with the result that some of the attacking party of a dozen must have been put out of the business of active participation. The others had begun to shoot, rather at random, but largely accounting for those who had attempted to resist; and then, as the Americans were about to round up their prisoners, some brave, foolhardy or fanatic German managed to set off a box of bombs or grenades, enough explosives to upset an average house.

But one man, Private Seeley, came out of that volcano able to tell what happened; two rushed out into the trench to fall on their faces, blinded and dying. Within was a holocaust of flame, smoke and poisonous gases presiding over the dead and dying, Americans and Germans alike. [Pg 195]

Sergeant West and Corporal Whitcomb reached the crumbling entrance and tried to gaze within.

"We must get our boys out!" began Herbert.

"Impossible!" protested West.

"Let's try! There may be some alive——"

"Not one! Let's get out of this!"

"You detail squads at the ends of the trench to fight to the last man and give me a rescuing party ____"

"No use, Corporal. You can see that. We shall be outnumbered and hemmed in soon. We've got to go!"

"Gardner and Watson are in there!"

"Dead as mackerels! They'll stay there forever. Come, now; we must go back!" With that Sergeant West blew the signal again, and the men, with no wounded, but rushing a number of prisoners, turned once more to retreat.

And then the thing happened which Herbert had expected, in part, and had planned to

circumvent: a rally of reprisal had been started. But not being sure of their ground, the Huns had meant, in turn, to cut off the Americans by another detour.

Carey had been left on guard outside of the wire. Paying little attention to what might be going on in the trench, he had followed the German survivors and he had seen and heard them return to No Man's Land and reach a place of ambush. This was along the line of some tall Lombardy poplar trees, that had probably once been a farm lane, and the spot was easily noted. Directly past it the Yanks must go to regain their trench.

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Carey's speedy progress toward his comrades was hardly marked by caution. His information was received by West and Whitcomb with as much elation as they could show in the face of the loss of their companions in the dugout. This was no time for sentiment; only for action.

"Follow me, men; double file as much as you can and pussy-foot it for keeps!" Herbert ordered, caring no more for technical terms than do many other officers when bent upon such urgent duty.

West ordered three men to conduct the prisoners straight across to the gun pit. Carey indicated the line of trees. Herbert led his men to a point fifty yards behind the trees; then he went to West.

"You order the charge, will you? You inspire the men more than I. I will give you the signal again, this time the soft whistle of a migrating bird."

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The Germans heard a low, plaintive call come from somewhere near; some might have suspected it; others hardly noticed it. But almost immediately afterward it was followed by such a yell that the enemy must have believed Satan and all his imps were on the job. Perhaps they were.

What followed was another mêlée; the Huns, being unable to swing their several machine-guns around, turned with rifles, bayonets and grenades to find their foes upon them, the revolvers of the Americans spitting fire quite as usual. The Huns were being mowed down most disastrously and in less than half a minute they were separated, beaten back, thrown into confusion, overpowered in numbers, disarmed and completely at the mercy of their superior and more dashing adversaries. Again the ready and effective revolvers had won.

"Back to our trench! March! Double quick!" shouted Sergeant West.

"A success, men; a success! I cannot give this too high praise in my report. It is worthy of being imitated. The men in the dugout were unfortunate; you couldn't help that. It is terribly hard to foresee anything, and no one would have been to blame if the whole scheme had failed. You only did your duty magnificently! And, Whitcomb, the credit for the idea belongs to you. We will have to term you our Lord High Executioner."

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"Please don't, sir!" the boy protested. "We may have to do this sort of thing in the business of fighting, but I wouldn't care to have it rubbed in."

The lieutenant laughed. "Well, at any rate, your scheme, though it practically wiped out your squad, and you are the only one left, must have accounted for at least ninety of the Huns, in dead and wounded, and you took fifty prisoners. Not bad out of perhaps two hundred men in that section of their trench!"

CHAPTER XVIII

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THE BIG PUSH

Susan Nipper was talking very loud, very fast, and she had need. The Germans had started something toward the American lines and gun pits—a cloud of something bluish, greenish, whitish and altogether very ominous. It was a gas attack.

On the other side of the hill Susan's sister, and still farther beyond another one of the same capable family, were also talking loud and fast and very much to the purpose, so that wherever their well-timed shells reached the gas-emitting guns and machinery the terrible clouds, after a moment, ceased to flow out and the atmosphere and the sloping ground became clearer and clearer.

Then, all that the American boys had to do was to put on their gas masks for several hours and burn anti-gas fumes, the Boches having been put to a lot of trouble and much expense for very little gain; one or two careless fellows were for a time overcome. After that there was a wholesome contempt for the gas on the part of the boys from over the ocean.

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But Susan kept right on speaking her mind. As the gas men retreated from the field in a terrible hurry they got all that was coming to them and many had come on that did not go off at all, unless upon litters.

Then, Susan paid her respects to aircraft of several kinds that had come over, not on scouting duty, but to drop their bombs here and there. There was a regular fleet of aircraft planes, or it might seem better to call a bunch of them a flotilla, or perhaps a flytilla. Anyway, they made an impressive sight, though not all coming near enough for Susan to reach.

Most of the enemy airplanes went on, despite the guns aimed at them from the earth, until, sighting a number of French machines coming out to do battle, they strategically fell back over the German lines, thus to gain an advantage if they or their enemies were forced to come to the ground.

The Americans had not before witnessed such a battle in the air as that. The birdmen turned, twisted, dived, mounted, maneuvered to gain advantage, French and German being much mixed up and now and then spitting red tongues of flame, singly or in rapid succession, at each other.

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Two machines were injured and came to earth, one German, that descended slowly; the other French, that tumbled over and over, straight down. Then two other German planes were forced to descend, and, finally, others coming from far behind the lines, the French retreated, being much outnumbered; they had to be outnumbered to retreat from the hated Boches. And the Boches did not follow them up.

This had all happened soon after daylight, the different incidents following each other rapidly. It was hardly eight o'clock when Susan Nipper let fly her last shell at the airplane. Before noon a messenger arrived at the pit, and Corporal Whitcomb was sent for.

"My boy, they must be aware of you back there at headquarters. You know you have been mentioned in dispatches a number of times as resourceful, altogether fearless, capable in leadership and——"

"I don't know how to thank you sufficiently—" Herbert began, but the lieutenant shut him off.

"Don't try it, then! Merely justice, fair dealing, appreciation, recognition of worth. We aim toward that in the army; military standards, you know. Well, as I was going to say, there is a general advance ordered, in conjunction with our Allies. We want to push the Huns out of their trenches and make them dig in farther on, somewhere. If the attempt is successful, the engineers will place Susan in a new pit somewhere ahead. But the main thing you want to know is what your duty will be."

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The lieutenant settled back with a half smile; half an expression of deep concern.

"They expect us fighting men in the army, and in the navy, too, I suppose, to have or to show not one whit of sentiment. We are expected to be no more subject to such things than the cog-wheels of a machine. But they can no more teach us that than they can teach us not to be hungry, or to want sleep. I have begun to think, of late, that they don't expect us to sleep, either.

"Well, my boy, if you would like to see an example of military brevity I will show it to you. Ahem! Corporal, report to-night to regimental headquarters, with your company; Captain Leighton, Advanced Barracks. By order of Colonel Walling.

"But hold on! Here's a little of the absence of military brevity. It appears that they so admire your record back there at headquarters that they have picked you out for almost—no doubt you think me pessimistic, or a calamity howler—for almost certain injury or death. My boy, I wanted you to stay here with me until we are relieved, which will be soon, but now they are going to take you away from me. An old man like me—I am getting on toward fifty—gets to have a lot of feeling in such matters. He likes to think of his military family, of his boys, and becomes more than usually attached to some of them. But let that pass.

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"They're going, I am told, to put you on special scouting duty before the drive. Of course, you'll go and glory in it, but, my boy—Well, good luck to you; good luck! If you get out all right, look me up when we are all relieved. Look us all up; the men will all wish it."

Herbert's leave taking of the pit platoon and the squads in the adjoining trench, that night, was one that was more fitting for a lot of school cronies than hardened soldiers bent upon the business of killing. But human nature is human all the world over and under pretty much all conditions.

That night, in the half light of a moon darkened by thick clouds, and in a cold, steady rain, Corporal Whitcomb journeyed with a patrol and on an empty ammunition lorry back again toward the rear, though not far. After bunking in the one empty cot in the barracks of a former National Guard battalion and messing with same, he reported to Captain Leighton, of his own company. He was received with a more than cordial handshake.

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"It's a pleasure to see you again, Whitcomb, especially after what we have heard concerning you. And you are the last man of your squad; the one survivor! Well, I learn that was not because you tried to save your skin. We have lost a good many men; sniping is one of the very hazardous things. The plan now is to form new squads as fast as we can get the men in from the trenches and they will be assigned to new points, mostly. You will be given eight other men, but we want you for special duty. The British have sent us a tank; one of these new-fangled forts on wheels, or belts, or whatever they call them, and it is to blaze a certain trail, to be followed by an armored motor car in which your squad will travel right into the enemy's lines. The car has trench bridges to lay down anywhere. Reaching an advanced spot, hereafter to be indicated and where a mine is to be laid, you will guard this from attack until a counter-drive; then fall back and set the mine off at a signal."

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"Are we to carry any other weapons but——"

"Only your rifles and pistols, and, of course, gas masks. No packs. There will be tools to dig you in and the car will carry all supplies. Perhaps the spot will not be attacked at all; perhaps it will be overwhelmed at once. In the latter case you are to use your own judgment about the setting off of the mine. You want to hold the enemy back until a large number attack you."

The general drive was ordered. The Allied armies were to attack almost simultaneously and over the frozen ground of winter, rain or shine, snow or blow. The firing of big guns and smaller guns from the Cambrai sector to the Aisne indicated to friend and foe alike what must be the plan. After some hours of this, when half of those in the German trenches had been made nearly crazy by the incessant hammering and many had been killed, the great push was on.

But the Germans were wise to the purpose. There had been other mighty drives launched against them, some to force them back a few miles and to win their first, second and even third line trenches; some to win nothing at all; some to be pushed back a little here and there, in turn, showing what a deadlock it is for armies of great nations to battle with those of others long and splendidly prepared.

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But this was a new thing in drives; it was fully simultaneous; it was launched in the early part of winter when the ground was frozen hard to a depth of several inches, to be broken up by the tramp of men over certain spots, the dragging of heavy ordnance, the armored cars, tanks and motor trucks, until in spots there was a sea of mud, holding back the advance to some extent, but still bravely overcome by pluck and persistence.

And there were several new schemes launched, largely the result of American strategy and suggestion.

Herbert knew all of the men in his new squad; they had all qualified as snipers at Camp Wheeler and otherwise he approved of them. A bunch of athletic chaps, skilled with rifles and revolvers and having already known the baptism of fire, were to be relied on in any emergency.

Not one of them ever forgot that motor-truck ride. They forged along over rough and rocky ground, through muddy and oozy ground, even through bits of swamp and, following the great, lumbering tank a hundred yards ahead, they plowed through once prosperous farmyards, along the street of a ruined and deserted village, seeing only a cat scamper into a lone cellar, through orchards, that had once blossomed and fruited, but with every tree now cut down by the dastardly Boches.

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Finally, still following the iron monster that was now spitting flame, they crossed the empty trenches of their Allies, putting into use the grooved bridge planking on which their wheels ran as over a track, and then came to the first line trenches of the enemy. Whereupon things began to get interesting.

On either side was orderly pandemonium; a concentrated Hades with motive, its machinery of death carried out with precision, method, exactness of detail, except where some equally methodical work of the enemy overthrew the plans for a time.

Long lines of infantry in open formation were running forward, pitching headlong to lie flat and fire, then up again and breaking into trenches, shooting, stabbing with bayonets, throwing grenades and after being half lost to sight in the depths of the earth for a time, emerging again beyond, perhaps fewer in numbers, but still sweeping on.

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Here and there were machine-gun squads struggling along to place their deadly weapons and then raking the retreating or the standing enemy with thousands of deadly missiles, sometimes themselves becoming the victims of a like annihilating effort or the bursting of a well-directed enemy shell.

Herbert rode with the driver; and before them and all around them the heavy sheet-iron sides and top of the armored truck protected them from small gun fire.

It was a risky thing to peep out of the gun holes in the armor to witness the battle, but this most of the boys did, the driver by the necessity of picking his way, and Herbert's eyes were at the four-inch aperture constantly.

Just behind him Private Joe Neely knelt at a side porthole, and next to him came young Pyle and Bill Neely, brother of the before-mentioned Joe. Cartright, Appenzeller, and Wood occupied the other side, back of the driver. Finley and Siebold lay on the straw in the center and hugged the water keg and the boxes of explosives and food to keep them from dancing around at too lively a rate on their comrades' feet.

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The going was as rough as anything that a motor truck had probably ever tackled, especially a weighty vehicle of this kind. It was well that the car had an engine of great power, an unbreakable transmission and a driver that knew his business.

On swept the great push, seemingly as irresistible, for a time, as the waves of the ocean, but presently to cease on the shore of human endurance; and the battle, so called, came to an end almost as quickly as it had begun five hours before.

Over the ground won the Americans and the Allies generally were digging in anew, or utilizing and refortifying the conquered German trenches. Once again were the great armies to face each other across a new No Man's Land the old area having been reclaimed.

But the active fight was not over, for then came the enemy's counter-thrusts here and there, which, as important as winning the battle proper, must be checked by every means possible. It was the plan of the American commander and his staff to teach the Boches a lesson in more ways than one.

Along the British sector the tanks, as formerly, had done wonderful work; the one tank with the American troops had also fulfilled its mission. It had ridden, roughshod, over every obstacle, crushing down barbed wire entanglements, pushing its way across trenches, its many guns

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dealing death to the foe on every side. In its wake and not far behind it the armored truck had followed faithfully the trail thus blazed by the tank.

At one spot, in line with a bend of the first line trench, a Hun machine-gun had let go first at the tank and then at the truck, doing no damage to the former. The boys in the latter hardly knew at first what to make of the direct hitting and glancing bullets that pattered on the iron sides, but they took quick notice of one that came through a port-hole and rebounded from the inside. It caused some commotion.

"Hey there, you chump! You don't need to dodge now; it's done for!" shouted Appenzeller, addressing young Pyle.

"Sho! Ye might think it was a hoop snake come in here 'stead o' nothin' but a old piece o' lead," remarked Cartright, and there was a general laugh.

"What's the matter with Joe? Here, man, do you feel sick? Say, Corporal, reckon he's got it!" called Finley, with one hand trying to hold Neely from falling backward, the fellow also trying to hold himself up.

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Herbert swung round; Bill Neely was beside his brother and talking to him:

"Say, Joe, are you hurt? How, Joe? When? Just now? Blast them devils! Mebbe you ain't bad, Joe; you only think so. Lots do."

"Stop the car, driver! Here's where we leave the track of the tank, anyway, I take it," ordered Herbert, getting down to business. "Where are you hurt, Neely?"

For answer the poor fellow placed his hand on his back; then suddenly fell limp in his brother's arms. Bill began to mumble over him.

"He isn't dead, Bill; he's just fainted," said Herbert. "We must get him back, Joe, somehow, to a hospital. But there are no ambulances following us this closely. And we must go on, whatever happens; those are our orders."

"Corporal, let me take him back!" Bill Neely made the request pleadingly. "I'll get him there somehow and then I'll come back and find you. I'll find you. I've got to put some lead into them Huns to get square for Joe, if he dies! Will you, Corporal?"

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"Go ahead, then, Bill. Slide that bolt and push that door open, Wood, and help get Joe down. Poor fellow! I hope he isn't badly hurt. Go straight for that bunch of pines, Bill, and you'll be pretty safe. If you come back bear off to the right a little from here and you'll find us pretty soon. So long, old man!"

Bill Neely with his brother humped over his shoulder, started back, as directed; the great armored car went on. Herbert told Wood to peep out back and watch Bill's progress, if he could, and the car progressed, as indicated by his orders. He had reached what he believed was a proper place, hardly two hundred yards from where they had stopped; he was ordering all out, the supplies unloaded and the driver to return, when Wood called to him:

"They're both gone! Wiped out! Shell! It hit right at Bill Neely's feet! I couldn't see anything but legs and arms and things."

"Killed?"

"Done for."

"Poor chaps! The only two boys in the family, too. Their poor old mother'll miss them."

"Know them, Pyle?"

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"Sure; since we were kids. Just across the street."

"Well, men; it's terrible, as we all know, but we've got to hustle if we don't all want to suffer the same fate. Get out those trench tools, Appenzeller, and give me a pick! We've got to dig in quick!"

CHAPTER XIX

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LIEUTENANT WHITCOMB

The great push had served a big purpose; it was to be followed by others quickly. In this manner it was hoped to strike the most effective blows at the enemy, giving it little time to recover. It could not be expected, however, that the Germans would take the matter at all calmly; they must be met with two blows to their one.

The place that Herbert had chosen was a small natural depression of a few feet; a pile of stones and hastily filled sand bags helped this much until a trench, really a nearly square hole, had been dug. Then this was roofed over with some half-charred planks and boards brought from a nearby pig-sty which the Huns had tried to burn, but could not.

Herbert and Cartright succeeded in throwing some earth on the roof without being hit by shells and other gun fire that had begun to come their way and they were delighted to notice that an anti-aircraft gun, undoubtedly well guarded, had been installed not a fourth of a mile back of them, insuring much safety from that quarter, at least.

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When night fell half the squad went on guard outside; the others worked like beavers, and

without food until the task was done, to successfully camouflage the shelter, using grass and weeds pulled up by the roots from the half frozen ground and placed upright on the roof. The entrance down earth steps was made through the dead-leaved branches of a large uprooted bush. Meanwhile, with Cartright as his most skilled assistant, Herbert was placing the fifty pounds of explosives in a large niche cut in the side of the pit and guarded by stakes, from which spot, under cover of darkness, a wire was laid for fully four hundred yards and the battery that was to set the charge off was buried in the ground and the spot marked.

The Germans did not seem at first to pay much attention to the pit until the final act of camouflage. A messenger, at night, sneaked to the pit and informed Corporal Whitcomb that it was deemed advisable to take this step now, as from airplane observations the previous day the Huns were getting ready to make a heavy counter-attack.

At once, therefore, a flexible steel flag-staff was firmly planted beside the pit and from it, with the first streaks of the coming day, the enemy viewed a division staff headquarters flag and a signal station flag flying in the sharp breeze. Then the shells flew, but the flags also kept right on flying. The steel staff was struck and shaken again and again, but its tough flexibility saved it; the flags showed many a hole, but still they fluttered proudly and the Boches went mad. [Pg 216]

Snipers tried to down the banners and incidentally pick off a few of the supposed officers and observers that must grace such a spot, but the squad of American experts with the rifle was more than ready for them and they quit that game both through the day and the night following. Perhaps because of this or the night-long bright moonlight, no raid was attempted; perhaps it was because a bigger move was in process of formation.

And on the next day the enemy launched a mighty counter-thrust to regain lost ground.

A barrage fire was laid down and it continued for a full hour. Private Wood took it upon himself to make some observations as to how the flags and staff were bearing this and he got too far above the shelter with his head. There are those who will do, against all sane judgment, most foolish, unnecessary things, and Wood was one such. [Pg 217]

Sad, indeed, was every member of the squad as all stood about with uncovered heads and placed poor, uncoffined Henry Wood into a hastily dug grave in the bottom of the pit, Finley, a minister's son, stumbling, half bashfully, over a short prayer.

Suddenly the barrage fire was lifted and over a wide front the Huns were coming.

"Get out, fellows, and back, or they'll catch us! We can outrun the best of them, but do it! Stick together, if possible, but all report later to Captain Leighton! Cartright and I are going to wait for the Huns and set off the mine."

The men all filed out through the birch branches and retreated straight back toward a certain spot, each waving a small American flag, as per agreement with the men in that section of the trench. But Appenzeller and Finley protested. The former uttered nothing less than a command.

"Corporal, let's stand and soak it to 'em for a little! We can reach 'em from this rise nicely as they come over the hill, and I'm good for about a dozen. Finley is, too. We all are!"

Of course, in its sporting sense, this sort of thing appealed to Herbert and, moreover, he must have regarded it as a duty. A little good shooting would undoubtedly account for a good many of the Boches. But he and Cartright could not join in, as they had a more important duty to perform. But the others might do as they pleased. [Pg 218]

"You fellows that want to, try it on them," he said. "We will have to leave you. But don't get caught or headed off! Go to it!"

Herbert and Cartright ran to the wire end. The corporal stood with the battery in his hand, watching through his field glasses the doings of the enemy. The Huns could not pass what they believed was a headquarters and signal station without, at least, an investigation. They swarmed toward the flag and pit from their advancing lines, no doubt believing they were to receive a warm reception and intent upon taking important prisoners.

The young American corporal was conscious of a greater degree of excitement than he had ever experienced before and with it there was uppermost that gentle humanity that makes a better man, even of a soldier.

"They're rushing up, Cartright! And they're a little puzzled, perhaps. They think they're going to get the very devil presently and they're preparing for a rush. It will be awful, old man! Say, how do you feel about it?" [Pg 219]

"I'd like to blow the whole bunch up so high that they'd stick fast up there; clean beyond our attraction of gravitation! And I'd like to see the Kaiser and old Hindenburg in the bunch!" growled Cartright.

"Well, say, then, you take this battery and spring it! I guess I'm chicken-hearted. It seems like murder, but of course it's war."

"You bet I'll spring it! Give the word; that's all! Say, what's going on over yonder? For Heaven's sake, Corp; look there!" Cartright almost shrieked the last word.

And Herbert, for a moment forgetting his first duty, gazed where the other's hand indicated.

The four had been putting in their best licks, as it were. No doubt but that they had reduced the number of approaching Germans, four hundred yards, nearly a quarter of a mile distant, and their guns must have been hot. But sweeping forward on the other side of a rise of ground, a

place also hidden somewhat by hedges and battle-ruined buildings, a large body of the enemy came suddenly almost between the four and any chance they had to retreat in that direction. [Pg 220]

That also offered the only chance the boys had to withdraw in safety, for almost at the same instant a rapid-fire gun had discovered them; and to try to get away over the clear ground directly behind them would have proved certain death. And so, stooping and looking back, they made straight for the hedge and saw the unintended trap too late. In a moment Hun soldiers, detached at a command and running forward on either side, had surrounded them. There was nothing to do but surrender.

With a groan Herbert turned back to the important business in hand. There were now no scruples in his heart as to performing any acts of war. The whole business is merely one of retaliation, anyway, from first to last.

"There they are, a whole company or more, right on the spot! And some are down in the pit! Spring it, old man; push it! Ah! It worked! Poor devils! They could not have expected that. Come, we've got to beat it!"

The retreat of the two was largely made under the cover of a little natural valley, somewhat thicketed. In only one place were they exposed: while crossing a narrow bit of open field. They were hardly half way across it, Cartright, also an athlete, running just behind Herbert, when the corporal heard again that well-known sound that a bullet makes in striking a yielding substance, in tearing through flesh. A little moan followed it. [Pg 221]

Herbert stopped and turned. "Hit, old man? Where?"

"Go on, Corp! Get out of this, or they'll get you, too!"

"And leave you? Not for all the Boches. Arms all right; are they? Get 'em around my neck and hold on! Honk, honk!"

It was a long, hard struggle. The wounded man, the last private of Herbert's second squad, was a heavy fellow. Herb was still unhurt, and he managed, though sometimes seeing black, to get into cover again, and there he could go more slowly, though he dared not stop. It seemed like hours, perhaps, instead of minutes, and the torture of struggling on and on with a weight greater than his own upon his back appeared a thousand times worse than anything of endurance that he had ever known on gridiron or long distance runs. Still he kept right on going, with ever the thought of the avenging Huns behind. [Pg 222]

And at last he knew not how far he had progressed and had begun almost to lose interest in the matter, having the mad desire to get on and on, fighting another mad desire to rest and ease his straining muscles, when in his ears welcome sounds were heard.

"Drop him, fellow! You've done enough. We'll take him. Hey, Johnny, I guess we'll have to carry both of 'em!"

Not an hour later Herbert saluted Captain Leighton in the trench. The rapid firing of guns, big and little, was everywhere; the counter-attack of the Boches had successfully been repulsed and the new drive was scheduled to take place, following another and very terrible barrage. The captain grasped the boy's hand.

"Splendid work, Whitcomb! Put out of business about two hundred of them; let her go just at the right time. Cartright has given me an account of it. And your bringing him in was great! No; he isn't badly wounded. Gone back; left grateful remembrances for you. But that's not the matter in hand—feel all right now? Good! Well, then, I have been empowered to brevet a lieutenant for this platoon; Loring was killed yesterday. I have chosen you and you ought to know why; reasons are too numerous to mention. Your commission will arrive soon. Probably you'll be the youngest commissioned officer in the army. Well, come with me." [Pg 223]

They walked down the trench, stopping here and there where the officers of squads waited with their men for the word to "go over the top and at 'em!" To each group the captain's words were pretty much the same:

"Men, you all know Whitcomb and you've all heard of his work. He's your commanding officer now, lieutenant of this platoon. The order to advance now will come in about ten minutes, I think."

A low cheer, intense with feeling, with expectation, with eagerness, greeted these words; there were mingled expressions of approval of their new leader and the idea of again going forward against the Germans.

Lieutenant Whitcomb never could remember much about the new push. He went with his men over the top; they charged in open formation again across the country over which he had come back with poor Cartright. [Pg 224]

They cut and tore aside wire entanglements; they faced and overcame machine-gun fire; they encountered long bursts of liquid flame and with rifle and revolver fire at short range finished the devils who dealt it. They leaped over piles of sand bags and into trenches, using only their pistols against a brave attempt to meet them with bayonets, and when all of the Huns in the first line had been accounted for or made prisoners the Americans went up and on again, always forward.

And then the gas. It came at them like a small typhoon of white and blue smoke, showing again

the iridescent colors, the gray-black center of its spreading force, and this time there was no Susan Nipper to disperse the poisonous fumes with her fiery tongue lashes sent into their midst.

Herbert knew the awful danger that confronted them and he feared that his men, with only the lust of battle in their eyes, hardly comprehended it. He turned and dashed down the line.

"Your masks, men! Every man get on his gas mask! Keep your wits about you! Get on those masks in a hurry, but get them on right! You're down and out, if you don't!"

Bent on saving his men, bent on disproving Captain Leighton's half-jesting comment as to his luck with a command, he forgot for the moment his own safety, his own mask, and the fumes were upon them.

[Pg 225]

Captain Leighton rose with difficulty from the bountifully spread table and looking about him at the kindly faces, seeing the broad, gentle humor of his host who had asked a few words from him, he said:

"You good people here at home, though you read and hear of these things and try to imagine them, can really have no adequate conception of them; of the hardships, the discomforts, the cold and the lack of sufficient rest amidst constant dangers and the almost continuous hammering of guns. And then, when in battle—well, no poor words of mine can picture it.

"You, Mr. Flynn, and you, Madam, the proud mother of this boy"—the captain stood with his hand across Roy's shoulder—"would feel a thousand times more proud if you could fully know what he went through when he lost his limb. And with a spirit like his, this loss cannot dim for one moment the usefulness of the lad in the world's activities. He will be doing his duty wherever he sets his—foot, as he did with both feet in and out of the trenches. I saw this even more plainly when we three came over, invalided home, in the good ship *Ingomar*.

[Pg 226]

"And now, Mr. and Mrs. Flynn, I want to call on my young friend here on my other side, as you know, your son's dearest friend, to say a few words to these charming guests who are so appreciative. Though his eyes are slightly and permanently impaired as a result of a gas attack, though he cannot again enter the ranks, the country thereby being the loser, his energies also are not diminished. Most of you know him—some of you well—Lieutenant Whitcomb."

Herbert rose slowly, awkwardly, protestingly, his face, behind the big, round, new spectacles, very red.

"I always have to thank Captain Leighton, late the captain of our company, for the kindness of his words concerning me. I have tried many times to express this to him, but talking is out of my line, as you can see. What we did over there was just all in the game; that's all. We bucked into the fortunes of war; it's a sort of accident, a sort of on-purpose accident, all the way through. It's duty first and it's all the time a concentrated Hades.

[Pg 227]

"But why always look at the dark side of this? It's going to be a better world after this war; a better understanding between nations. Everyone agrees to that. America will be the model upon which the nations will run their governments, and no people will want to fight, except for a just cause. If everybody feels like that, as the United States feels about it, why, then, nobody can make an unjust cause and wars will be over and done away with. Thank you; thanks!

"I want to say one thing more, and this is entirely personal. It concerns our host and hostess and their son, my chum. I want to thank them all, publicly, for something they have done for me. Oh, yes, Roy, old man, I will say it. While I was away over there and getting these eyes bunged up, and all that, Mr. Flynn here took it upon himself to inquire into my affairs with my guardian. It seems that instead of being a beggar, I am not quite that, and now, Mr. Flynn is my guardian. And so Roy and I, next term, go back again to dear old Brighton and take up our studies where we left off. That's the best news I can tell you about ourselves, if it interests you at all, and I know how Uncle and Auntie Flynn—that's what I call them now—feel about it. Roy can tell you far better than I could ever express it just how he and I feel about it."

[Pg 228]

Herbert sat down, still red of face, and Roy was up instantly, leaning on his crutch, but his old self seen in his round, freckled face.

"Whurrah! as me old granddad used to say over in Ireland. Eh, dad? This boy here can't talk as well as he can shoot and scrap, and so you can see what kind of a soldier he was. There was no danger he feared; no duty he shunned; no gentleness he——"

"Oh, blarney!" escaped from Herbert.

"Bedad, you see it! Modesty is his only sister and if you say 'hurrah for you!' to him he wants to fight. But though I never would have gone over and lost this leg if it hadn't been for him, yet I'd do it again, and if I'm a bit sorry for it, I'm glad of it. So there you have it and it's the way we soldiers all feel!"

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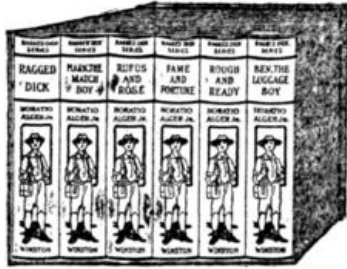
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Transcriber's Notes:

Images may be clicked to view larger versions.

Retained inconsistent hyphenation when no clear majority was found (e.g. tonight vs. to-night).

Some questionable spelling (e.g. "musn't") retained in dialogue on the assumption that it is intentional.

Page 21, changed "than" to "then" in "and then a decided cheer."

Page 53, changed "most woman are fine" to "most women are fine."

Page 62, changed "pasued" to "paused."

Page 74, added missing close quote after "cinch."

Page 77, changed "prefectly" to "perfectly."

Page 127, added missing close quote to end of page.

Page 128, changed "tomorrow" to "to-morrow" for consistency.

Page 152, removed stray quote after "attempting——"

Page 171, added missing space to second instance of "Wonderful shooting!"

Page 226, changed "diminshed" to "diminished."

Harry Castlemon's Books for Boys ad, capitalized "the" in "Houseboat Boys, The."

Winston's Popular Fiction ad (second page), changed "Embarrasing" to "Embarrassing" and added missing close quote after "ink can do."

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