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Training for the Big Fight in France, by Josephine Chase**

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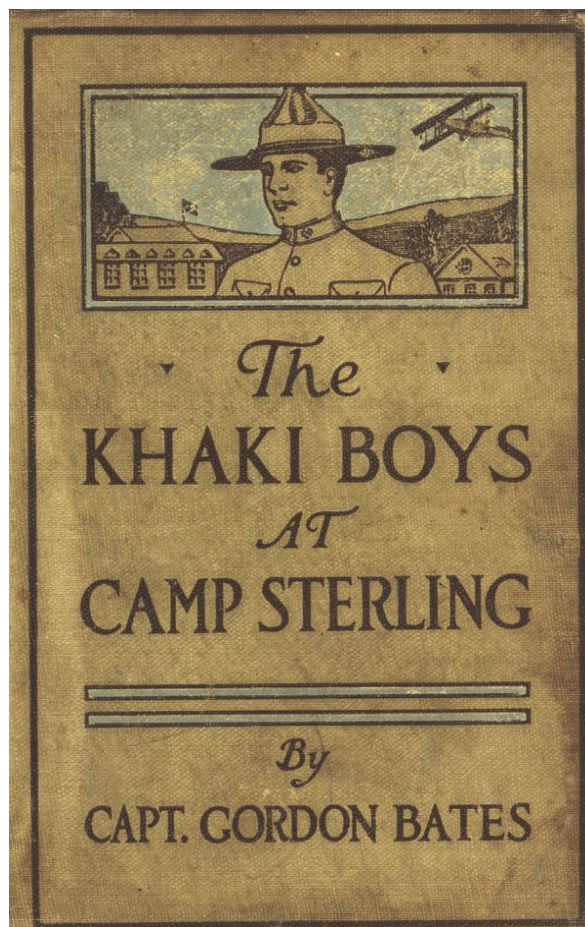
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TRAINING FOR THE BIG FIGHT IN FRANCE ***

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**"SEE HERE, YOU," RAPPED OUT THE
DISGUSTED "NON-COM."**

**THE KHAKI BOYS
AT
CAMP STERLING**

OR
Training for the Big Fight in France

By
CAPT. GORDON BATES
Author of "The Khaki Boys on the Way,"
"The Khaki Boys at the Front," etc.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY

THE KHAKI BOYS SERIES

By CAPT. GORDON BATES

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THE KHAKI BOYS AT CAMP
STERLING

or Training for the Big Fight in France

THE KHAKI BOYS ON THE WAY
or Doing Their Bit on Sea and Land

THE KHAKI BOYS AT THE FRONT
or Shoulder to Shoulder in the Trenches

Other Volumes in Preparation

CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY, New York

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THE KHAKI BOYS AT CAMP STERLING

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[1]

CHAPTER I THE GLORY ROAD TO FRANCE

"You, over there in the crowd, and *you* and *you*, why don't you get busy and help Uncle Sam? What are you hanging back for? Now's your chance to show that you're a real American, and ready to fight for your country. What's the use of waiting for the draft to get you? You're just wasting time! The sooner you enlist, the sooner you'll be ready to do your bit in France. It's up to good old Uncle Sam to jump into the big war and win it. But he can't do it alone. It needs a lot of brave, husky fellows to lick the Boches off the map. Are you going to be one of 'em? Every little bit helps, you know!

"Now we're going to sing you one more song. While we're singing it, get on the job and think hard. We want to take a bunch of you back with us to the recruiting station. All right, boys. Give 'em 'The Glory Road to France!'"

[2]

Standing in the middle of a big recruiting wagon, lavishly decorated in red, white and blue, the orator, a good-looking young soldier of perhaps twenty years, bawled out, "Let 'er go!"

From one end of the wagon rose the strains of a lively air, enthusiastically hammered out on a small, portable piano by another khaki-clad youngster, seated on a stool before it. Gathered about him, half a dozen clean-cut soldier boys immediately took it up. The sheer catchiness of the melody, tunefully shouted out by the singers, had its effect on the crowd. The sturdy quality of the words, too, brought a flash of newly aroused patriotism to more than one pair of eyes belonging to the throng of persons closely packed about the big wagon. It appeared to deepen

with the lustily given chorus:

“Take the Glory Road for France,
Hike along to join the fray,
With the Sammies take a chance
’Neath the Stars and Stripes to-day.
At the front brave men are falling,
Now’s your time to do and dare.
Don’t you hear your Uncle calling,
’Boys, I need you “Over There!””

At the extreme edge of the crowd, a gaily painted roadster had come to a full stop, its progress temporarily checked by the mass of persons about the wagon. It was a four-cylinder car, built low, with one gasoline tank behind the seat and still another behind it, a small reserve. The body of the roadster, painted a bright green, stood out sharply by reason of the red wire wheels. The doorless entrance at one side formed a neat “U,” while the extra tires, also mounted on red wire wheels, strapped on at the rear, gave it a last additional touch. Plainly it was built for speed and had a mischievous, runaway air about it that accorded curiously with its driver, a gray-eyed, sunny-haired young man of perhaps eighteen, whose clean-cut features bore an expression of reckless good humor that immediately stamped him as one of those wide-awake, restless lads in whom the love of mischief is ingrained. [3]

Forced to slow down and halt his car by the ever-waving arm of a traffic policeman, he now leaned forward over the wheel, his attention fixed on the singers. He had come upon the scene at the moment when the youthful orator had commenced his harangue. Further, he had been one of those whom the latter had addressed as “you.” From a good-humored grin, his boyish mouth had gradually grown grave as he listened. First sight of the recruiting wagon had recalled to Jimmy Blaise a matter which had been troubling him ever since the United States had declared war against Germany. The only son of an intensely patriotic father and mother, despite his love of fun Jimmy had done some serious thinking about the big war. [4]

At the last ringing line of appeal, “Boys, I need you ‘Over There,’” involuntarily Jimmy spoke his mind aloud. “I guess that’s right,” he agreed, with a vigorous wag of his head.

A boy standing close to the roadster caught the remark and glanced levelly at the speaker. In his dark blue eyes there was an answering flash which the other lad caught and read aright. For an instant the two stared at each other in silence.

“How about it?” demanded Jimmy genially.

“I guess Uncle Sam needs us all right enough,” the blue-eyed boy replied, his sober face lighting into a singularly sunny smile. “I’ve thought a lot about it. I’d like to go.”

“Put her there!” The youth in the car leaned down and shot out a friendly hand. “I’ve been thinking about it myself. I can go to-morrow, that is, if I get accepted. I asked my folks the other night what they’d do if I enlisted. I’m not twenty-one, you see. Quite a long way from it. Won’t be nineteen until next November.”

“What did they say?” questioned the other eagerly.

“They both said it was up to me. They’re not slackers. I can just tell you that. Of course, my mother looked kind of sad for a minute; then she braced up and said she’d be proud to have a soldier son. My father said if he was young enough he’d enlist himself. That shows pretty plainly what sort of stuff they’re made of.” [5]

“I should say so,” emphasized the blue-eyed boy. “I was nineteen last month. My father and mother are both dead. I take care of myself. So you see there isn’t anyone to care—”

“Gee whiz, that’s tough,” sympathized Jimmy. “Say, I like you. You’re all right. What do you say? Let’s enlist. Yes? No ride in that recruiting wagon for me, though. Look! They’ve got four fellows already! That Glory Road song waked ’em up, I guess. Tell you what you do. Jump into my roadster and we’ll get away from here and be at the station ahead of those fellows. This car can certainly go some. I call it ‘Old Speedy.’ If we were out in the country on a good smooth road I’d give you a fast ride, all right. Course I have to go easy in the city. But climb in and let’s beat it. Those Sammies in the wagon are getting ready to move on. What’s the matter? You’re not going to back out, are you?” Quick to note a trace of hesitation in his new acquaintance’s manner, the gray-eyed boy’s straight brows drew together in a disappointed frown.

“Back out? Well, I *guess* not.” With this the other boy hopped nimbly up to a seat beside the driver. “It’s fine of you to do this,” he burst forth impulsively. “Why, you don’t even know my name or—” [6]

“Oh, can it,” grinned Jimmy. “I took a good look at you. That’s enough. I always know when I first see a fellow whether I’m going to like him or not. I don’t change my mind about him, either. Now I’m going to back out of here in a hurry. I’ll turn around up the street, then cut down a side street and hit it up for the recruiting station.”

With this Jimmy busied himself with his car and soon had it backed far enough to make the turn. As it glided into the side street, his companion glanced over one shoulder at the crowd they had left behind. “It looks as if they were going to start,” he commented.

“Let ’em start. We’ll beat ’em to it,” predicted Jimmy. “I’ll run as fast as I dare. Say,” he continued, as they spun along over the smooth pavement, “as long as we enlist together, we’ll

probably be sent to the same training camp. Then we'll be pals. How's that? My name's James Sumner Blaise. My folks call me Jimmy and the fellows call me Jimmy Blazes."

His companion smiled at this funny nickname. He was already under the spell of Jimmy's careless, happy-go-lucky manner.

"I'd like to be pals," came his hearty response. "My name's Roger Barlow. I've been working in a munitions plant ever since the war in Europe began. I used to be in the shipping room of a big hardware place. I didn't make very good wages, so I left it for munitions. This is the first Saturday afternoon I've had off for three months. I've earned quite a lot of money and I've got almost a hundred dollars saved up," he added confidentially. [7]

"I haven't a hundred cents," confessed Jimmy cheerfully. "My father gives me an allowance on the first of every month. I'm always broke before the tenth. I just came home from Langley—that's a prep school—in June. I'd be in Harvard next fall if this hadn't happened. Maybe I will be anyhow. Hope not. I'd hate to be turned down. I don't believe I will be, though. I'm pretty husky. I've never taken a drink of anything stronger than ginger ale, and I hardly ever smoke. I've never been sick, either, since I had the measles. That was long ago. I played quarterback on the football team at Langley, and I hold the record there for the hundred-yard dash."

"My, you've done a lot of things, haven't you?" admired Roger. "I've always wanted to play football, but never had a chance to learn how. I'm good and strong, though. Hard work's made me so."

"When we get to camp, maybe we'll meet some nice fellows that want to organize a football team. Then you'll get a chance to play. It's a great old game, all right." [8]

"That would be fine," glowed Roger.

The two lads whom Chance had so curiously thrown together were beginning already to plan as if their enlistment were an assured fact. Judging from outward appearances, Uncle Sam would be only too glad to number them among the khaki-clad host of young patriots, so soon to receive in a foreign land their baptism of fire and steel. Of almost the same height, about five feet ten inches, their clear eyes, healthfully tinted cheeks and straight, spare boyish figures showed the admirable result of clean living.

"Here we are." Jimmy had brought his roadster to a full stop before a tall, rather dingy brick building. The huge plate-glass front of the ground floor was filled with large placards of soldiers, resplendent in the becoming uniform of the United States Army. Straight across the top of it a white banner stretched from one side to the other. It bore in large black letters the pertinent legend, "Do Your Bit for Your Country: Enlist NOW!"

"That's us." Jimmy leaped from his car and nodded jovially at the sign. Roger landed on the sidewalk only a second behind him. "Forward march and mind your step, Roger, old pal! We're going to do our bit, all right, if Uncle Sam'll take us."

Side by side, their boyish faces illumined by the light of patriotism, the two swung up the short flight of steps, splendid examples of sturdy, buoyant young American manhood. Yes, there was little doubt that Uncle Sam would take them. [9]

CHAPTER II

OFF TO CAMP STERLING

 [10]

One o'clock of a sunshiny September afternoon saw a company of young men marching by twos down a long wooden platform, on each side of which rose waiting trains. Though still in civilian clothing, their careers as soldiers had fairly begun. Through the iron gates of the station streamed after them another procession of a somewhat different order. Though it numbered a few men, it consisted chiefly of anxious-faced women both young and elderly, who had come out that afternoon to wish the newly enlisted soldiers Godspeed before their start for Camp Sterling.

Well toward the end of the little double line were Jimmy Blaise and Roger Barlow. A little over a week had passed since that eventful Saturday afternoon when the two boys had driven to the recruiting station in Jimmy's car. Uncle Sam had indeed been willing to number them among his daily growing host of young patriots. They had passed through the ordeal of a rigid examination with flying colors. Having gone thus far in the process of enlistment, they had since been impatiently waiting for the summons that would call them to a training camp, there to undergo a final test, take the oath of allegiance and begin soldiering in earnest. Both were distinctly elated at having thus easily passed the first test. With one accord they had decided on the infantry as the most desirable branch of the service for them. Infantry promised plenty of excitement. [11]

Having already obtained the sanction of his parents to enlist, it had but remained to light-hearted Jimmy to go home and inform them that the great deed was done. With Roger there had been no one to consult, other than notifying the employment office of the munitions plant of his new move. This he proposed to do on the following Monday morning. Rather reluctantly he had given in to his friend's persuasions that he should accompany Jimmy to his home that Saturday afternoon and meet the latter's parents. The Blaises lived in one of the most beautiful suburbs of the great city, and the very sight of the stately stone house which the lucky Jimmy called home, set well back on a wide, tree-dotted lawn, had filled Roger with secret dismay. As the roadster had rolled up the broad drive that wound its way through the grounds to the garage, situated well behind the house, he had been stirred with a strong desire to jump out of it and hurry away. [12]

He wondered whether Jimmy's folks would approve of him.

Later, when he had met the Blaises and found them delightfully friendly and hospitable, he had been glad that he had not yielded to his first panicky impulse to flee. Thoroughly accustomed to their son's whirlwind tactics, Mr. and Mrs. Blaise had not only accepted Jimmy's new friend at his face value, but had also privately approved Roger's quiet, resolute manner and direct, courteous speech.

During the brief time that had elapsed between the enlistment of the two lads until the morning of farewell, he had been a frequent guest of easy-going Jimmy. The prophesy of friendship that the latter had made on the afternoon of their first meeting had become an actual fact.

Jimmy not only grew daily fonder of Roger on account of his sturdy manliness. He also respected the other boy for what he knew. Considering the fact that Roger had left high school to go to work at the close of his second year there, what he had gained by both work and study at night amounted to a good deal. On the other hand, Roger had never before encountered a boy quite so likable as Jimmy. Opposites by nature, each hailed the other's good qualities with boyish enthusiasm. The very sincerity of their liking for each other was to carry them triumphantly through many strenuous days that lay ahead of them. [13]

Now bound for Camp Sterling together, they were two very excited and almost happy boys, as in company with fifty other youths they marched down the platform that afternoon, there to say their last words of farewell to Mrs. and Mr. Blaise before boarding the fateful train. Of the two, Jimmy was scarcely more concerned at saying good-bye to his parents than was Roger at taking leave of these kind friends. For a brief season he had once again known something of the joy of a real home. It would be very hard to say farewell to Jimmy's parents, he thought. They had taken the kindest interest in him. Already Mrs. Blaise had more than once smilingly called him her foster-son. Looking gratefully back to the Saturday afternoon of his first meeting with Jimmy, he had wondered how it had all come about.

"There's Mother, over yonder, and Father, too," muttered Jimmy in Roger's ear. Paused beside the train that was to bear them away, the company of prospective Khaki Boys had begun seeking their own among the throng of civilians for a last word. "I almost wish they hadn't come. It hurts to say good-bye. Anyway, we'll see them again before long, if we behave," he added with a faint grin. "No behavee, no furloughs."

With this he made his way to the waiting couple, who had already spied him, Roger at his heels. Since his enlistment in the Regular Army this was the one shadow that had clouded Jimmy's enthusiasm in his new patriotic venture. He had resolutely shoved into the background all thought of saying good-bye. Now that the dread moment had come, he looked exceedingly solemn. [14]

"Good-bye, Roger." Mrs. Blaise extended her hand. Obeying a motherly impulse she bent forward and kissed his cheek. "Be a good soldier boy. I know you'll be a good friend to Jimmy." Her blue eyes wandered affectionately to her son, who was gravely shaking hands with his father, his merry features grown momentarily sad.

"Don't you worry about me, Mother." Jimmy's voice sounded a trifle husky. "I can take care of myself and Roger, too."

Not ashamed to show his affection for his mother in public, Jimmy wrapped his strong young arms about her in a loving hug. "I'm going to be a regular angel Sammy," he whispered. "I'm going to make you proud of me. Maybe by the time I come home for Thanksgiving I'll be a general or something. I guess it'll be 'or something,'" he added with a half-hearted attempt at humor. "If I can get a pass to come and see you before then, you know I'll do it. It's only a few hours' ride in the train from here to Camp Sterling. So cheer up, best Mother. I'll be back driving Old Speedy around town again before you know it." [15]

For a little the two boys lingered there, then with the sound of fond, final farewells in their ears they climbed the steps of the rear car and were lost for an instant to view. Almost immediately a window on the side next the platform went up and two heads emerged therefrom. Far down the track the engine was already sending forth premonitory warnings. They were followed by the creaking jar of ponderous iron wheels about to be set to their work of separating the Khaki Boys from home.

By this time every window casing of the car framed boyish faces, peering eagerly out for a last exchange of looks and words with the home folks. As the train began to show signs of moving, a pretty girl, laden with a bouquet of long-stemmed red roses, now flung it straight toward a rear window of the car from which a soldier boy leaned far out, his eyes fixed upon her. His right arm shot out in a wild attempt to catch it. It fell short of his extended fingers by a bare inch or so and dropped. Quick as lightning a uniformed figure on the lowest step of the train's rear platform sprang for it, fairly snatching it up as it was about to roll under the slowly revolving iron wheels. Pausing only to raise his cap to the thrower, the officer who had retrieved the flowers from destruction swung aboard the train and disappeared into the car. The next second the soldier for whom the bouquet had been intended was triumphantly waving it out the window. [16]

The hearty cheering which had begun with the first shudder of the train increased to wild applause of the little act of gallantry. Inside the car the young volunteers were also voicing noisy appreciation. It was merely an incident, and yet it served to impress on those left behind the belief that the welfare of their boys was in good hands.

As the train continued to move slowly out of the long shed the cheering was kept up. This time it was for the Khaki Boys themselves. It met with an equally fervent response on their part, accompanied by a frantic waving of hands, hats and handkerchiefs. The Khaki Boys were started at last on the first stretch of the Glory Road.

[17]

CHAPTER III

THE BEGINNING OF COMRADESHIP

"Did you see the way that officer grabbed those roses from under the wheels?" demanded Jimmy excitedly, as he and Roger settled back in their seats. The train had now left the shed behind and was steadily gathering momentum. "Pretty clever in him, wasn't it?"

Roger nodded. "It showed that he was interested in us even if we are just rookies. I wonder how long it will take us to look as well in our uniforms as he does in his? What did you do with your Infantry Manual? We ought to be studying up a little while we're on the way."

Roger referred to the little blue books he and Jimmy had purchased at a department store soon after their enlistment. As he spoke he reached into a pocket of his coat and drew his own forth.

"Mine's kicking around in my suitcase somewhere," grinned Jimmy rather sheepishly. "I've been intending to study it, but I've had so many other things to do. Put it back. Don't go to studying now. I want to talk to you. Time enough for us to get busy when we hit Camp Sterling. Maybe I didn't hate to leave Old Speedy behind, though. Next to the folks comes Speedy and after that Buster, my brindle bull pup. That dog certainly knew I was going away for keeps when I said good-bye to him. But he won't be neglected. Buster has lots of friends. Everybody on our street knows him. Next to me he likes Mother. She'll take good care of him. But poor Old Speedy'll have a lonesome time shut up in the garage. It's such a giddy-looking machine you couldn't hire the folks to ride half a block in it. But you can't have everything, so what's the use of worrying?"

[18]

His active mind leaping from the subject of his car back to the officer whose recent kindly act he had so sturdily commended, he continued irrelevantly: "Say, an officer that would do a thing like that ought to be good to his men. Don't you think so? I've heard a lot of stuff about officers being regular cranks and jumping all over their men just for spite. Do you suppose it's true?"

"No, I don't," Roger made emphatic return. "I don't believe that part of it is much different in the Army from what it is in a shop or factory or an office. Only, of course, there has to be stricter discipline in the Army. I've worked in a good many different places and I've found out that the way you're treated most always depends on the way you do your work. Of course, wherever you go you're sure to meet some people you won't like and who won't like you. If you mind your own business and let 'em alone, generally they'll let you alone."

[19]

"But suppose they don't? What then?"

"Well," Roger looked reflective, "I never had that happen to me but once. It was when I worked in that shipping department. There was a boy about my size or maybe a little bigger who wouldn't let me alone. He'd make mistakes and then lay them to me. At last I got sick of it and gave him a good licking. He let me alone after that. You couldn't do that with an Army officer, though. You'd have to stand it and say nothing. Anyway, I don't believe you'd find one officer in a thousand that wouldn't treat you fairly. It's just as much to them to have the respect of their men as it is to the men to have the good will of their officers."

Unconsciously Roger had voiced the opinion that prevails from coast to coast among both commissioned and non-commissioned officers in the United States Service. The mistaken impression that those who have been placed in commands in the National Army are a brow-beating, bullying lot is fast passing. The Army officer of to-day respects himself too much to abuse his authority. He also values the good will of his men too greatly to abuse them. All this, however, the Khaki Boys were presently to learn for themselves.

[20]

"I guess your head's level," conceded Jimmy. "I'm glad you licked that shipping-room dub. I hate a *sneak!*"

The explosive utterance caused the heads of two young men in the seat in front of their own to turn simultaneously in Jimmy's direction. One of them, a dark, thin-faced lad with twinkling black eyes and a wide, pleasant mouth, spoke. "Hope you didn't mean me," he offered good-humoredly. The other, stockily-built, his pale, stolid features bearing the unmistakable cast of the foreigner, stared at Jimmy out of round, china-blue eyes, with the unblinking gaze of an owl.

"Course not," apologized Jimmy, reddening. "Why should I mean you?"

"I don't know, I'm sure." The smiling lips widened to a broad grin. "You said it pretty loudly. It almost made me jump."

"Well, I meant it," maintained Jimmy stoutly, "but not for you. I meant it for any fellow, though, who isn't square and above-board."

"Shake." The black-eyed youth half-raised himself in his seat and offered Jimmy his hand. His companion continued to stare dumbly, as though dazed by the suddenness of the whole thing.

[21]

"I saw you at the recruiting station the other day," observed Roger, addressing the boy who

had offered his hand. "You were just coming out of the place as I was going in."

"I saw you, too," nodded the other. "That used to be my business; just seeing people and things and writing 'em up afterward. I was a cub reporter on the *Chronicle*. Then I got the enlisting habit and here I am."

"Every morning I read him, that paper," announced a solemn voice. The dumb had come into speech. "You write him?" The questioning round blue eyes looked awe upon his seatmate.

"Ha, ha! That's a good one," shouted the ex-reporter gleefully. "Say, Oscar, what do you take me for?"

"That is no my name. It is Ignace; so. Ignace Pulinski," was the calm correction. "I am one, a Pole."

"Well, 'Ignace So Pulinski, one, a Pole,' you've got another think coming. I used to write about this much of the *Chronicle*. See." The boyish news-gatherer indicated a space of about three inches between his thumb and first finger.

"That is no much." Ignace relapsed into disappointed silence. Nor did he offer a word when his energetic companions proposed turning their seat so as to face Jimmy and Roger. He lumbered awkwardly to his feet and sat stolidly down again as though moved by invisible strings. [22]

"I was lucky to get that some days." Now seated opposite his new acquaintances the reporter resumed the subject of his recent occupation. Noting Roger's and Jimmy's patent amusement, their friendly *vis-a-vis* winked roguishly at them and continued, "Well, no more of it for me. What branch of the service did you fellows enlist in?"

"Infantry," came the concerted answer. "We thought we'd like to be sure of a front place in the big fight."

"You'll get it," was the grim assurance. "This war's going to last long after we've hit the trenches in France and done our bit. We're lucky to be going to Sterling. It's one of the best camps in the country. It was one of the first to be laid out. I was sent up there by my paper to get a story about it when it was just starting. It was nothing but a lot of cornfields then. I was up there again about three weeks ago and maybe there wasn't a difference, though! Ground all cleared, company streets laid out and barracks going up fast. It's a dandy place for a camp. Good and dry with no swamps. There shouldn't be many men on sick list."

"How large is it?" inquired Roger interestedly. [23]

"Covers about eight square miles, I should say; maybe a little more than that. I hadn't thought of enlisting until after the second trip to it. Then I just had to step in line. I wasn't going to hang back until the draft got me, like a lot of fellows I know. I figured it out this way. If I went into the Army and came out alive at the end of the war, I'd have had all the fun and a barrel of experience. If I got to France and then went West—that's what they call it when you cash in your checks—I'd have a lot of fun anyhow while I lasted. I'd like to get a whack at the Fritzies, so why lose a chance at it? Infantry for mine, though, every time."

"I hope we are put in the same barrack." This new acquaintance was one strictly after impetuous Jimmy's own heart.

"So do I." A flash of approval sprang to the young reporter's face. His mental appraisal of Roger and Jimmy had been "all to the good."

"I go by you, an' you, an' you, mebbe, huh?" Ignace again came to life, accompanying each "you" with a rigid pointing of a stubby forefinger.

"Mebbe, huh," agreed Jimmy solemnly. "Later on you might be sorry for it, too. Didn't you ever hear about appearances being deceitful?"

A slow grin overspread the Pole's stolid face. "I take the chance," he declared, thereby proving that he was not so stupid as he seemed. [24]

"You're a real sport, Iggy." His seatmate playfully slapped him on the shoulder. "I guess if you can stand us we can stand you."

"You are no ver' strong." Ignace was evidently more impressed by the lack of force that had attended the light blow than by the compliment. "My father ver' strong man," he added with a reminiscent frown.

"Well, I hadn't expected to knock your head off," conceded the other satirically. "That was only a friendly tap." Struck by a sudden thought he asked curiously, "How'd you happen to enlist, Iggy? Are you twenty-one?"

"Y-e-a. Twenty-one an' two weeks. So"—the china-blue eyes took on a defiant glint—"run 'way. My father, he no like this war. He say I no go 'cause no American. I say, 'go anyhow.' Better I think be solder an' get kill once than my father most kill when he hit me much. I work by one mill, but he get all moneys I make. This is no right, I say many time, and always get the black eye or the bloody nose. So go quiet by place an' say to man there, 'I can be the solder? I like fight for this country.' Then I don't go home more. Stay by a frien' an' my father don't know nothin' till too late."

Once started on a recital of his own troubles, Ignace had hardly stopped for breath. There were no smiles on the faces of his listeners when he had finished. The lack of excitement in his voice as he droned forth the story of his own patriotic awakening and his final revolt, brought a sympathetic gleam into three pairs of eyes. [25]

"I guess it's time to shake with you, Iggy." Jimmy suited the action to the word by grabbing the Polish boy's rough hand.

"Here, too," called out the reporter. "Let's all shake and tell our right names. Mine's Robert Dalton. Either Bob or Dal'll do."

"Mine's Jimmy Blazes, James Blaise when we have company. This old sobersides is Roger Barlow. He's got to have a shorter name than that, though."

"Call him Ruddy and let it go at that," suggested Dalton. "I used to know a fellow named Roger. We called him Ruddy or Rodge."

"Either'll suit me." Roger was secretly pleased with his new names.

"Ahem! We have with us this afternoon, Iggy and Jimmy and Bob and Rodge." Dalton stood up, threw out his chest, thrusting his left hand pompously inside his coat. "We're here because we're here. Gentlemen, on us depends the safety of the great American commonwealth. Until we entered this stupendous conflict, all was lost. But you can't lose us. We're Four Dauntless Dubs Devoted to Daring Deeds. How's that?" Dalton beamed patronizingly on the trio, then sat down.

"Not so bad. We're sure enough dubs when it comes to soldiering!" smiled Roger. "I expect we'll feel we're less than that if we get into the awkward squad for being slow for drill. I'm not going to stay in the dub class, though." His boyish mouth set in determined lines. "I'm not going to get into the awkward squad if I can possibly help it." [26]

"Some ambitious rookie," teased Bob. "Well, it's a great life if you don't weaken. I'm not saying where I'm going to land. Just so I land on both feet every time. When I used to write in my copy book, 'Obedience is the first and last duty of a soldier,' I never thought that it was going to come home to me like this. That's the whole game in a nutshell, though. Speak when you're spoken to, etc. Throw out your chest and look happy when you get a call-down. 'Love your country and can up the Fritzie before they can you,' is going to be my motto. How any husky fellow with good red blood in his veins can read about what's going on 'Over There,' and never blink an eyelash, is more than I can see." Bob had grown serious. "All I hope is that it won't be long until our turn comes to go over. I might have enlisted a good while ago. Wish I had. I haven't a relative in the world to worry over except an uncle who's a pacifist, and I'm not worrying much about him. Too bad he's too old for the draft. I'd like to hear him spouting peace to a line of charging Boches. This is about the way he'd do it!" [27]

Bob drew down his face, and proceeded to give an imitation of his peace-loving relative that made even solemn Ignace laugh.

"It is good I come sit here," congratulated the Pole. "You are fonny, but you have the kind heart. You make of me the fon, I no care. I no make the fon of you. Somebody hit you. I hit him. I am the fren'."

"Much obliged, old man." Bob looked surprised and touched at this sudden tribute of loyalty. "I can take care of myself, though. I'm strong, even if you don't think so."

"I am no the old man," corrected Ignace with dignity. "Anyhow, I take care you!"

"I certainly seem to be popular with some people," murmured Bob. "All right, Iggy, you can go as far as you like. Maybe I do need a keeper. If you and I land side by side in the same barrack we'll be bunkies, like Jimmy and Roger. I know a good thing when I meet it."

"Brothers all!" Ignace raised a hand as though pronouncing a benediction.

In the days to come the Polish boy's declamation was to be fulfilled to the letter. From that chance meeting in the train was to spring a comradeship between the four young men, all from such different walks in life, that would do much toward helping them over the hard ruts in the Glory Road.

CHAPTER IV

ALL IN THE DAY'S WORK

"Camp Sterling! Camp Sterling!" The stentorian call thrilled the hearts of the embryo soldiers. Long before the train had come to a creaking, puffing stop, fifty boys were on the *qui vive* to be out of it for a first satisfactory look at the camp, of which they had obtained only tantalizing glimpses from the car windows. Emerging with alacrity from the train, they made brief halt on the station platform, while the officer of the bouquet incident called the roll.

Met at the station by two sergeants from the camp, the little detachment of future defenders did their level best to obey promptly the order, "Company attention! Forward march!" Accompanied by the sergeants, who had come down to the station to receive them, they were soon marching away from it and through the wide gateway that admitted them to the camp itself.

Far ahead of them they could see scattered groups of long, low buildings, which they immediately knew to be barracks. As they proceeded straight forward along an almost level and extremely dusty road, they could make out more plainly the first outlying group of barracks, to which they were momentarily drawing nearer. Of new, unpainted wood, two-storied and many-windowed, these buildings looked rather cheerless at first view. Here and there at the side or front of one stood small, sturdy trees, the dark green of their foliage relieving the prevailing monotonous yellow cast that predominated. [29]

For over a mile they tramped steadily along. By this time they had long since passed the outlying groups of barracks, and had had the chance of viewing numbers of them at close range. Ordered at last to halt before one of them, their conductors marched them up a flight of four wooden steps, and through an open door into a long, bare room, the chief furnishing of which consisted of two rows of narrow canvas cots. Placed fairly close together, these cots ranged the length of the room on both sides, leaving a wide aisle in the middle.

Here they were taken in hand by still another sergeant, who informed them that they were now in a receiving barracks, where they would sleep that night prior to being re-examined at a regimental hospital the next morning. Crisply assigned to cots, they were allowed only time enough to stow their suitcases and scant luggage underneath these cots, then were conducted to the quartermaster to draw mess kits, blankets, haversacks, and such equipment as is issued to each man as soon as possible after arrival at a training camp. [30]

They were ordered to check carefully each article of the Government's property as it was issued to them, and obliged to sign for it. This done, they were conducted back to the receiving barracks, where they spent the brief interval before mess in neatly arranging their personal and issued property under the cots which they would use only temporarily.

The bugle call to mess found them again falling in for their first trip to a mess hall. Arrived there, they entered and were marched, single file, the length of the long room to a counter at one end, where each in turn received a goodly portion in his mess kit of the various eatables that went to make up the meal that night. These were served to them by the soldiers detailed for kitchen work, much in the same fashion that food is served in the city cafétarias.

The furnishings of the mess hall consisted of the counter, two large kitchen ranges, a furnace in the middle of the room, many tables and rows of uncomfortably hard wooden benches. Once they had received their portions of food, the new arrivals were permitted to choose their own places at table. [31]

All in all it was the plainest fare that the majority of the young soldiers had sat down to for many a day, perhaps the first of its kind for a few of them who had come from homes of affluence. It may be said to their credit that whatever may have been their mental attitude toward regulation Army fare, they showed no visible signs of discontent, but fell to and ate hungrily.

Mess over, it but remained to cleanse their mess-kits at sinks provided for that purpose. Then they were taken back to the barrack where they were to sleep that night, and where they spent the remaining hours, until Tattoo sounded, in going over their effects and quietly visiting with one another. Call to quarters sounded at 9:45, to be followed by the ten o'clock call of Taps.

Awakened the next morning by the clear notes of a bugle blowing first call, the fifty recruits lost little time in scrambling from their cots and getting hastily into their uniforms before Reveille sounded. Lined up outside the barrack, a sergeant called the roll. This done, the Khaki Boys were allowed a brief twenty minutes before breakfast in which to make up their cots and perform their morning ablutions at the barrack sinks. Breakfast at the same mess hall where they had eaten the previous evening came next, then a return to barracks, followed by the call of "Assembly" at a few minutes past seven. [32]

Directly afterward they were escorted to the hospital for the final examination that was to prove beyond a doubt their physical fitness to become soldiers in the National Army of the Republic. Out of the fifty who went to hospital that morning only three failed to measure up to the standard, which meant that for them all hope of a military career in the great war was ended.

None of the four "Brothers," however, were among this unlucky trio. Bob Dalton, Jimmy Blaise, Roger Barlow and Ignace Pulinski were pronounced physically fit in every respect. For them, the Glory Road was open so far as being acceptable specimens of young American manhood went. Their examinations ended by eleven o'clock that morning. They were then regularly sworn into the Army and shortly afterward drew their uniforms. First attempts at donning them were attended with considerable difficulty. All four had trouble in smoothly adjusting the canvas leggings. Ignace in particular groaned and grumbled at the task until Jimmy mercifully went to his assistance. When fully dressed none of them were without a feeling of awkwardness. It would take time for them to grow accustomed to their new attire.

Late afternoon of the same day saw them established at last as members of Company E, 509th Infantry, in one of the barracks assigned to that regiment. It had, indeed, been a busy day for the four Khaki Boys. The barracks in which they were now quartered was a considerable distance from the one in which they had passed their first night in camp. It had, therefore, taken some little time to remove their effects to it, not to mention a further visit to the quartermaster to obtain a number of necessary articles which they still lacked. [33]

Mess over that night, the tired quartette were glad of a chance to lounge in their new quarters, there to discuss among themselves the, to them, unusual events of that long day. Greatly to their satisfaction they had not been separated, but occupied four cots together in a row, with Roger and Jimmy in the middle and Ignace and Bob on either side of the two.

"To-morrow our real military life begins," exulted Roger. "I wonder how long we'll be taken out for drill, and whether we'll be in the same squad or not?"

"Hope we don't land in the awkward squad the very first shot," commented Bob. "The drill sergeant's supposed to go easy with rookies for the first day or two. An enlisted man I know, who's been in the Army for the past three years, once told me that it depends a whole lot on the officer who does the drilling. If he's an old-timer who's seen service he's more apt to be patient [34]

with a rookie than if he's just won his chevrons. A newly made drill sergeant is more likely to get peppery and bawl a rookie out before the whole squad."

"I used to know a little bit about this drill game. The last year I was in grammar school some of us kids got the soldier fever and organized a company of our own," reminisced Jimmy. "The brother of one of the fellows belonged to the National Guards and he used to drill us. There were about twenty of us, and we drilled in our garret once a week for a whole winter. We'd planned to go camping together the next summer and sleep in tents and all that, like real soldiers. Then some of the fellows got to scrapping and our company broke up. We had uniforms something like those the Boy Scouts wear and wooden guns. Hope I haven't forgotten what little I learned. Maybe it'll help me now."

"Shouldn't be surprised if it would." Bob regarded Jimmy with interest. "You'll probably be quicker at catching the swing and rhythm of things than the rest of us. Being familiar with the commands ought to help some."

"I am the dumb," broke in Ignace, who had been gloomily listening to the conversation of the trio. "If this day I no brother help me what I do? Yet must I be the good solder. I have said an' so am I, som' day." [35]

"You've done the best you could, old man," comforted Bob. "You'll learn. So don't cry about it!"

"Never I cry the tear," was the somewhat reproachful retort to Bob's kindly chaffing. "Only the littles an' the 'ooman cry. I am the man. I no cry my father hit me, I no cry now. So is it."

It had been anything but a red-letter day for the Pole. Bewildered by the rapidity with which things happened in Camp Sterling, Ignace had been hustled here and there like a sheep to slaughter. Only the kindly proddings and promptings of his three self-adopted Brothers had saved him from being set down as intolerably stupid in the minds of the efficient officers and men with whom he had already come in contact.

In reality Ignace was not as stupid as he appeared. Years of unremitting, slavish toil had undoubtedly made him slow and clumsy of movement. He had not the quick faculty of adapting himself to new conditions, which is one of the most striking characteristics of the American the world over. He was also likely to come to grief frequently through his imperfect knowledge of English. In spite of all these handicaps, his will to become a good soldier was so paramount that his three friends were of the opinion that somehow he would plod along to that end. Moreover, they had privately agreed among themselves to do all in their power to help him. [36]

"That's the talk," commended Jimmy. "Never say die till you're dead."

"Then can I no say," supplemented Ignace so positively as to create a general snicker. It dawned upon him that he had provoked it, and a slow grin overspread his usually immobile face. He was beginning to understand the vernacular of his "Brothers."

"We've got a lot to learn," sighed Roger. "All I can see to do is to get busy and learn it. I've been trying to look as much like a first-class private as I could since I drew my uniform. Jimmy has us all beaten when it comes to that, though. His uniform blouse looks as though it grew on him."

Jimmy appeared radiantly pleased at Bob's candid praise. Unconsciously he drew himself up with a proud little air that was vastly becoming to him. "Oh, I'm not so much," he demurred.

"Don't let it go to your head and swell it, Blazes," teased Bob. "Look at me and think what you might have been. To-night you see before you a simple, hopeful rookie. To-morrow at drill you'll see a sore and hopeless dub. I expect to get mine; but not forever. Live and learn. If you can't learn you've got a right to live, anyhow. A few gentle reminders from a drill sergeant that you're a dummy won't put you in the family vault. A little mild abuse'll seem like home to me. I'll think I'm back on the *Chronicle* listening to the city editor. It takes a newspaper man to read the riot act to a cub reporter. Nothing left out and several clauses added." [37]

Bob's untroubled attitude toward what lay in wait for him on the morrow had a cheering effect on Jimmy and Roger. Ignace, however, sat humped up on his cot a veritable statue of melancholy. Decidedly round-shouldered, his stocky figure showed at a glaring disadvantage in the trim olive-drab Army-blouse.

Jimmy's glance coming to rest on the dejected one, he counseled warningly: "You'd better practice holding back your shoulders, Iggy. They need it."

Ignace obediently straightened up. "Too much mill," he explained. "All time so." He illustrated by bending far forward. "Mebbe better soon. Huh?"

"You'll have to keep on the job all the while, then," was Jimmy's blunt assertion.

"So will I." Ignace sighed, then braced himself upon the edge of his cot to a position of ramrod stiffness that was laughable, yet somehow pathetic. Occupied with the ordeal, he took small part in the low-toned talk that continued among his Brothers, but sat blinking at them, now and then slumping briefly and recovering himself with a jerk. Shortly before the 9:45 call to quarters sounded, he dropped over on his cot and went fast asleep. Sound of the bugle brought him to his feet with a wild leap and a snort that nearly convulsed his comrades, and brought the eyes of a dozen or more of rookies to bear upon him. Among them was a tall, freckle-faced, pale-eyed youth with a sneering mouth, who bunked directly across the aisle from the four Khaki Boys. [38]

Viewing Ignace with a grin of malicious amusement, he addressed a remark to his nearest

neighbors that caused them to burst into jeering laughter. Quick to catch its scornful import, Jimmy shot an angry glance across the room. Beyond an occasional cursory survey of his rookie companions of the barrack, he had paid them small attention. Now in his usual impetuous fashion he conceived an instant dislike for the freckle-faced soldier, which he never had reason to change. For a second the two stared steadily at each other. Across the narrow space sped a silent declaration of war to the knife. Had Jimmy been gifted with the ability to read the future, he would have been considerably amazed to learn what the outcome of that mute declaration was destined to be.

[39]

CHAPTER V

THE BEAUTY OF GOOD ADVICE

During the first three days in camp the four Khaki Boys could not get over the awkward feeling of having been suddenly set down in the midst of a strange and confused world. Taken out for drill on the second morning after their arrival at Camp Sterling, their first encounter with a drill sergeant did not tend to make them feel strictly at home in the Army. It served, instead, to bring out sharply to them a deep conviction of their own imperfections.

Greatly to their secret disappointment, they were not all assigned to the same squad. Bob and Roger were placed in one squad, Ignace and Jimmy in another. Of the four, Jimmy Blaise acquitted himself with the most credit. Blessed with a naturally fine carriage, lithe of movement and quick of perception, he showed every promise of becoming a success as a soldier. Undoubtedly his previous, though amateur training, now stood him in good stead. Added to that was a genuine enthusiasm for things military.

[40]

Schooled in the work-a-day world, Roger and Bob were also of excellent material. Both had learned to move quickly and obey promptly. Roger's chief assets were earnestness of purpose and absolute dependability. Less earnest and more inclined to whimsicality, Bob was possessed of an alertness of brain that enabled him to comprehend instantly whatever was required of him. So the two were fairly well-matched and needed practice only in order to develop and bring out their latent soldierly qualities.

Poor Ignace alone seemed determined to cover himself with confusion. Drilled in the same squad with Jimmy, he was from the start a severe trial to the efficient, but hot-headed young sergeant in charge. Slow to think and slower to act, he immediately became a mark for criticism. His awkward carriage and shuffling walk were an eye-sore to that trim, capable officer.

During the first day's drilling of the squad to which Ignace belonged, the sergeant showed becoming patience with the clumsy Pole's painful efforts to obey orders. Two trying sessions with Ignace on the next day sent his scanty stock of forbearance to the winds. At the morning drill the sergeant had, with difficulty, mastered his growing irritation. Ordered out for drill again that afternoon, Ignace received the rebuke that had been hovering behind the sergeant's lips since first he had set eyes on the unfortunate Pole.

[41]

"See here, you," rapped out the disgusted "non-com," after a particularly aggravated display of awkwardness had aroused his pent-up ire. "Where do you think you are, anyway? This is no boiler-factory. You're in the Army now! Lift up your feet! You're not stubbing along to work. Pick up your head! First thing you know you'll be stepping on your neck. That's a little more like it. Now hold it for two minutes, if you can. If you can't—into the awkward squad you go to-morrow. Pay attention and do as you're told *when* you're told. Every time you make a move you make it just in time to queer your squad. Now this is the last time I'm going to tell you. I've got something better to do than splitting my throat yelling at you."

This scathing bawling-out of unlucky Ignace occurring just before the drill ended, he escaped, for that day at least, the humiliation of being bundled into the dreaded awkward squad. But to-morrow was yet to be reckoned with. In consequence, he looked a shade more melancholy than usual when, the drill period over, he dejectedly moped along toward the barracks with Jimmy.

A short distance from it, they encountered Bob and Roger, who were also returning from a period of, to them, strenuous drill. As recruits, it would be some little time before they would be ready to adhere to the regular daily program of infantry drill.

[42]

"Hello, fellows!" greeted Bob. "Hike along with us and let's hear the latest. How goes drill?"

"Oh, pretty fair." Jimmy shrugged his shoulders. Ignace, however, shuffled along beside Jimmy in gloomy silence.

"Cheer up, Iggy." Guessing the reason for the Pole's dejection, Bob gave him a friendly slap between his again sagging shoulders. "For goodness' sake, *brace* up! When you hump over like that your coat fits you, *not*. You'd better shove a stick under your arms and across your shoulders, and spend your time until Retreat hiking around camp that way. It'll be as good as shoulder braces."

"So will I." A gleam of purpose, which Bob failed to note, shot into the Pole's china-blue eyes, as, with a deep sigh, he threw back his shoulders.

"You'd better stop shuffling your feet, too." Now on the subject, Bob decided to call his disconsolate "Brother's" attention to this unsoldierlike habit. "Pick 'em up like this." Bob took a few extravagantly high steps in a purely waggish spirit.

"So will I," came the resolute repetition. "Soon learn I. It is the yet hard. An' the words; the words never I un'erstan'." Ignace's voice held a note of active distress. It called for sympathy. [43]

"What words?" asked Roger. "Oh, I know. Do you mean that you don't understand the commands the sergeant gives you?"

"Som'time, yes; som'time, no. When yes, I do, but too late."

"I understand." Roger nodded sympathetically. "You ought to take my manual and study it. You can learn all the different commands from it. Then you'll know them when you hear them and can follow them more easily."

"Never un'erstan' I that book. I have read him, but he is no for me," came the dispirited objection.

"Ha! I've an idea." Bob began to laugh. "I'll fix you up, Iggy. You come around to me after mess to-night, and I'll have a grand surprise for you. Don't you bother me till then, either, or you won't get it. Savvy?"

"Y-e-a." Ignace looked drearily hopeful.

"Now what have you got up your sleeve?" asked Jimmy curiously. Bob was chuckling as though over something extremely funny.

"Wait and see. What I said to Iggy means you fellows, too. Run along and take a walk around Camp Sterling. Sight-seers are always welcome, you know. Here's where I fade away and disappear." With a wave of his hand, Bob started on a run for Company E's barrack, to which they had now come almost opposite. [44]

"Let's do as he says. We'll take a walk around, and see if we can't find a few officers to try a salute on. I've got to practice that. I almost bumped into one yesterday. He looked so prim and starchy I pretty nearly forgot to salute him." Jimmy looked briefly rueful.

"All right. I guess I need a little saluting practice, too," agreed Roger.

"I can no go. I have the work to do," demurred Ignace. "Goo-bye. You again see som'time." Without further explanation, the Pole turned and scuttled off down the company street in the direction from which they had come.

The two he had so unceremoniously deserted stopped to watch him. Somewhat to their surprise they saw him suddenly leave the street and set off across a stretch of open ground sloping a little above the camp.

"What's he up to now, I wonder?" mused Jimmy.

"Hard to tell. Those Poles are queer. He's a splendid fellow, though, not a bit of a coward. Too bad he has so much trouble about the drill, isn't it?" Roger felt extreme sympathy toward blundering Ignace.

"Yes. He got his from the drill sergeant this afternoon. I was afraid he would. Say, do you know it's funny about him. He's the last fellow I'd have ever thought of getting chummy with. At home, I couldn't have stood him for a minute. Yet here, somehow, I kind of like him. He's so sure that we're his brothers and all that, I feel as if I ought to be good to him." [45]

Bob smiled. He quite understood Jimmy's attitude. Born of the classes, fortunate Jimmy had never had much occasion to consider the masses, particularly the very humblest of the great army of bread-winners.

"That's one thing I like about the Army," he said. "It's the Service that counts; not just you or I. A private's just a private here, even if he is a millionaire's son back in civil life. By the time this war is over, a lot of fellows will have found that out, the same as you have. It's different with me. Iggy seems sort of my brother, after all, because I've been a worker, too. He's a good, honest fellow and I like him. That's enough for me."

"He's square," emphasized Jimmy. "When a fellow's square, he's pretty nearly O. K. Iggy's clean and neat, too. That's more than I can say of some of those rookies in our barrack. Say, did you know that the guy who bunks next to that fresh Bixton is a German-American? Schnitzel's his name. Wonder how he happened to enlist. He's a queer stick. Never says a word. Just watches the fellows as if they were a bunch of wild Indians. Do you know what that Bixton has been handing around the barrack?" Jimmy scowled as he mentioned the man whom he so strongly detested. [46]

"No." A faint pucker appeared between Roger's own brows. He had not forgotten Bixton's unnecessary jeering at Ignace. He also disapproved of the freckle-faced rookie as having too much to say.

"Well," continued Jimmy, "I heard he said that this man Schnitzel acted more like a German spy, sent here by the Fritzies, than a Sammy. Can you beat that?" Jimmy's question fully conveyed his disgust.

Roger's lips tightened. "Bixton ought to have more sense," was his curt reply. "That's a pretty serious story to start about an American soldier. Are you sure he said it? Did you get it straight?"

"Yep. I told the fellow that told me to can it. Catch me getting into a mix-up over a yarn like that. I guess you know how much love I have for Bixton. Bob's down on him. Even Iggy says, 'Too much speak for nothin'.'"

Both boys laughed at the Pole's blunt criticism.

"I don't like him, either," returned Roger decidedly. "We'd better all steer clear of him. Too bad he's in your squad. He'll probably try to make fun of poor old Iggy."

"Just let him start something. Great Scott!" Jimmy's hand went up like lightning. His quest of an officer to salute had been granted with a despatch that almost proved fatal to him. "Pretty near missed it again," he muttered, as soon as the passing officer, a second lieutenant, was out of earshot. [47]

"I saw him about a fourth of a second before you," laughed Roger. "I didn't have time to warn you. That's what we get for gossiping. We must keep our eyes open and our hands ready from now on."

Determined not to be caught napping again, the two bunkies strolled along, eyes alertly trained on all passers-by. Following the company street for almost a mile they retraced their steps, talking confidentially as they went. A brief stop at the barrack saw them issue from it with sparkling eyes. The home folks had stolen a march on them in the matter of letters. Jimmy was the proud recipient of three, while Roger had been made happy with a kindly note from Mrs. Blaise.

"Let's go up there to those woods and sit on that stump fence to read 'em," proposed Jimmy. "No use going back to barracks. Old Bob will have a fit if we butt in on his great stunt, whatever that is."

Roger acquiescing, the two left the street, unconsciously taking almost the same route which Ignace had traveled. It was not more than a quarter of a mile to the irregular stump fence that skirted the bit of woodland.

"Gee, it looks great up among those trees. Come on." Clearing the fence at a bound, Jimmy forgot his newly-acquired dignity and raced along through the woods with the joyous friskiness of a small boy, Roger close behind him. [48]

A little way back among the trees they came to a good-sized flat rock and on this the two sat down to read the news from home. Roger read Mrs. Blaise's note in happy silence. Jimmy, however, broke into speech about every five seconds. "Just listen to this!" or "What do you know about that?" was his continual cry, followed by the reading of a line or a paragraph. One letter alone he declined to share with Roger. "This is from my girl," was his sheepish apology. "She used to live next door to us, but now she lives in Buffalo. This letter came to our house after I'd gone, so Mother sent it on to me. 'Course, Margaret, that's her name, couldn't come down to the train to see me off; so she wrote, thinking I'd get it that day. We're just good friends, you know. None of the love stuff. She's a fine little girl, though, and pretty as a picture."

"I am sure she must be." Roger's eyes twinkled. Jimmy's candid confession amused him not a little. Silent while Jimmy read the letter, he became aware of a far-off crackle of brush. "Someone's coming," he announced.

"Huh? Uh-huh," returned Jimmy, still deep in his letter.

But no one appeared in sight, although the faint snapping of twigs under human feet was still to be heard. [49]

"Someone is walking around on the other side of that little hill," Roger asserted, proud of his ability to locate the sound. For this is a most necessary requisite of a soldier.

"Let 'em walk." Jimmy declined to be interested.

"Just for curiosity, I'm going to see who it is." Roger rose and strolled quietly toward the crest of the hill. Three minutes later he was back, his usually serious face all smiles. "Come here," he called in an undertone. "Want to see something funny? Go cat-footed, though. Let him hear you and the show will be over!"

CHAPTER VI

THE BEGINNING OF TROUBLE

Hastily tucking his letter into its envelope, Jim noiselessly trailed Roger to the top of the hill. Looking down, they beheld a most remarkable sight. Back and forth in the hollow, for a distance of about twenty feet, marched, or rather pranced, Ignace. His shoulders rigidly forced back by means of a long stick, thrust under his arms, he was giving an exhibition of high stepping that would have filled Bob with joy. Lifting first one foot, then the other, to a height of at least two feet, he traversed the hollow with the airy steps of a circus pony.

"Let's beat it before I howl," begged Jimmy, shaking with suppressed mirth.

As stealthily as they had come, the two beat a quick retreat down the hill and out of sight of their industrious Brother, where they could have their laugh out.

"I never thought he'd do it," gasped Jimmy.

"We won't let him know we saw him. It would be a shame to kid him when he's so dead in earnest. But won't Bob howl? Oh, wait till I tell him!" [50]

"It was certainly rich." Roger's boyish laugh rang out afresh. "It'll do him good, though. I'll bet he keeps it up every day. He's afraid of being put in the awkward squad. I like his grit. He'll get there. Now if Bob can fix him up on the rest. We'd better be hiking, Jimmy Blazes. It must be

nearly time for Retreat.”

“Four-thirty.” Jimmy consulted a gunmetal wrist watch. “I wouldn’t wear one of these at home,” he added, half apologetically. “They’re too girly-girly. But they’re all O. K. out here.”

“Wish I had one.” Bob eyed the little watch with approval. “I think I’ll buy one when I get my first pay. It would be a great convenience.”

Jimmy agreed that it would. He also made mental note that he would write certain things to his mother at once. Well supplied with pocket money, he decided that he would surprise his bunkie with a present of a wrist watch long before pay-day arrived. Roger would value it doubly as a gift from a Brother.

“What if poor old Iggy forgets to come out of the woods in time for Retreat?” Having now descended the slope and almost reached the company street on which their barrack was situated, Roger paused to glance anxiously back toward the woods. [52]

“Think we’d better skate back after him?” Jimmy’s gaze followed Roger’s.

As they stared toward the woods, a familiar figure came loping down to the stump fence. Iggy was still decorated with his makeshift shoulder brace. Scrambling over the fence, the Pole stopped and laboriously divesting himself of the stick, tucked it under a projecting stump. Straightening up, he threw back his shoulders and came slowly forward, careful to lift his heavy feet well from the ground, though in a now-modified fashion.

“Did you see him tuck away his shoulder brace?” snickered Jimmy. “That means to-morrow same time, same place. No awkward squad for Iggy. It’s Jimmy’s little old bunch for him. Ignace So Pulinski’s going to stick by his brother James, if he has to step clear over the barracks to do it. Let’s hustle, so we can tell old Bob before Iggy comes.”

Vastly amused by what they had so lately witnessed, the two strode rapidly along toward their barrack, to acquaint Bob with the exploits of Ignace before that aspirant toward military proficiency should put in an appearance.

“Well, how’s the great stunt?” inquired Jimmy. On entering the barrack, he had hurried ahead of Roger, who had stopped to speak to a comrade, up the short flight of steps to the second floor squad room, where the four Khaki Boys bunked. [53]

Seated cross-legged on his cot, a quantity of loose sheets of paper scattered broadcast about him, Bob was making a fountain pen fairly fly over a pad, braced against one knee. Raising his head from his writing he grinned amiably. “Oh, fine, fine,” he declared. “Bobby has certainly been the busy little rookie. I’m not done yet, by a long shot. After mess I’m going to see if I can’t borrow the loan of a typewriting machine and type this copy.” He waved a careless hand over the wide-strewn sheets of paper.

“But what’s that got to do with the great stunt? Or maybe this *is* the stunt?” Jimmy guessed, nodding toward the papers.

“Clever lad,” commented Bob. “This is *it*. Mustn’t touch,” he warned, as Jimmy reached out a mischievous hand to gather them in. “Can your impetuosity, Jimmy Blazes. Now watch me rake in the results of two hours’ genius.” Bob whisked the papers together in a jiffy and began patting them into an even pile.

“All right, stingy. Just for that I shan’t tell you Iggy’s latest.” Jimmy turned away, smiling to himself. He was not in the least peeved. He merely wanted to arouse Bob’s curiosity.

“It’ll keep,” was the unconcerned answer. “It’s almost time for Retreat, anyhow. I’ll hear the terrible tale of illustrious Iggy later, all right. Better still, I’ll ask Iggy about it.” [54]

“You needn’t.” Jimmy swung round with a jerk. “Don’t say a word to him. He doesn’t know we know it.”

“We? H-m! That’s you and Ruddy, I suppose. Then I’ll quiz old Roger. Here he comes now with our Polish brother at his heels. What’s happened to Iggy? He looks all braced up. Sort of a strait-jacket effect. What make of starch do you use, Iggy?” he waggishly hailed, as the Pole reached him, holding himself painfully erect.

“You see? You think him better?” Ignace asked anxiously. “Yes, but I am the tired!” Making a lunge for his cot he bundled himself upon it in a heap.

“Complete collapse of the left line,” murmured Bob.

Now grown used to the sight of their comrades, the other occupants of the barrack had paid small attention to the trio who had just arrived. Bixton, however, the talkative rookie whom the four “Brothers” so disliked had been aware of the Pole’s sudden change of carriage. A member of the same squad, he had heard the drill sergeant’s reprimand of Ignace that afternoon and accordingly took his cue from it.

“Hey, Poley, what’s the matter?” he called in a purposely loud tone. Ignace had now risen from his cot and reassumed his strait-jacket appearance. “Are you practicing for the awkward squad? You’ll get there if you live till to-morrow.” [55]

“You too much speak.” A slow red had crept into the Pole’s cheeks. His mild blue eyes held an angry glint as he turned on his tormentor who had swaggered up to him. “I no like you. You no let me lone I give you the strong poonch.” Ignace clenched his right hand menacingly.

“Oh, you will, will you? Better not try it. You’ll—”

"Let him alone," ordered Jimmy hotly. "He's minding his own business. Now mind yours."

"Who asked you to butt in?" sneered Bixton. "'Fraid I might give your Poley pet a trimming?"

The appearance at the head of the stairs of the acting first sergeant of the squad-room put an end to the budding altercation. The men who had begun to gather about the wranglers prudently left the scene of discord, and promptly busied themselves with their own affairs.

Almost immediately afterward the call for Retreat formation sounded and the recruits were marshalled out into the company street, where they stood at attention while the daily ceremony of lowering the Flag was conducted, a regimental band in the distance playing the "Star Spangled Banner." Everywhere in Camp Sterling at this hour all soldiers not on detail were expected to stand at attention during this impressive ceremony, saluting as the band played the final note. [56]

Our four Khaki Boys found themselves thrilling in response to the sonorous notes of their country's chosen anthem. All watched with reverent eyes the dignified descent of that red, white and blue banner, the sacred emblem of "Liberty and Union; Now and Forever; One and Inseparable."

CHAPTER VII

CAUGHT IN HIS OWN TRAP

[57]

Call to mess followed at 5:30. It was not until the four Khaki Boys had performed their usual stunt of climbing over several tables with their portions of food, and were seated in a row along a wall bench, that Bob reopened the subject of Bixton.

"The next time that Bixton smarty tries to jump you, Iggy, don't act as though he was alive," was his wrathful advice. "He's a talker and a trouble maker. Don't let him get your goat. That's what he's trying hard to do. He thinks you are easy."

"I give him the good lick," threatened Ignace, still ruffled.

"I don't doubt you could wipe up the squad-room floor with him. But what's the use of spoiling the floor?" Bob demanded whimsically. "Let him babble. He likes it."

"I no like," came the sullen protest.

"Neither do I," sputtered Jimmy. "He was trying to make a show of Iggy. I'll hand him one myself some of these fine days." [58]

"Ruddy and I'll come to see both our brothers when they land in the 'jug' for scrapping," offered Bob, affably sarcastic. "Won't we, Rud?"

"No, I won't." Roger looked severe. "If you two are going to let that Bixton fellow rattle you, then I can't say much for your good sense. Give him the icy stare a few times and he'll stay in his own corner. Just as long as he sees he can bother you, he'll do it. When he finds he can't, he'll quit and start on somebody else. But that won't be your lookout."

"I try't," promised Ignace. His scowling features clearing, he proceeded to devote himself sedulously to the savory portion of stew in the meat can before him. Nor were his companions loath to drop the unpleasant subject of Bixton for a hungry appreciation of their food.

The meal finished, the four dutifully cleansed their mess-kits, returning with them to their barrack. The evening meal over, the pleasantest relaxation period of their camp day lay before them. Until the 9:45 call to quarters they were free to follow their own bent, so long as it did not take them beyond camp limits.

After putting away his mess-kit, Bob's first move was to reach under his cot for the suitcase in which he had deposited his precious papers. A respectful audience of three stood watching him, mildly curious as to what he intended to do next. [59]

"Does the great stunt come off now?" smiled Roger.

"Not yet, my boy. I'm going out on the trail of a typewriter first. It breaks my heart to leave you, but it must be did. Half an hour's clickety-clicking and you'll see me back here in all my glory. If the machine downstairs isn't working overtime, maybe I can grab it for a while."

"Let's go over to the 'Y' and write letters," proposed Jimmy. "Our room's better than our company with old Mysterious Myra here. If I don't answer mine bang-up quick, I'll never write 'em. Here's enough paper and envelopes for the bunch." Reaching under his cot he held up a good-sized box of stationery.

"I would to poor my mother a letter in American write, but she can no read that write," offered Ignace sadly. "I can the American read and write but no my family. My mother un'erstan' American little but no read."

"Write it in Polish, then," suggested Jimmy. "You don't have to write it in English, do you?"

"But I want show poor my mother how that I am smart it to do." Ignace was bent on distinguishing himself. "She it would much please." [60]

"Couldn't someone read it to her, then?" asked Bob. "One of her neighbors; or maybe your groceryman." Familiar with the Polish section of the city from whence Ignace had come, Bob was somewhat acquainted with the ways of the clannish Poles. He knew that they were prone to

gravitate to the grocery store in their neighborhood for everything from merchandise to general information.

"S-o-o! I have no think to that." Ignace brightened. "I write him American anyhow!"

"Drop in about eighty-thirty and watch *Mysterious Myra* conduct a seance." Bob cast a withering glance at Jimmy. "You ought to be ashamed to ticket a bunkie with such a handle," he added severely. "Now get out of here quick before I smite you." He made a playful pass at Jimmy.

Equally in fun, the latter raised an arm as though to return it.

A sudden cry of, "Fight! Fight!" echoed through the room, and caused both Jimmy and Bob to whirl. Directly across from them Bixton had been morosely watching the quartette. Aware that the bit of by-play was merely fun, he had called out "Fight!" with malicious intent. Knowing the acting first sergeant to be at one end of the room, he had shouted with a view toward creating trouble. His essay succeeded so far as to bring the officer to the group on the run.

"What's this?" he questioned, sternly surveying four very calm but very injured young men. [61]
"What's the trouble here?"

"None that we know of," answered Roger respectfully.

"Then who called out 'Fight!'?" snapped the non-com.

"It was not one of us." Roger evaded a direct reply.

"Humph!" The sergeant shot a quick glance about the almost empty room. His keen eyes coming to rest on Bixton he made directly for him. "Did you call out 'Fight!'?" he queried sharply.

Caught in his own trap, the color mounted to Bixton's freckled face. "Yes." The reply was grudgingly made.

"Why did you do it? Did you *see* anyone fighting?" demanded the sergeant satirically.

"I thought I did," mumbled the man.

"You *thought* you did," emphasized the non-com. He thereupon launched into a tirade of sarcastic rebuke that fell like verbal hailstones on the would-be trouble-maker's ears.

"Come on, let's beat it," muttered Jimmy. "I'm so happy I could hug that sergeant."

Leaving Bob to smile seraphically as he busied himself with his papers, the three made a discreet exit, the voice of the nettled non-com still beating upon their ears as they scampered down the stairs.

"That's the time he got his," exulted Jimmy as they emerged from the barrack. [62]

"He must have been watching us," commented Roger. "When he saw Bob and you making passes at each other he thought he'd start something."

"He get the fool," chuckled Ignace.

"He certainly did," agreed Jimmy joyfully. "If he gets off with a call-down, he'll do well. I'll bet that sergeant has him spotted for a talker. Hope he has. Then Smarty Bixton'll get the worst of it if he tries to queer us again. Maybe he's learned something by this time that wasn't down in his books."

"He's heading for the rocks," Roger said soberly. "Somebody ought to try to set him straight. I wish he hadn't started on Iggy the way he has. We couldn't say a word to him now. It would only make things worse. We'll just have to do as we agreed and not notice him."

The looming up of a second lieutenant in their path brought three hands up in smart salute and temporarily closed further discussion of Bixton. Reaching the Y. M. C. A., Jimmy distributed note-paper with a lavish hand and soon the trio had settled themselves on hard benches before the primitive-looking desks to write their letters.

Provided with an extra fountain pen of Jimmy's, Ignace stared blankly at the wall, sighed profoundly, gingerly tried the pen, and finally gave himself up to the painful throes of composition. Jimmy dashed into his letter-writing with his usual reckless impetuosity, his pen tearing over the paper at a rapid rate. In consequence he was triumphantly signing "Jimmy" to his second letter before Roger had half finished his carefully worded note to Mrs. Blaise. [63]

"Hurry up, slow-pokes. It's eight-ten," adjured Jimmy, as he scrawled an address across an envelope.

"Him is done," proudly announced Ignace, holding up his epistolary effort. Undated and unpunctuated, it began at the very top of the sheet and ended halfway from the bottom of the first page. "Now you read." He proffered it to Jimmy.

The latter took it and with difficulty kept a sober face as he read:

"poor mi mothar so am i the bad son wen i run away but i can no stan the bete my fathar giv all tim now am i the solder an he can no get mor i sen you the monee wen i get som tim i hav the 3 brothar now i hapee but no wen think you poor mi mothar from you son Ignace."

"That's a good letter, Iggy." Jimmy had lost his desire to laugh as he handed it back. It had begun to strike him as pathetic. He was wondering how it had happened that before meeting the poor Polish boy he had never credited that humbler half of the world, in which Ignace had lived, with human emotions. [64]

"I can the read better the write," assured Ignace grandly, well pleased with the other's praise.

"I write the name, the street my mother, you write again this?" he asked, holding up an envelope.

Much amused, Jimmy complied. Ignace surveyed the envelope with admiration. "How gran' is the write my brother," he commented.

"Some compliment. Here's a stamp, Iggy. Stick it on and away we go. Finished yet, old top?" This to Roger.

"Yes." Methodically Roger sealed and stamped the envelope he had just addressed.

"Look who's here!" exclaimed Jimmy. His gaze roving idly down the big room, he had spied Bob Dalton just entering it.

Discovering his chums in the same instant, Bob steered straight for them, his black eyes twinkling with mischief. "Three whoops for Mysterious Myra," he hailed, waving a little sheaf of papers above his head. "Got through typing sooner than I expected, so I beat it over here in a hurry. This is an exclusive stunt. It calls for an exclusive place. Too much publicity at the barrack. Come on over in that corner and help yourself to a front seat while I read you Dalton's Marvelous Military Maneuvers in Rhyme, respectfully dedicated to the daily use of Ignace So Pulinski."

CHAPTER VIII

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

[65]

"You ought to be grateful to me for the rest of your life, Iggy," was Bob's bantering peroration when the four had taken possession of the deserted and therefore desirable corner.

"Y-e-a. So am I." Ignace looked more dazed than grateful. He had not the remotest idea of what Bob was driving at.

"Now listen hard, Iggy, and try to get this. Ahem!" Clearing his throat the rhymster shot a mirthful glance at Ignace and began to read, emphasizing each word for the Pole's benefit.

"'Attention,' means, 'Eyes to the Front.'
Stand on both feet to do this stunt.
Your hands at sides; keep straight your knees;
Feet out at forty-five degrees.
Thumbs on your trouser seams must rest;
Hold up your head; throw out your chest."

By the time he had reached the middle of the jingle, Jimmy and Roger were smiling broadly. They, at least, had come into complete understanding of the "great stunt." The Pole's stolid face was a study. Light was just beginning faintly to dawn upon him. [66]

"Did you get it?" Bob asked him, his black eyes dancing.

"Y-e-a. Som I get. You read him 'gain."

"No. I'm going on to the next. When I'm through, I'm going to give you these rules for your own. You must study 'em and learn 'em. See?"

"Y-e-a. Thank." Ignace beamed seraphic joy at his poetic benefactor. "So will I," he vowed fervently.

"Go ahead and tear off some more," begged Jimmy impatiently. "Myra's sure some poet."

"I'll give you a few of 'em just to be obliging and to show I don't mind being called Myra. You can read the rest yourselves. When you get enough, snap the lever and the talking machine will go dead. All right, Mr. Dalton. So kind of you." Bob smirked, grimaced, then continued:

"'Parade!' This second of commands
Means Iggy quick must join his hands
At center-front, below the waist,
Right thumb and index fingers placed
To gently clasp his own left thumb
And show the sergeant he knows some.

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"To 'Rest,' your left knee slightly bend;
Your right foot quick behind you send,
Pick it up smartly; swing it clear,
A straight six inches to the rear.

"All officers you must 'Salute.'
Your right hand to your head now shoot,
Straight hand and wrist o'er your right eye,
Fingers and thumb must touching lie.

"'Right': Turn your head to 'right oblique,'
And don't you dare toward 'left' to peek.
'Left' means don't rubber toward the 'right,'
'Front,' look ahead with all your might.

“Right Face!’ On your right heel swing round,
Ball of your left foot pressed to ground,
Your left foot place beside your right
And do it quick: Don’t wait all night.
‘Left Face’: Your left heel does the work,
Turn easily without a jerk.

“At ‘Forward March!’ your left knee’s straight;
Upon your right leg rest your weight.
Left foot advancing to the front
To do your little marching stunt.

“Anybody want to snap the lever?” Bob looked up with an inquiring grin.

[68]

“Not yet.” Roger eyed the rhymster with genuine admiration. “It’s bully. Go on.”

“I like. Much I un’erstan’. You read him more. Byme by you give me I stooody all time.” The Pole showed actual signs of enthusiasm.

“That’s the idea, else why is Bobby a bum poet?” Pleased, nevertheless, at his success, Bob resumed.

“For ‘Quick Time’ thirty inches step—
Lift up your feet and show some pep.
The ‘Double Time’ is thirty-six;
Now practice this until it sticks.

“‘Halt!’ when you’re told; don’t keep on going,
Unless you want to get a blowing;
Stop in your tracks, your feet together
And show your brain’s not made of leather.

“To ‘March to Rear’ turn right on toes.
Then ‘Left Foot!’ ‘Right Foot!’ here he goes.
For ‘Change of Step’ right foot’s first used,
So swing your right, or get abused.”

With this last line of sage advice, Bob stopped reading. “This talking machine has an automatic brake,” he declared. Deftly shuffling the typed sheets into numerical order he handed them to Ignace with a flourish. “Now go to it, old chap. Stay on the job until you can say ‘em backward. There are about a dozen more that I didn’t read out loud. If you don’t understand ‘em trot ‘em around to me and I’ll set you straight. Practice every move as you say it and you’ll soon be O. K. After you get them learned, the rest will come easier to you.”

[69]

“Thank! Thank!” Ignace clutched the papers gratefully. Pride of his new acquisition made him reluctant to let Roger and Jimmy take them long enough to read the balance of the verses.

“Show’s over. We’d better be moving along. It’s twenty-five to ten,” warned Jimmy at last. “You’re all to the good, Bob. Wish I could write like you can.”

“Forget it.” Bob waved an inconsequential hand. “You’ve got me beaten already when it comes to soldiering. So honors are more than even, I guess. A lot they care up here whether you wrote the Declaration of Independence or the latest best seller. You’re in the Army now, and in bad, too, unless you can show the drill sergeant that you’re a live one.”

“Soon I show,” broke in Ignace eagerly. “Here have I the rule. What more?”

“What indeed?” murmured Bob, winking solemnly at Roger.

Leaving the Y. M. C. A., the four Brothers started briskly toward their barrack, which was no farther away than would be two ordinary blocks in a city. Call to quarters sounded just as they entered the building. During the short walk Ignace had ambled along in happy silence, holding tightly to his treasure trove. He was secretly wondering which of his three Brothers he liked best and what he could do for them to prove his loyalty. Just now he could think of nothing to do that seemed worth while, except to work hard and show them that he could be a good “solder.” He resolved to study night and day the “fonny” rules Bob had written for him. Could Bob have foreseen the outcome of this firm resolve, he might have considered well before supplying Ignace with the rhymed record of instruction he had just delivered into his Polish bunkie’s keeping with the advice, “Stay on the job until you can say ‘em backward.”

[70]

“There! We forgot to mail our letters,” commented Roger regretfully to Jimmy as he began removing his shoes.

“Too late now. Taps’ll sound in a minute. I’ll mail ‘em all the first thing in the morning, right after breakfast. Give me yours now. I’ll get Iggy’s and put ‘em all together on the top of my shelf. If you happen to think of it first, remind me of them.”

Collecting from Ignace the one letter he had written, Jimmy placed it, together with his own and Roger’s, on top of a little folding shelf above his bunk. He had brought it from home and it held his father’s and mother’s photographs. It also boasted of several kodak prints. There was one of the girl friend with whom he had grown up, another of Buster, his dog, and still another of himself, seated in ‘Old Speedy.’ “They’re all here,” he had remarked to Roger as he had set them

[71]

in place, "even to Old Speedy."

Sleep soon visited the eyelids of the four Khaki Boys. Having been more active than usual that day they were quite ready for a good night's rest. The last to drop into slumber, Roger was the first to awaken the next morning. Long accustomed to rising at a few minutes past five o'clock, he had found himself awake before first call blew each morning since his arrival in camp. His eyes opening to greet the daylight pouring in at the windows, his gaze roved idly over the rows of sleeping soldier boys. Remembrance of Jimmy's request concerning the letters sent his glance next straying toward the shelf where he had seen his bunkie place them. They were not there now. Roger stared frowningly at the shelf, then his face cleared. Jimmy had evidently taken them from there and put them elsewhere. Perhaps in his suit-case. As soon as Jimmy was awake he would ask about them. He was sleeping so peacefully now. It would be a shame to disturb him before first call. Jimmy always slept until the last minute, then fairly dashed into his uniform.

Deciding that he would begin to dress, Roger slipped quietly from his cot and began methodically putting on his clothing. When the clarion notes of the bugle, sounding first call, split the drowsy air, he was fully dressed and seated on the edge of his cot, watching with quiet amusement the orderly flurry that had commenced all around him. [72]

"Where's my shoe?" came presently in desperate tones from Jimmy, thus centering Roger's attention upon his friend. "It was right beside the other last night. I'll swear to it that I put it there. Now it's gone!" Jimmy's voice rose anxiously on the last word. By this time the call of "I can't get 'em up" was echoing through the barrack.

"Here is him." From under his own cot, where Ignace was just snatching his own shoes, he drew Jimmy's missing one and slid it along the bare floor.

Jimmy swooped down upon it with a gurgle of relief. Not stopping to inquire how it had wandered there, he hastily put it on and went on dressing at breakneck speed, barely finishing before Reveille, the third and last warning before roll call.

Concern for his bunkie's loss drove the subject of the letters from Roger's mind. Returning into the barrack after roll call to make themselves presentable before breakfast, recollection of the missing letters came back to Roger with dismaying force.

"Don't forget your letters, Jimmy," he reminded. [73]

"Much obliged. I *had* forgotten. That shoe business rattled me. I'll cinch them now before I visit the sink to make myself beautiful."

A few quick strides and he had reached his cot. Following, Roger heard him exclaim: "What in Sam Hill!" Whirling with a grin he called out, "You old fake! You've got those letters! All right. You can just mail 'em."

"But I haven't," came the earnest denial. "When I first woke up this morning I looked at the shelf and saw they were gone. I thought you'd put them in some other place."

"I put them on *that shelf*," emphasized Jimmy. "What's the matter, I'd like to know? First my shoe turns up under Iggy's cot and then away go all our letters. There's something queer about this. Shoes without feet can't walk off alone. Letters can't disappear without hands. What's the answer?"

"Maybe Iggy or Bob took the letters to mail for you," hazarded Roger. "They've gone ahead to scrub up for breakfast and we'd better do the same. You can ask them about it in the mess hall. Don't bother any more about it now. Come on."

Frowning, Jimmy obeyed, feeling a trifle nettled over the fact of a second annoying disappearance on the heels of the first.

"Did either of you fellows take those letters to mail?" was his initial remark to Bob and Iggy as they met at mess. [74]

Receiving a surprised "No" from both, Jimmy turned to Roger with: "What do you know about that?"

"Not much." Roger grew grave as he explained the situation to Bob and Iggy.

"Someone got away with them," asserted Bob cheerfully. "Must be a mighty small someone who'd stoop to lift a bunch of letters to the home folks. Stealing anything from another fellow is a serious offense in the Army."

"Why should anybody want to do a thing like that?" demanded Roger. "We don't know the fellows in our barrack well enough yet for any of them to do it for a joke."

"It's no joke," was Jimmy's savage opinion. "It was done for pure meanness. How'd my shoe get away down under Iggy's bed? Some fellow in the squad-room has it in for me. If you don't know who he is, well—I do. I'll bet you my hat Bixton did it to spite me for jumping him yesterday. Just wait till I see him! I'll—"

"No, you won't," interposed Bob. "You'd only get in wrong unless you had proof. You can't accuse a fellow offhand of anything like that and get away with it. Keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. The only way to land a criminal is to get evidence that he is one. The same thing applies to a mischief-maker. Whoever he is, I'm not saying it's Bixton, he'll think he's put one over on you, and so pretty soon he'll try it again. It's up to you to pussy-foot around and catch him at it. Now mind your Uncle Bob, not a word about these letters to anyone. You can write some more to your folks. Just act as if nothing had happened and do a little watchful waiting. [75]

There's a time to speak, but it isn't now. So bottle your wrath, Blazes, and do the Sherlock Holmes act. With the four Brothers on the job, all keeping a starboard eye out, believe me, whoever cribbed those letters will wish sooner or later that he'd let 'em alone."

[76]

CHAPTER IX THE CROWNING INSULT

Realizing the soundness of Bob Dalton's counsel, his three friends agreed to abide by it. Nevertheless, Jimmy was already firmly convinced that he had Bixton to thank for the strange disappearance of his letters. He did not hesitate to reiterate the statement to his chums. Iggy solemnly supported the theory out of pure devotion to Jimmy. Bob and Roger refused to commit themselves, thought privately they were of the same opinion that suspicion pointed strongly in Bixton's direction. Both knew only too well that it needed but a word from them to set hot-headed Jimmy Blazes on the trail of the disagreeable rookie with a vengeance, a proceeding which, as Bob had sagely pointed out, would be not only futile but disastrous to Jimmy as well.

The exigencies of drill that morning drove the incident from the minds of the four for the time being. Keyed up to the highest pitch of desire to do well, Ignace partially retrieved himself in the eyes of the impatient drill sergeant. Though he could not know it, that efficient individual laid the Pole's marked improvement of carriage to the dressing-down he had launched at Iggy on the previous day. Proud of his ability to "whip these rookies into shape" he showed considerably more patience with the still clumsy recruit, and the end of the morning drill found Ignace again escaping the dreaded awkward squad. [77]

Not yet obliged to put in full time at drill, the squad to which Iggy and Jimmy belonged was dismissed at 10:30 not to resume their work until called out again after one o'clock Assembly. The instant he was released, Ignace hot-footed it for barracks, there to begin the "studdy" of Military Tactics as laid down by Bob. As the latter had shrewdly calculated, when the idea for them had taken shape in his fertile brain, he could not have devised a better way of impressing the first, simple Army commands on the slow-thinking Polish boy. Aside from feeling highly honored that his "smart" Brother should have gone to so much trouble for him, Ignace regarded the jingles with much the same delight which a child takes in its first book of nursery rhymes.

Reaching the barrack soon after Ignace, Jimmy was not surprised to find the latter seated on his cot, busily engaged in droning Rule No. 1 aloud. As it happened the squad-room was almost deserted. The three or four rookies it contained beside themselves were wholly occupied with their own affairs. Thus Ignace had a free field with no one to object to the sing-song murmur of his voice. [78]

"Come on, Iggy," Jimmy urged. "Let's go over to the 'Y' and write our letters again. We'll have plenty of time before mess, if we hustle."

"I can no go." Ignace stopped in the middle of a verse to make this stolid refusal.

"Don't you want to write to your mother?"

"Y-e-a. Som' day. No now. I am the busy. Better I studdy the rule firs'. Mebbe to-night write. Mebbe, no. Now am on job. So stay I. You see. This morning, no get the cross word. No yet go to what call you it, that bad squad? So have I do good. Soon much good. Pretty soon fine solder, I work hard."

"All right. Keep up the good work." Smiling, Jimmy turned away to get his note-paper. "Guess I'll stay here and write," he added, half to himself. Extracting a small leather portfolio from his suit-case, he settled himself on his cot, his back braced against the wall, and started the re-writing of his letters. Every now and then he raised his head to grin at Ignace, whose voice droned on, a steady, monotonous murmur. Far from disturbed by the sound, Jimmy was merely amused.

Shortly after their arrival, the barrack contingent began dropping in by twos and threes, among them Roger and Bob. Regardless of all comers, Ignace's sing-song recitation never flagged. Disturbed by the increasing amount of stir and conversation, his tones rose unconsciously with it until gradually he became an object of attention. Nor was he in the least aware of the curious and mirthful glances launched in his direction. Even the voices of his three Brothers, talking together so near to him, failed to distract his attention from his "job." [79]

"There sits a living monument to my usefulness," muttered Bob, jerking his head toward Iggy. "I wouldn't butt in on him for the world. He's forgotten we're alive. Just listen to him."

Roger's eyes rested for an instant on the absorbed Pole, then traveled about the squad-room. What he saw brought a quick frown to his forehead. "Iggy," he remonstrated. "Keep your voice down. You're getting noisy."

"So-o!" The reciter straightened up with a jerk as though coming to Attention. "I no mean make the noise. You 'scuse."

"I don't care," Roger laughed. "I only told you for your own good. The fellows up here will start to kid you if you keep it up. That's all."

"Thank." Ignace cast a sheepish glance about him. Encountering more than one smiling face he colored slightly, then doggedly returned to his task. Though his lips continued to move, his voice was no longer heard. Luckily for him, his arch-tormentor, Bixton, was absent from the [80]

squad-room and so missed a chance to jeer at the "Poley Pet" as he had sneeringly dubbed Ignace.

When, shortly before call to mess, he sauntered into the room, he cast a scowling glance toward the latter. He had anticipated the pleasure of seeing "that thick fathead" banished to the awkward squad. In consequence he was disappointed, not so much on Iggy's account, but more because of Jimmy's peppery championship of the former. He had begun by jeering at Iggy purely because he considered him a glaring mark for ridicule. Jimmy's interference had aroused in him a fierce dislike for both boys which was not likely to die out in a hurry.

The presence of the acting first sergeant, who had come up the stairs behind him, alone served to keep him discreetly within bounds. His bunkie, however, a lank, hard-featured man, whose small black eyes had a disagreeable trick of narrowing until almost half shut, lost no time in regaling the newcomer with the latest news from across the aisle, laughing loudly as he related it. Seated side by side on the latter's cot the two were a fitting pair. At least, so Jimmy thought, his usually pleasant mouth curving scornfully as he viewed them for a second, then turned his back squarely upon the obnoxious couple. [81]

At drill that afternoon, Ignace did even better than in the morning. True, he had not yet absorbed much of Bob's rhymed information. Still, it had given him a working basis on which to proceed. It needed only time and the dogged persistence which so characterized him to give him a lasting grip on the first principles of military tactics.

Released from drill, half-past three that afternoon saw him back in barracks, and engrossed in the "stoddy" of his precious jingles. Now, however, he was minus the company of his Brothers, who returned to the squad-room after drill only to go directly out again for a walk about the camp. With no friendly eye to keep ward over him, Ignace forgot Roger's caution of the morning and was soon droning away like a huge bumble-bee. Nor did he evince the slightest sign of having heard, when from across the room floated the surly command, "Aw, cut it out, you big boob!"

"All officer you mus' saloot,'" placidly intoned Iggy, his gaze glued to his copy. "You right han' to you head now——"

"What's the matter with you, you fathead? You heard me tell you 'cut it out' once. Isn't that enough?" This second boorish hail as well as the first came from the man, Bixton, who was lounging on his cot. His longed-for opportunity had come. [82]

This time Ignace had heard and dimly realized that he was being most ungently addressed. His voice breaking off on "now" his head came up with a jerk. His round blue eyes registered a blank amazement that quickly changed to active resentment as he fixed them upon the rookie who had so roughly called out to him. Half rising from his cot, his strong hands instinctively clenched themselves. Then he slowly sank back to his former position, determined to follow Bob's advice, "just act as though that smarty wasn't alive." Out of pure defiance he again resumed his reciting of the Salute rule, raising his tones a trifle by way of showing his utter disregard for the other's uncalled-for attack.

With a sudden spring Bixton left his cot. A hasty glance about him revealed the fact that the room was clear of officers. Nor were there more than half a dozen privates present, including himself and Ignace. Striding across to where the latter sat he halted directly in front of the Pole.

"I'm goin' to put the sergeant onto you, you poor fish," he blustered. "How'd you s'pose a fellow can rest with you keeping up that racket? Now chop it off, or you'll get yours."

For answer, Ignace calmly laid down one of the typewritten sheets he was holding and centered his gaze on another. [83]

"At 'Forwar' Mar——" he began unconcernedly.

With a sudden lunge of his right arm, Bixton snatched at the little sheaf of papers. Unexpected as was the movement, the Pole's grip on them tightened. One of them came away in the aggressor's clutch, however, with an ominous tearing sound.

That was the last straw. Insults to himself, Ignace could endure, but when it came to an attempt to wrest from him the fruits of Bob's labor he was a changed and raging Iggy. Uttering a wrathful howl he launched his stocky body at Bixton with a force that sent them both crashing to the squad-room floor. The Pole landing uppermost, his arms wrapped themselves about his tormentor in an effort to pin him down.

Of strong and wiry build, Bixton struggled fiercely to free himself. Over and over the squad-room floor they rolled, thumping heavily with every turn. Nearing the end of the room farthest from the stairway, Iggy succeeded in tearing himself free and getting a vise-like hold on his antagonist. The few rookies that had been present when the fight began now gathered about the combatants with noisy exclamations of "Give it to him, Poley!" "You got him cinched, now hand him one!" It was plainly evident with whom their sympathies lay. Bixton was most thoroughly disliked by the majority of his comrades. [84]

"Ignace Pulinski!"

The utterance was freighted with a degree of stern disapproval that almost caused the Pole to relax his grip on his adversary. It proceeded from Roger Barlow. He had come up the stairs just in time to hear the cry of "Give it to him, Poley!" Darting the length of the floor, he had pushed his way into the midst of the group to behold his usually placid Brother transformed into an enraged savage.

"Let him up," ordered Roger. "*Let him up, I say!*" The intense forcefulness of his tones cut the air like a whip-lash. Long years of obedience to a superior will now had its effect upon Ignace. His face distorted with anger, nevertheless his strong hands fell away from Bixton's prostrate form. Very sullenly he lumbered to his feet and stepped back a pace, his fists still doubled.

Freed from that relentless pressure, Bixton was up in a flash. His pale blue eyes gleaming with malignant fury, he launched a vicious upper-cut at Ignace, only to find his punishing right arm arrested in mid-air by two determined hands. Anticipating some such move on Bixton's part, Roger had blocked it with lightning-like swiftness.

"Help me hold him back, you fellows," he snapped, as Bixton struggled to strike him with his left arm. [85]

Three pairs of sturdy arms now coming to Roger's aid, Bixton was fairly dragged over to his cot and bundled upon it, thrashing about wildly under the pinioning hands. Ignace had not assisted in this operation. He stood stock-still at the point where he had let Bixton up, his face a study. Roger's interference had brought him to his senses. He was beginning to regret his own display of temper. He had done just exactly what he had been warned against doing. Weighted down by a sense of his own shortcomings, he shuffled over to his cot and began to pick up his scattered papers.

"Hold on to him just a minute more, please. I've something to say to him." With this energetic direction, Roger's own hands relaxed their grasp on Bixton. "Now, listen to me," he continued, fixing a steely gaze on the man. "If you know when you're well off, you'll behave yourself when the fellows let go of you. I don't know what all this is about, and I don't care. Just by pure luck you've escaped the sergeant. If he'd come in here as I did and seen you two fighting, you'd both be in the guard-house by now. He's likely to come in any minute, so watch yourself. That's all. Break away, boys."

Released, Bixton shot up from his cot like a jack-in-the-box. "Trying to screen your pet, are you?" he sputtered. "Well, you can't. He's going to get his, all right, the minute the sarge hits the squad-room. I'll teach that pasty-faced hulk a thing or two!" [86]

For all his bluster, he made no attempt to attack either Roger or his companions.

"Better hold your tongue," advised Roger dryly, looking the bully squarely in the eye. "It takes two to make a fight, you know. I wouldn't bank too much on the sergeant's seeing it differently. Come on, fellows. Leave him to think it over."

Roger turned away, followed by an extremely disgusted trio of young men. He did not consider it necessary to enjoin them to silence. Bixton's threat to tell tales to the sergeant had merely put him in deep disfavor with them. In the Army or out, no self-respecting man will countenance a tale-bearer.

Roger went over to Ignace, who had now slumped down on his cot in an attitude of utter dejection. He had hard work to keep from smiling. He did not doubt for an instant that Ignace had had just cause for his outbreak. Nevertheless, he put on an air of severity that he was far from feeling. "What started this fight?" he asked sharply. "Didn't Bob and I both warn you not to notice that fellow? Do you know where you'll land if the sergeant hears of this? You'll land in the guard-house for a month, maybe. I shouldn't be very sorry for you, if you did. Get up and let me brush you off. Your uniform's covered with dust." [87]

Without a word Ignace meekly stood up. Reaching under his own cot for his clothes brush, Roger put it into energetic use on his now chastened Brother. "I'm surprised at you," he rebuked, between strokes. "You need a keeper, Iggy."

"So am I the bad one," Ignace agreed mournfully. "But I feel to kill w'en that——" English failing him, he paused, then added a string of Polish words which Roger could only guess at as not being complimentary to Bixton.

"You had better luck than you deserved," commented Roger crisply. "Now come on out for a walk with me. I want you to tell me about this affair. But not here. It's a good thing that it was I instead of Jimmy who happened along. There'd have been a free-for-all fight sure. Here comes the sergeant, too," he added grimly, as the acting first sergeant stepped from the stairway into the squad room. "Wait a minute. Sit down again and we'll see what Bixton intends to do."

With these words, Roger calmly seated himself on his own cot to await developments, his eyes trained squarely on Bixton. That injured individual had also been busy plying a clothes brush, a fairly good sign, Roger thought, that he did not intend to carry out his threat. During the short time that the sergeant remained in the room an expectant silence prevailed. Like himself the other rookies present were breathlessly awaiting the outcome. [88]

Stretched at full length on his cot, Bixton made no move to unburden himself to the officer. He watched the latter morosely as he paused to give an order to one of the men, who promptly seized his hat and followed him from the room. As the two disappeared, Roger could not refrain from casting a challenging glance at the sulker. Directly he had done it, he was sorry.

Bixton had caught and rightly interpreted it. Raising himself on his elbow he said fiercely: "Fraid I was going to tell on him, wasn't you? I'll do it yet, if I feel like it. I'll fix both you boobs for this. There's other ways beside that. Before I'm through, I'll see you both fired outa this camp and those two smart Alecks that run with you. This camp's not big enough to hold me and you fresh guys at the same time, and you'll pretty soon get wise to it or my name's not Bixton."

CHAPTER X

NO LONGER "JUST ROOKIES"

[89]

As the September days glided by, Bixton's threat of speedy vengeance bore no apparent fruit. Whether he was lying in wait for a good opportunity to discredit the four Khaki Boys, or whether he was only the proverbial barking dog that never bites, they neither knew nor cared. To their great relief, the story of the fight did not reach the ear of the acting first sergeant. Thus Ignace escaped the disgrace of being punished in his very first week at Camp Sterling.

On hearing an account of the affair from Ignace himself, Roger was less inclined than ever to blame him for what had happened. He did not say so to Ignace, however. Instead, he sharply pointed out to the crest-fallen pugilist that two wrongs never made a right. He also privately warned Bob and Jimmy, who had been told of the fracas, not to let their sympathies run away with them.

Impetuous Jimmy, however, found it very hard to repress openly, to Ignace, his own satisfaction at the latter's recent uprising. He secretly wished that Ignace *had* given Bixton a sound thrashing and "gotten away with it." Slow of comprehension in some respects, the Polish boy was not too obtuse to divine Jimmy's attitude toward him. In consequence, he hung about the latter with a dog-like fidelity that signally amused Roger and Bob. Devoted as he was to his three Brothers, Jimmy was rapidly becoming his idol. [90]

The passing of days saw all four young men making progress in the business of soldiering. As has been already stated, Jimmy showed the most dash and snap in that direction. He took to military procedure like a duck to water, and "went to it" heart and soul. Easily the most efficient man in his squad, he was on the road to a corporalship, though he did not suspect it. He drilled with the same zest he would have put into a football game and prided himself on his prompt ability to execute correctly a new movement immediately it had been explained to him. It was the glory rather than the duty of being a good soldier that most impressed him.

On the other hand, Bob and Roger regarded it more from the duty angle. This was only natural, considering that both men had been obliged, when in civil life, to shift for themselves. They tackled drill as they would have wrestled with a new job. It interested but did not enthrall them. It was a means to an end. That end meant, to them, Bob in particular, active service in France. He looked upon "Going Over" as the supreme adventure. If he survived he intended to come home and write a book "that would sell like hot cakes." [91]

Iggy's noblest aspiration was to do well and so stay in the same squad with Jimmy and Bixton. Devotion to the former and spite against the latter swayed him equally. He knew that Jimmy was as desirous of his welfare as Bixton was of his downfall. This double motive inspired him to good works. Back of it all, undoubtedly, he was a true patriot. His enlistment in the Army proved that. For the time being, however, the glory of being a soldier was lost in the difficulty of trying to stay one. The drill sergeant was the most awe-inspiring figure on his horizon. Long afterward when the four Brothers had proved their mettle in far-off France, he had been heard to declare soulfully: "Go Over Top no so bad. One drill sergeant more worse twenty Tops!"

In spite of his encounter with Bixton, Ignace was still seized with spells of reciting his rules aloud. It did not take his companions of the barracks long to discover the nature of his frequent fits of mumbling. When it gradually became noised about in the squad-room that Bob Dalton had composed them for his bunkie's benefit, he was besieged for copies of them. Though he refused to supply them, he good-naturedly recited such as he could recall to several of the men. Very soon hardly a day passed when he was not asked to give one or more of them. As a result it was not long before they achieved the popularity of a topical song and at least half the occupants of the squad-room could recite one or more of them. In time they became circulated throughout the camp and long after Bob had left Camp Sterling behind for "Over There," his "Military Maneuvers in Rhyme" were passed on to newcomers and gleefully quoted. [92]

October saw the four Khaki Boys long since emerge from the School of the Soldier into the School of the Squad. They had now mastered the basic principles of military training and were beginning to feel a little more like Regulars. They now knew the Manual of Arms and had been fully instructed in the use, nomenclature and care of their rifles. They were no longer just "rookies."

Their periods of drill had been gradually lengthened until they were now putting in the same amount of time as the seasoned men. From half-past seven in the morning until dismissal by a sergeant at half-past eleven, they were kept at work learning soldiering. One o'clock Assembly marked the beginning of the afternoon drill period, which lasted until half-past four with thirty minutes' intermission before Retreat. [93]

Thus far none of the quartette had troubled themselves much concerning "passes," those magic bits of scribbled paper that meant permission to quit camp limits for a few brief hours of civil life. Once or twice they had obtained leave to spend an evening in Glenwood, a village about three miles from Camp Sterling.

"What we ought to do is to all get a pass, go to Tremont and take in a good show," was Bob's opinion one evening as the four boys sat talking together in barracks. "We could get off at noon some Saturday and be back by midnight. That would give us the afternoon to see the town, a bang-up supper at a first-class restaurant and a show afterward. Oh, boy! Oh, joy! I can just see us doing it."

"That sounds good to me," glowed Jimmy. "I've been going slow on the pass business 'cause I want to ask for one from Saturday until Monday morning, so that I can go home. Every letter I get from Mother lately she asks me when I'm coming home. But I guess if I'm good maybe I can get off with you fellows and get the pass home, too."

"Let me see. This is Thursday. Why not make it for day after to-morrow?" proposed Bob. "With pay-day only yesterday we've all got money to spend. Why let it burn in our pockets? Use up and earn more's my motto."

"I'd like to take a trip to Tremont," nodded Roger. "We've all worked good and hard since we came here. It's time for a little harmless recreation." [94]

"You can count me in," readily assured Jimmy.

"I can no go," stated Ignace regretfully.

"Why not?" Jimmy demanded. "What's going to hinder you?"

"I have no the monies. A little, yes, but no much. So stay I here. Anyhow, you go. I very glad for you have the fon. While you way think I to you," Ignace added with a sigh.

"No money! For goodness' sake, where is it? You just drew— I beg your pardon, Iggy." Jimmy colored hotly. "I shouldn't have asked such a nosey question. Forget it."

"Ask all thing you want ask all time." Ignace accompanied this gracious permission with a sweeping flourish of his hand. "You are the Brother. So have you the good right. Firs' think I no say nothin'. Anyhow, now I tell. I am to poor my mother the bad son for that I run way. When I home give her all monies no my father take. Now I here she have the nothin' for long time. He my father give only for the rent an' the eat. No much the eat. In my house are the three littles, two sister an' one brother. So have I nother brother. He have sixteen year. Work hard but every week get only the five dollar, an' my father take mos'. Now have I the pay sen' all my mother. Only I keep two dollar. It is enough here, but no for have the eat, the show, the good time Bob say. Som' day go along Tremont. No now. I am the broke." Ignace looked mildly triumphant at having been able to express himself in slangy Bob's vernacular. [95]

"You may be 'the broke,' Iggy, but you've got a solid gold heart!" exclaimed Bob, his shrewd black eyes growing soft. "I call that mighty white in you. Never you mind, if we can get the passes you come along with us just the same. I'll do the treating and glad to at that."

"Count me in on that," emphasized Jimmy. "My dough is yours, Iggy. You can draw on it till it gives out."

"Same here," smiled Roger, who had been signally touched by the broken little tale of sacrifice.

"No, no!" The Pole's tones indicated stubborn finality. "I can no do. Thank. You are the too good all. I know; un'erstan'. I have for me what you call it, the respet. So mus' I the no say an' stay by the camp. You ask me more, I no like; feel fonny mad!"

Ignace's characterization of hurt self-respect as "fonny mad" raised a laugh. That, at least, did not disturb him. He merely grinned and remarked tranquilly: "You make the fon one poor Poley." [96]

The plan for a journey into Tremont, having been duly discussed, it but remained to the three young men to obtain the desired passes for Saturday afternoon. Tremont was the only city of importance within a radius of seventy-five miles. It lay about twenty miles east of the camp. Soon after the making of Camp Sterling a line of automobile busses had sprung up to do a thriving business between there and Tremont. There were also many regularly licensed jitney automobiles that went to and fro for the accommodation of both soldiers and visitors, not to mention their own individual profit.

"We can go to Tremont in one of those Cinderella pumpkins for seventy-five cents, or we can give up a plunk apiece and ride in style in a jit. You pays your money and you takes your choice," declared Bob. At first sight he had attached the appellation of Cinderella pumpkins to the big yellow uncomfortable busses operated by a business concern in Tremont.

"Me for a regular buzz wagon. I wouldn't wear out my bones bouncing around in one of those bumpety-bump Noah's Arks if I was paid to ride in it," objected Jimmy disdainfully.

"What's a quarter more beside Jimmy Blazes's delicate little bones!" jeered Bob.

"Did you ever ride in one of those rattle-traps?" retorted Jimmy.

"No, my son, and I don't intend to," beamed Bob. "I've seen other fellows ride in 'em."

CHAPTER XI

THE RESULT OF STAYING AWAKE

"So long, Iggy, old top. We'll be back by midnight," called out Jimmy Blazes from the front seat of the automobile which was to take Roger, Bob and himself into Tremont for their Wednesday outing.

"You'll never know when midnight comes, Iggy." Bob leaned out of the tonneau of the machine, his black eyes twinkling. "Better watch yourself to-night, or you'll be dropping off at eight o'clock, sitting up straight, and morning'll find you flopped over still in your uniform. You

won't have any nice kind brothers around this evening to shake you awake before Taps." Bob teasingly referred to Ignace's tendency to doze off early in the evening while sitting on his cot. "Why not be a hero and stay awake for once just to see that your little Buddies get back O. K.?"

"So will I," assured Ignace with deep decision. "Goo'-bye." The automobile now starting, he nodded solemnly and raised his hand in a familiar gesture of farewell which Bob always called "Iggys benediction style." [98]

"I believe he will, at that," remarked Roger, as the car rolled down the company street. "You shouldn't have told him to do it, Bob."

"Oh, he understood this time that I was only kidding him," was the light rejoinder. "Look who's here!" he exclaimed, as the car stopped at a hail from a waiting group of six soldiers.

Crowded into the tonneau with strangers, neither Bob nor Roger saw fit to continue the subject of Ignace. Both were soon exchanging good-humored commonplaces with their soldier companions of the ride.

Once fairly outside camp limits, the load of rollicking soldier boys were soon raising their voices in a lusty rendering of "Where Do We Go From Here?" With the prospect of an afternoon and evening of freedom before them, they were all in high spirits. Traveling a somewhat rough road, the frequent jolting they met with whenever the car went over a bump merely added to their hilarity. An unoffending motorist ahead of them, driving along in a somewhat rickety runabout, presently became an object of marked concern. A running fire of military commands gleefully shouted out at the swaying machine as it lurched along soon caused its luckless driver to speed up and scuttle out of sound of the derisive calls which greeted him from the rear. Uncle Sam's boys were out for fun and intended to have it. [99]

An hour's ride brought the revelers into Tremont. Arrived in the heart of the city, which boasted a population of about one hundred thousand, Jimmy, Bob and Roger took friendly leave of their noisy fellow travelers.

"Now where do *we* go from here?" asked Roger, as the trio halted together on a corner of Center Street, Tremont's main thoroughfare, and looked eagerly about them.

"To a restaurant for grub," was Bob's fervent response. "I know a place where the eats are O. K. I told you fellows that the first newspaper job I ever tackled was on a morning paper in this town. I lived here about three months. Just long enough to make good on the paper. Then I beat it back to the big town and landed with the *Chronicle*. I know every historic cobblestone in this lovely burg."

As none of the three had stopped for the noon meal at Camp Sterling, they lost no time in patronizing the restaurant of Bob's choice.

After weeks of uncomplainingly accepting in their mess kits the wholesome though monotonous rations of the Army, a real bill of fare to choose from was a rare treat. In consequence they lingered long at table and, according to Jimmy, "filled up for a week," before starting out to "see the sights." This last consisted of a stroll through the principal streets, with stops along the way at various shops, there to purchase a few trifles, such as had caught their fancy while pausing to stare into attractive show windows. Then followed a visit to a motion-picture theater, where a feature photoplay was going on. From there they drifted into another "movie palace," and so amused themselves until supper time. The evening was devoted to witnessing a "real show" at Tremont's largest theater. It was a lively farce comedy and the boys enjoyed it. [100]

Meanwhile, Ignace So Pulinski was putting in a most lonely afternoon and evening at Camp Sterling. Temporarily deprived of the lively society of his Brothers, he was at a loss to know what to do with himself. Part of the afternoon he spent in wandering gloomily about camp, frequently consulting the dollar watch he carried, in a wistful marking of the slow passing of the time. Aside from his bunkies, few of the men in his barrack had ever taken the trouble to cultivate his acquaintance. During his first days in camp they had regarded him as "a joke," privately wondering what three live fellows like Jimmy, Bob and Roger could see in "that slow-poke" to make a fuss over. After his wrathful descent upon bullying Bixton, he had undoubtedly risen in estimation. He had signally proved his ability to take care of himself. No longer classed as "a joke" he achieved the title of "that wild Poley" and was accorded a certain amount of grudging respect that made for civil treatment but little friendliness. [101]

By the time the supper call sounded that evening Ignace had reached a stage of loneliness that caused him to sigh gustily as he stood in line at the counter with his mess kit to receive his portion of food.

His china-blue eyes roving mournfully over the long room in search of companionship while eating, they came to rest on the man Schnitzel. The latter looked equally lonely, as he arranged his meal at an unoccupied table at the far end of the room. Owing to the fact that it was a half-holiday, the mess hall was minus at least a fourth of its usual throng. Obeying a sudden impulse Ignace made his way to where Schnitzel sat, and asked half-hesitatingly, "You care I sit here by you?"

"Help yourself," was the laconic response. Nevertheless the German-American's eyes showed a trace of inquiring surprise at this sudden invasion.

"Thank." Ignace carefully set his meat can and cup on the table, and solemnly seated himself beside the other.

"Too much quiet, so is because the many get the pass," ventured the Pole. "I no like ver' well."

"It's all the same to me." There was a note of bitterness in the replying voice. "I haven't any kick coming. I suppose you miss your bunkies," he added, making an indifferent effort at civility. "They're a lively bunch of Sammies." [102]

Ignace stopped eating and stared fixedly at his companion. The latter's dark, rugged features wore an expression of melancholy that woke in him a peculiar feeling of friendliness. "Y-e-a," he nodded. "I miss. Them ver' good my frens, all. I call my Brothar. You speak the American good. You have go by American school?"

Having never before exchanged a word with Schnitzel, Ignace had fully expected to hear the man use broken English.

Schnitzel's fork left his hand and clattered angrily on the bare table. "Why shouldn't I speak English well?" he burst forth, scowling savagely. "I was born in this country. My parents came from Germany, but my father's an American citizen. He hates the Kaiser like poison. I'm an American, not a Fritzie, as a lot of fellows here seem to think. If I wasn't I wouldn't be in this camp training to go over. I enlisted because I wanted to fight for my country. Some people act as if they didn't believe it, though. There's been a lot of lies started about me right in our barrack. I know who to thank for it, too. I've stood it without saying a word. But if it goes on—" He stopped, one strong brown hand clenching. "I was glad you jumped that hound the other day," he continued fiercely. "Wish you'd hammered him good!" [103]

"So-o!" Ignace was not too slow of comprehension to put two and two together. Here it seemed was a man with whom he had something in common. "You see me do him?" he asked.

"Yes. I was there that day and saw the whole thing! I didn't blame you. I hate the sight of him. He bunks next to me, you know. I wish he didn't. But then, what do I care? I can take care of myself. Don't let's talk about him. It makes me sore just to think of him. Those three fellows you run with are good chaps. You were lucky to get in with them. They all treat me fine, though I hardly know them."

Praise of his Brothers caused Ignace to launch forth into the story of his first meeting with them, and of all they had done for him. Schnitzel listened without comment, merely repeating, "You were lucky," when Ignace had finished. With that he relapsed into taciturn silence, hurriedly finished his meal, and with a brief "So long" rose and left Ignace to himself.

The latter, however, was not concerned by his table-mate's sudden relapse into uncommunicativeness. He watched Schnitzel walk away, a gleam of interest in his round, childlike eyes. He would have something pleasant to tell his Brothers on their return. They would be surprised to learn that the "so quiet fellow who never talk" had said so much to him. [104]

His letter to his mother still unwritten, Ignace decided to begin it directly he had cleansed and put away his mess kit. Seven o'clock saw him established at a desk in the Y. M. C. A., laboriously wielding a stubby pencil. This time he wrote in Polish and at some length. It was almost nine o'clock when he finished amid frequent yawns. Realizing that he was getting very sleepy, he took a brisk walk up and down the company street on which his barrack was situated. He was determined to fight off sleep, so as to stay awake until his bunkies' return.

He lingered outside in the crisp night air until call to quarters drove him reluctantly indoors. After Taps, however, his struggle began in earnest.

From the sounds of deep breathing about him he guessed that he alone was still awake. By the time that eleven o'clock had actually arrived he was sure that it was past twelve, and that his bunkies had overstayed their leave of absence. The setting in of this dire conjecture roused him in earnest. He had now no further need to fight off sleep.

His face turned anxiously in the direction of the stairway; he was not aware that across the squad room a man had noiselessly left his cot and was slipping along cat-footed toward one of the three vacant bunks just beyond Ignace's own. Though he heard no sound, that inexplicable sense that warns of stealthy approach wrenched the Pole's straying gaze from the direction of the stairway. [105]

A sudden echoing yell of mingled surprise and anger was followed by the smack of a bare fist against flesh. Came a scuffle of feet and a resounding thump as two bodies hit the floor. The racket aroused the peacefully dreaming occupants of the squad room to startled awakening. As the thumping continued, mingled with hoarse exclamations, enraged sputterings, and the thudding impact of blows, a babble of voices rose on all sides. With it came lights and an exasperated top sergeant bearing down upon the combatants with fire in his eye.

He might have been a thousand miles away so far as the fighters were concerned. They had now gained their feet, and were engaged in battle royal.

"Stop it!" bellowed the sergeant. "Break away! Get back to your bunks, both of you."

Despite his stentorian commands, the fight went on. Clad only in his undergarments, his long fair hair wildly tousled, eyes two blue flames, blood trickling from his nose, Ignace was a sight to be remembered, as he launched a powerful blow at Bixton, his hated antagonist. Bixton looked even worse. The coat of his pajamas hung on him in shreds. His left eye was closed, and his nose was bleeding also. His face was a livid, infuriate mask against which the freckles stood out darkly. [106]

The sergeant now took a hand in the fight. Leaping behind Ignace he wrapped both arms

about the Pole's body, and, exerting all his strength, jerked the belligerent violently backward. Beginning dimly to realize what was happening to him, Ignace retained just enough common sense not to resist, but allowed himself to be flung unceremoniously down on his cot.

"This is a nice state of affairs," lashed out the sergeant, glaring down at Ignace, who had now raised himself to a sitting posture. "Now you stay where you're put. Don't you dare move an inch off that cot." With this he whirled and bore down upon Bixton, who had been dragged to his own cot by another non-com.

"You're a nice-looking specimen," he blared forth at Bixton. "Get those rags off you quick, and go and wash your face. Move lively. Go with him, Quinn," he directed, turning to the corporal, who stood at his elbow. "He's not to be trusted. Get him back here on the jump, and don't let him open his head. The nerve of two rowdies like that setting the squad room in an uproar at this time of night! Not another sound from you, you ruffian," he warned Bixton. "You'll get yours tomorrow."

"It wasn't my fault," began Bixton hotly. "I started to get a drink of water and——"

[107]

"Hold your tongue!" roared the sergeant. "See to him, Quinn." Turning on his heel the sergeant took the center of the floor, and issued a succession of sharp commands that sent the men to their bunks, and brought order and quiet out of the humming confusion. Finally satisfied with the result, he next took Ignace in tow and marched him off for repairs, sternly refusing to allow him to offer a word of explanation. "You can say what you've got to say at headquarters tomorrow," was his grim ultimatum.

When at five minutes to twelve Roger, Jimmy and Bob stole quietly into the squad room, it was apparently wrapped in its usual midnight silence. Nor were any of the three aware of the many pairs of bright eyes that marked their entrance and followed them to their cots.

"Are you asleep, Iggy?" whispered Jimmy softly, as, smiling to himself, he bent over the Pole's cot. He was wondering if Ignace had really taken Bob seriously.

In the darkness an arm reached out and drew his head down to a level with the Pole's own. Into his ear was breathed the amazing words: "I have give Bixton the strong poonch. To-morrow mebbe no more solder. You no speak me more now. Morning I tell you." The voice ceased and the grip suddenly relaxed, as Ignace flopped over on his side with a faint sigh.

Jimmy repressed the amazed ejaculation that sprang to his lips as he straightened up. Before sitting down on his own cot, he slid quietly over to Roger, who was engaged in removing his shoes. "Listen. Iggy's done it," he whispered. "Given Bixton a trimming. He doesn't dare open his head. He's in bad. Pass it on to Bob. I don't know what started it, but, oh, Glory, I wish I'd been here!"

[108]

CHAPTER XII

AN UNEXPECTED FRIEND AT COURT

[109]

During the remainder of the night none of the four Khaki Boys slept much. The very nature of Ignace's fragmentary information was calculated to keep his bunkies awake for a while. Ignace himself tossed restlessly about on his cot. Though his conscience did not trouble him, his nose pained him.

Dropping into fitful slumber just as dawn was graying in the east, he was cautiously awakened a little before first call by Roger, who was always first of the four to open his eyes in the morning.

"Sorry to do it, old man," apologized Roger in a whisper, "but we mayn't have another chance to talk. Get dressed as quietly as you can. I'm going to wake up Jimmy and Bob."

Bob and Jimmy next interviewed, the quartette dressed with noiseless speed. Directly after first call they gathered about Ignace, who in an undertone regaled them with an account of the fight.

[110]

"Now listen to me, Iggy," counseled Bob in low, guarded tones. "When you get on the carpet before the K. O. you tell him just what you told us and stick to it. Don't you let Bixton put it over you. Naturally he'll try it. It'll be your word against his."

"Too bad somebody else didn't see him at his dirty work," muttered Jimmy. "Wish we hadn't gone off to Tremont. Then this wouldn't have happened."

"What you should have done, Ignace, was just to hold onto him and raise an alarm." Roger's face indicated troubled sympathy.

"So think I," protested Ignace. "Get up quick an' try. Him no think I am the wake. Jus' I catch, him yell; hit me the nose. Then am I the mad. Hit too; ver' strong poonch. So is it the fight."

"So is it," commented Bob grimly. "You're in for it, Iggy. All you can do is to speak your little piece, and take your medicine like a lamb. You're in the Army now. Oh, boy!" The rueful intonation of this last brought the flicker of a smile to three very gloomy faces.

"Break away!" warned Jimmy *sotto-voce*, as he sighted Sergeant Dexter bearing down upon them.

As Roger had feared, the sergeant was on the trail of the belligerents, neither of whom were to be allowed to mingle with their comrades, pending the action of the commanding officer, to

[111]

whom he had already sent a written report of the disturbance.

Following one o'clock Assembly that day, came the dread summons that saw both Ignace and Bixton dropped out of ranks and marched off to headquarters under guard, there to give an account of themselves to that awe-inspiring person, the K. O., which is Army vernacular for the commanding officer. It was a highly uncomfortable moment for both when they were brought into the presence of a most austere-faced commandant, whose penetrating blue eyes pierced them through and through, as they came to attention before his desk.

With him was Sergeant Dexter, who eyed the two with an expression of profound disgust. The sergeant was feeling decidedly sore over the whole affair. It put him in an unpleasant light. Having stared the culprits fairly out of countenance, Major Stearns proceeded, with due deliberation, to pick up the report from his desk, reading it aloud in a dry, hard tone that fully indicated his great displeasure.

"This is a full report of what occurred last night?" he asked, turning to Sergeant Dexter.

"It is, sir," replied the sergeant, saluting.

"What's your name? What have you to say for yourself?" he next rapped out severely, addressing Bixton. The man's left eye showed all too plainly the result of that scrimmage in the dark. [112]

"Bixton, sir. What happened last night was not my fault, sir," returned Bixton, almost defiantly. "A little after eleven o'clock I woke up and found I was thirsty. I left my cot to get a drink of water. I crossed the room as quiet as I could, and started down the squad room. I stumbled a little in the dark and stopped for a minute. Next thing I knew a man had jumped on me and was trying to hit me. It surprised me so I yelled right out. He kept on hitting me, so I had to defend myself and——"

"That is no the trut'," came the angry contradiction. Ignace glared righteous indignation at his traducer. "Never I——"

"Silence!" thundered the K. O. "Don't you dare speak until you're told to talk!"

"Scuse," muttered Ignace, too utterly abashed by the rebuke to be soldier-like.

"You state," the Major resumed his inquiry, "that this man here attacked you last night in the dark without cause?"

"Yes, sir."

"Humph! Have you ever before had any trouble with him?"

"Once before, sir." A baleful gleam of triumph shot into the man's pale eyes.

"When and where? Tell me about it."

"One day quite a while ago he was talking loud in barracks when I was trying to rest. I asked him to stop it, and he wouldn't pay any attention. Then I asked him again to stop making so much noise, and he jumped on me just the same as he did last night. He got me down and would have half-killed me if one of the fellows he runs with hadn't come in and pulled him off. As soon as I knew last night who was fighting me I wasn't surprised any more. I knew he'd been laying for me and so——" [113]

"That will do." The major cut him off sharply.

Fixing a severe glance on Sergeant Dexter he asked, "Why didn't you make a report of this first fight between these two men?"

"I knew nothing about it," was the chagrined answer. "I was certainly *not* in the barrack when it occurred."

"Humph!" came the dry repetition. "You seem to be hunting for trouble, my man," was the commanding officer's grim opinion, as he looked poor Ignace sternly over. "If you've anything to say, I'll hear it." The tone indicated that more than enough had already been said. "What's your name? Speak up."

Ignace drew a deep, sighing breath. Raising his head with a proud little air, which he had unconsciously borrowed from Jimmy, he said, with slow dignity: "I am one a Pole, Ignace Pulinski, sir. I am no the liar, sir. Now say I the trut' all. You no believe, I can no help." Quite unemotionally, and with frequent groping for a word that eluded him, Ignace proceeded in his broken speech to give a detailed account of Bixton's repeated churlish conduct toward himself since he had first encountered him in Company E's barrack. Neither did the K. O. interrupt him, but allowed him to go on talking, his keen eyes never leaving the Polish boy's stolid face. [114]

"Yeserday my three Brothar get the pass," pursued Ignace doggedly. "Then I all 'lone. Bob say, 'you stay wake we come back.' I say, 'So will I.' Taps him come, I ver' sleepy, but no go sleep. So wait I an' watch. After while think now is mid the night. My Brothar no yet come. I look to the stair, then, know I no why, look round. I see this man—so." Ignace leaned forward to illustrate. "He have the hand reach out the rack Jimmy, my ver' bes' Brothar. I think he go steal something. Once we write the lettar. Leave on the shelf Jimmy. In morning no lettar. So las' night think him mebbe t'ief. I think catch, keep till sergeant come. Then him yell an' hit me the nose. So am I the mad. Hit, too; ver' strong poonch. So is it the fight," ended Ignace placidly, using the precise words in which he had recounted the fray to his bunkies.

"That's a big lie from beginning to end! He's trying to save his own face." This time it was

Bixton who forgot himself. His face aflame, he turned menacingly upon his accuser. "You dirty, foreign trash——" [115]

"Hold your tongue! Such language is unbecoming enough in itself, let alone in the presence of your commanding officer." The probing eyes of the commandant grew steely, his jaws came together with a snap on the last word. "The stories of you two men don't agree in the least, except on one point," he continued harshly. "You are both guilty of brawling and thus disgracing the Service. Sergeant——" Still standing at rigid attention, the non-com. tried to look even more attentive. "Bring the man you say knows something of this affair from the other room."

Smartly saluting, the sergeant wheeled and stepped to the door of an inner room. Flinging it open he disappeared, to return almost instantly with a soldier, whose dark, rugged face was set in purposeful lines.

"This is the man, sir," reported the sergeant.

Momentary consternation showed itself in Bixton's face as he viewed the unexpected witness; then a sneer played about his lips. Ignace, however, stared at the newcomer in blank, absolute wonder. The sergeant's report, read out by the K. O., had contained nothing about this third party, who, nevertheless, it seemed, had something to say about last night's disturbance. Now the Pole listened with strained attention as Private Schnitzel, the man whose acquaintance he had made only yesterday, made prompt replies to the major's preliminary questions. [116]

"Tell me what you saw last night," commanded the K. O.

"I was awake and saw Bixton leave his cot last night, sir. He crossed the room and stopped, as well as I could see in the dim light, in front of the vacant cots that belong to the men that were away. I saw him reach out his hand. Then I heard him yell and knew someone had caught hold of him. I knew it must be Pulinski who had grabbed him, because he must have thought just as I did that Bixton was up to something crooked."

"Never mind what you thought," frowned the major. "Is that all you saw? You are holding nothing back?"

"That is all I saw, sir. I have told you everything I knew about *last night*, sir, except that I saw the fight and all that happened afterward when the sergeant came."

"What do you know concerning the trouble between these two men previous to this disgraceful affair?" The K. O. had caught the slight stress laid on Schnitzel's words, "last night." "Were you in the squad room when the first brawl between them took place?"

"Yes, sir."

"Give me an impartial account of it." [117]

Schnitzel complied with a terse recital of the occurrence, which in every detail corroborated the statements which Ignace had made.

"Are you ready to take solemn oath, if necessary, that what you have just stated is absolutely true in every respect?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. That will be all for the present. You may go."

Saluting, Schnitzel wheeled and walked briskly from the room.

An oppressive silence fell as the sound of his retreating footfalls died out, during which the K. O. coldly scrutinized the pair before him. When at last he spoke, he addressed himself to Bixton.

"According to the testimony of two men, you were behaving in a suspicious manner when Pulinski attacked you. If you were on your way to get a drink of water, why did you stop to prowl about another man's cot?"

"I didn't stop on purpose, sir," denied Bixton. "I stumbled and nearly fell. In the dark it might have looked different to those two men, though."

"I'd advise you to carry yourself so straight hereafter that what you do won't 'look different' to any man in your barrack," was the sarcastic retort. "Mind your own business, and keep to your own side of the squad room."

"As for you," he stared hard at Ignace, "keep your too-ready fists to yourself. A rowdy who can't control himself isn't fit to be a soldier. Loss of self-control in war time has put more than one man against a blank wall, facing a firing squad. If you see a man acting in what you think is a suspicious manner, report him to your sergeant. Don't fly at him like a savage and start to pummel him. Leave discipline to your officers. That's what they're here for." [118]

"You two men are both guilty of disgraceful and disorderly conduct. If you're ever brought on the carpet again for fighting or misbehavior in barracks it will go hard with you. You will be confined to your company street for thirty days, without privileges and with extra fatigue. If that doesn't teach you soldierly behavior, we have stronger methods of dealing with such ruffians as you."

Having delivered himself of a few further biting remarks relative to his highly uncomplimentary opinion of both men, the K. O. ordered them back to barracks, instructing the sergeant to keep a close watch on them, and see that his orders regarding them went into instant effect.

To Ignace it seemed unbelievable that he should be returning to barracks. He had fully expected to land in the guard-house for at least twenty days. He was divided between humiliation at the rebuke he had just received, and dazed happiness at the thought of again being with his Brothers. He was also deeply grateful to Schnitzel, whom he fully realized had tried to befriend him. [119]

Though the commanding officer had reprimanded both himself and Bixton with impartial severity, Ignace could not know that of the two he had made a far better impression on the "ver" cross major." Behind Major Stearns' impassive features had lurked a certain sympathy for the man who had been too hasty with his fists in the protection of his friend's property. The K. O. was of the private opinion that whereas Ignace had told the truth, Bixton had lied. A keen student of human nature, he had arrived at a fairly correct estimate of the latter. The testimony against him had been too vague, however, on which to hold him for any charge other than that of disorderly conduct. He had, accordingly, been obliged to consider the two combatants as equally guilty. He was strongly of the belief, however, that Bixton would bear watching, and made mental note that he would instruct Sergeant Dexter to keep a special lookout in that direction.

Bixton's face was not good to see as he returned to barracks. He was consumed with a black and unreasoning rage against the world in general. Most of all he hated Schnitzel. Schnitzel had tried to "queer" him. Well, he had failed. Now he, Bixton, would never rest until he "got even" with the "nosey tattle-tale." He would "queer" Schnitzel no matter how long it took him. When he was through, Schnitzel would find himself in for something worse than a "bawling-out" from the K. O., extra fatigue and thirty days' loss of liberty and privileges. [120]

CHAPTER XIII

A CORPORAL AT LAST

 [121]

Returned from drill that afternoon, Bob, Jimmy and Roger were jubilant to learn that Ignace had escaped the guard-house. They were also greatly surprised, and not a little pleased to hear from him of the sturdy stand Schnitzel had taken in his behalf.

"It was white in Schnitzel to do that," lauded Jimmy. "I'll bet it helped some, even if he couldn't say he'd really seen Bixton do anything crooked. I'd just like to know why that sneak was fishing around my cot. After my suitcase, maybe. But what would he want that's in there?"

"Most any little thing that he didn't happen to have and took a fancy to," shrugged Bob.

"More likely he wanted to get at your side of the rack and do some mischief to your clothing," was Roger's sage opinion. "Slash your overcoat or cut all the buttons off it, or do something of that sort. I've heard that he has plenty of money to spend, and that he gets lots of stuff from home. He was out to do something malicious rather than steal. He's the kind of a man that holds a grudge." [122]

"There's something in that," nodded Bob reflectively. "Well, he's canned for a while, anyhow. He'll have to lie low and mind his p's and q's. Hope he doesn't try later to take his spite out on Schnitzel. I guess Schnitzel's not afraid of him, though. What he did for Iggy proves that much."

"Schnitzel's too much of a man to let a sneak like Bixton get his goat," asserted Jimmy. "He'll plod along just as he's done before and pretend not to notice that yellow cur. We ought to do something to show Schnitzel that we think he's O. K. I've never had much to say to him 'cause I've always thought he'd rather be let alone. Now I'm going to make a stab at getting acquainted with him."

"So stab I, too," agreed Ignace promptly, which raised a laugh at his expense.

"You've done enough 'stabbing' to hold you for a while." The smile faded from Jimmy's lips. "Do you know that your thirty days'll be up just one day after Thanksgiving? You've given the 'strong poonch' to a plan of mine. I wanted all three of you fellows to go home with me for Thanksgiving. I'd already fixed it up with Mother. Now you've gone and queered yourself on my account, so I guess we'd all better stay here for Thanksgiving and keep you company." [123]

Ignace eyed Jimmy wistfully. "No," he announced with heroic positiveness, "never you stay here for the Thankgivin'. You go home, along Bob and Roger. You stay here, I am the mad. No speak you, no look you, no nothin'. I am no the pig. You go by Jimmy?" he demanded anxiously of Roger and Bob.

"This is so sudden," murmured Bob. "It takes my breath."

"You and Jimmy will have to settle it between you, Iggy," laughed Roger. "It's not up to Bob and me to choose. All I have to say is that it's mighty fine in you and your folks, Blazes, to want us with you for our Thanksgiving furlough."

"It certainly is," Bob agreed warmly.

"You see?" Ignace turned triumphantly to Jimmy. "Bob and Roger want go by your house. So is it." Having made up his mind on this important point, Ignace was firm.

True to his word, that very evening Jimmy sought out Schnitzel and invited him to go for a stroll about the camp, in company with Bob and Roger. The man's gloomy face brightened perceptibly as he somewhat hesitatingly rose from his cot, laid aside a book he had been reading, and followed Jimmy to the stairs, where his two friends stood waiting. Due to his reticent, stand- [124]

offish manner, it was the first invitation of the kind he had received since his arrival at Camp Sterling.

Bixton's malicious intimations against him had done far less to ostracize him than had his own hurt pride. Keenly sensitive of his German parentage, the first whisper against his loyalty to the Flag had caused him to retreat into his shell.

It is said that out of evil some good must eventually come. The disturbance between Ignace and Bixton resulted at least in awakening in the minds of Iggy's bunkies a genuine interest in Schnitzel, which was one day to prove his salvation. Though he responded rather shyly to their kindly overtures, he made a favorable impression on all three, and, in his reserved fashion, soon grew to be on fairly friendly terms with them. With Ignace he appeared to be even a trifle more at ease. He had not forgotten the little incident of the mess hall. Ignace had come to him at a moment when he most needed companionship. That he was grateful he had summarily proved.

Meanwhile both participants in the fight were feeling the effects of their breach of good conduct. Added to their daily routine of drill was hard work and plenty of it, not to mention the loss of all privileges, confinement to the company street, and the too-searching eyes of the top sergeant keeping tab on their movements.

Ignace did not so much mind the hard work. He had never been used to anything else. Loss of privileges and confinement to the company street were his chief crosses. Though November was fast slipping away, the weather had remained mild. There had been plenty of sunshine and little rain. In consequence, his Brothers spent much of their leisure time out-of-doors, and it grieved Ignace not a little not to be in a position to accompany them on their frequent jaunts about the camp, or on brief expeditions to Glenwood. [125]

Bixton, on the contrary, resented far more than loss of privileges and confinement to company street, the amount of hard work he was made to perform. He disdainfully regarded the various camp labors imposed upon him as servant's tasks. Brought up in idleness by a too-adoring widowed mother, his enlistment had come about as the result of a disagreement with her over money.

From the moment in which he had begun to realize that the Army had "got" him, he had become at heart a slacker. He had been careful not to let it be suspected, however, among the men in his barrack.

Spiteful by nature, he was ready to make any man whom he did not like an escape-valve for his pent-up malice against the military. He had picked Schnitzel as his first victim, but without any special success. The German-American had refused to quarrel with him or notice his petty attempts to torment him. He had accordingly started upon Ignace, thereby drawing down upon himself Jimmy's hearty dislike, which he had returned with equal intensity. As Roger had surmised, Bixton's stealthy trip across the squad room had to do with certain dark designs on Jimmy's equipment, best known to the author of them. The drubbing Ignace had given him, followed by the summons before the K. O., died into insignificance beside the unexpected move Schnitzel had made against him. He now had but one object in life: to "get even" with "that German snake." [126]

If Franz Schnitzel suspected Bixton of harboring plans for revenge, he kept it to himself. When in company with the four Brothers, Bixton's name seldom crossed his lips. Warned by the impetuous Jimmy to "look out for that hound," he merely replied, "I'm not afraid of him." No one save himself knew of the alert watch he kept on himself and his belongings. If Bixton tried to "put anything over on him," he proposed to be ready to hold his own.

With the middle of November came the first signs of approaching winter. Light falls of snow blanketed the camp and the nights grew cold. Thanks to the beneficent efforts of that indefatigable band of Army welfare workers, the Red Cross, Uncle Sam's boys at Camp Sterling were the grateful recipients of extra quilts, sweaters, knitted wristlets and warm under-clothing. Among the more fortunately-situated soldiers, such as Jimmy Blaise, who were already well supplied with every comfort, these unexpected gifts were passed on by them to more needy comrades. Due to delay in the turning on of steam heat in the barracks, these extra quilts were particularly welcome. After the hard day's routine of outdoor drill, the tired soldier boys had on more than one night found their allotted bed covers insufficient against the snapping cold. It was the first real discomfort they had encountered since their enlistment, and the majority of the camp contingent accepted it in the spirit of true veterans. [127]

Veterans they were fast becoming. All traces of the rookie had long since vanished. They had acquired the erect carriage and long, purposeful stride that indelibly marks a man the world over as belonging or having once belonged to the military. Each day saw them engaged in learning or perfecting some necessary part of the soldier's trade. Strenuous practice hikes about camp, bayonet drills, trench instruction, target practice, together with the thousand and one details of military training, now entered into their scheme of life.

Among them all, there was no finer example than Jimmy Blaise of what military training will do for a young man. He was not only a joy to look at, so far as soldierly bearing went. He was also verifying the early promise he had shown of inevitably rising from the lowly private to the rank of a non-commissioned officer. Off duty and among his bunkies he was the same easy-going Jimmy. On duty he was a man who regarded the Service as a religion and lived up to it devotedly. Whatever he was ordered to do he did, with an intelligence and finish which marked him as one who keenly *felt* his responsibility. [128]

No one except himself was greatly surprised when, just a week before Thanksgiving, he received a warrant from Washington, which signified that his appointment to a corporalship had been approved by Major Sterns, his commanding officer. So far as friendliness can be demonstrated in the Army between a commissioned officer and an enlisted man, Jimmy stood well in the estimation of the major.

Strangely enough it was his knowledge of automobiles which had brought him first notice from the commanding officer. The removal of a man, who had acted as the major's chauffeur, to another training camp had caused the K. O. to look about him for a substitute. It having reached the ears of Sergeant Dexter that "Blaise owned a car and knew a lot about buzz wagons," he had promptly acquainted the major with the fact. The result was that Jimmy was detailed one Sunday afternoon to drive the K. O. into Tremont. This trip was the first of other similar expeditions in the major's service. His delight in them was scarcely greater than that of his bunkies. Though Bob and Roger teasingly accused him of "being raised a pet" and warned him against "getting the big head," they were unenviously glad of his good luck. [129]

So it was that when, on the momentous afternoon of his rise from the ranks, he proudly confided to them the great news, they received it with a jubilation second only to his own.

"You're hiking right along on the Glory Road, old man," was Bob's hearty congratulation as he wrung Jimmy's hand.

"Mebbe soon top sergeant," averred Ignace hopefully, his solemn face wreathed with smiles.

"Then you'll lose your bunkie, Iggy," teased Bob. "Top sergeants are rare, exclusive birds, you know. They roost on the roof of the barracks with their heads in the air. They have their uses, though. They stop fights, quell frays and disorders and——"

"Oh, chop it," cut in Jimmy in sheepish protest. "The war'll be over long before I ever get that far. You fellows will probably be corporals, before long. I hope so. I'm not so much." It was Jimmy's favorite summing-up of himself. "Course I'm glad it happened. I guess it was just luck, though. Anyway, I'm going to be a bully good corp. if I can. No half-way business about it. I don't expect to go any higher in a hurry. I wouldn't care to, unless I could take you fellows along with me. I'd rather be one of the four Brothers than a rare bird that roosts on top of the barracks. I'd rather stay with the gang and see what happens." [130]

CHAPTER XIV

ADVENTURE

 [131]

"What's the program for to-morrow afternoon?" demanded Jimmy Blaise of his bunkies. It was Friday evening and the four Khaki Boys had finished their supper and were returning to barracks from the mess hall.

"Most any old thing except hanging around camp all Saturday afternoon," was Bob's fervent response. "Nothing that takes much dough, though. I'm saving my coin for Thanksgiving and the big town."

"Here, too," nodded Roger. "Still I wouldn't mind spending a dollar or so down in Glenwood to-morrow afternoon. A fellow told me about a bazaar that's to be held there for the benefit of the Red Cross. We might take that in. The Red Cross has been mighty good to us. I guess it wouldn't hurt us to help the bazaar along a little."

"I'll do my bit," agreed Jimmy cheerfully. "What's a few plunks to Blazes? He's going home next Wednesday." [132]

"I can no go," stated Ignace automatically. He had said it so many times during the past month that it now fell from his lips like an oft-recited lesson.

"So we've heard you remark before," commented Bob lightly. "Never mind, Iggy, you'll soon be over your troubles. Then we'll give you a bang-up blow-out in Tremont to make up for the unhappy past." Pausing in the middle of the company street Bob raised his meat can on high and exclaimed dramatically, "One week from to-day, Ignace So Pulinski, and you shall walk forth under the open sky and from the narrow confines of the company street, shouting 'Free at last! The past is gone and cannot be recalled but the glorious future——'"

"I do, som' one see, so say I am the crazy," giggled Ignace.

"Come along before someone runs *you* in for a nut," warned Jimmy, seizing Bob by the arm. "Here comes a shave-tail. Try that lingo on him and see what he says." By "shave-tail" Jimmy referred in Army slang to a "second lieutenant."

Four hands went up into prompt action as the lieutenant came within saluting range and passed on.

"He just missed my oration," deplored Bob.

"Run after him and tell him about it," laughed Roger. [133]

"Some other time. I've got to attend a sewing-bee at barracks and I can't play along the way. I've a date with a needle and thread and a few buttons."

"With fingers weary and worn,
And eye-lids heavy and red,

A Sammy sat on his little cot
And counted the knots in his thread!"

caroled Bob. "That's me; Bobby, the Beautiful Seamstress, or Sewing on Buttons Against Heavy Odds. You certainly learn a lot of useful trades in the Army."

Returned to barracks, all four soon busied themselves in the going over of their effects. Saturday morning meant the weekly inspection of their cots and equipment by an officer from the regimental hospital, whose practiced eyes missed nothing in the way of defects. Thus far no one of them had failed to be in readiness for him. Nor did they intend that he should find anything to criticize.

Saturday dawned clear and sunny, with only a suspicion of frost in the bracing air. Having obtained leave of absence for the afternoon, the three bunkies started for Glenwood directly after the noon mess, Ignace accompanying them as far as the end of the company street.

Arrived at the main street of the drowsy little town, their first move was to find the building which held the Red Cross bazaar. [134]

On entering, the three Khaki Boys found the place already well filled with Glenwood civilians and soldiers from Camp Sterling. For an hour or so they amused themselves strolling about the big room, lined on three sides with gaily decorated booths, each with its own attraction in the way of salable commodities. After conscientiously doing their bit in the way of purchasing a number of articles that caught their fancy, they left the bazaar and wandered on down the street to a bowling alley.

It was four o'clock when they emerged, each well pleased with the score he had run up. After a brief stop at a drug store soda fountain for hot chocolate, Bob was of the opinion that camp was almost as exciting as Glenwood and that they had better be beating it up the road.

Frequent side-stepping to allow the passing of jitneys to and from camp finally moved Bob to propose impatiently, "Let's get off this turnpike and hit it up across the fields. It may be a little bit roundabout but we've lots of time to get back to camp."

Roger and Jimmy agreeing, the trio left the highway, leaping a stump fence and striking off across a meadow, the withered grass of which still showed patches of green. Crossing it they went on to another field, which continued level for a little way, then sloped gradually downward. Coming to the point where the descent began, three voices were suddenly raised in a concerted shout. Their eyes had simultaneously spied at the foot of the slope that which had evoked the outcry. [135]

"Come on!" yelled Jimmy, breaking into a run. "It's an aeroplane. Looks as though it had flopped. Maybe someone's hurt or killed!"

With a shout, a figure emerged from behind the fuselage of the quiescent plane and stood still, gazing straight at the rapidly advancing trio.

"One man alive!" yelled Bob. "Hope he's the whole show! Hey there! Anybody hurt?"

"Nope," came the cheerful hail. "Old Auntie's just wanted to take a rest. She takes 'em once in a while. She's all right now. We were getting ready to go up when we heard you yell."

With this reassuring information the speaker stepped forward, halting a few paces from the newcomers. Close survey of him showed a grinning, boyish face, looking out from a close-fitting hood. It was lighted by two dancing blue eyes, bluer by reason of their heavily marked brows and thick black lashes.

"Gee!" exploded Jimmy. "We thought it was a sure-enough smash-up! Some plane you've got there. Mind if we take a look—"

He broke off abruptly, his gray eyes widening. From the elevator of the motionless plane a stooping figure suddenly straightened up. For an instant Jimmy was under the impression that he was seeing double. "Why—what—" he gasped, as he stared stupidly at this second youth, so identically like the first, even to his wide grin. [136]

"Twins!" Bob's quick brain had instantly grasped the situation. "Well, I'll be jiggered!"

"How did you guess it?" laughed the youth they had first addressed. "You don't think we look alike, do you?"

"Not enough so that I'd ever be able to tell you apart," retorted Bob, his black eyes twinkling.

"Oh, that's easy enough when you know us," was the jesting assurance of the other twin. "We never have any trouble about it ourselves. I wouldn't have to be a detective to spot where you fellows live. How's Camp Sterling, anyway?"

"It's there yet. At least, it was still there at one o'clock." Bob's voice quivered with amusement. His face betrayed a lively curiosity, which was plainly reflected on the features of his companions. To suddenly come upon an aeroplane taking a rest in a hollow and presided over by a couple of youngsters, so identical in every respect, even to a wide, good-natured grin, was adventure, to say the least.

CHAPTER XV

THE TWINKLE TWINS

Unable to restrain his own wonder, Jimmy burst forth impulsively, "Say, where did you two come from? You don't belong around here, do you? That's the first plane I've seen since we struck Camp Sterling and said 'I do.'"

"We live about thirty-five miles from here, out in the country. We're the Twinkleton Twins," came the smiling answer. "That's no joke. The name, I mean." He had noted Jimmy's involuntary half-frown. "We're Twinkletons all right. John and Gerald. I'm John and he's Gerald. Only we get Jack and Jerry, or the Twinkle Twins, mostly. Oh, it's great to have a double!" he added drolly, his Cheshire grin reappearing.

"It sure is," echoed his brother, duplicating the wide smile.

"Well, Twinkle Twins, we're glad to know you." Bob held out his hand. "I'm Bob Dalton, and these two Sammys are Roger Barlow and Jimmy Blaise—Blazes, I mean." [138]

"Jimmy Blazes! That's a hot name," commented the twin who had first spoken, as he shook hands with Roger and Jimmy. "Pretty near as good as Twinkle Twins."

"Pretty near," agreed Jimmy with a heartiness that bespoke lively approbation of the merry-faced strangers. His glance roving over the aeroplane, he added: "It must be great sport to sail around in that. Beats a buzz-buggy all hollow!"

"That's us. We have a racer, but we haven't used it much since we got Auntie, here."

"Auntie!" repeated Roger in an amused tone. Thus far he had let Bob and Jimmy do the talking. "Talk about names! That's a funny one for an aeroplane."

"She's an Antoinette, but we call her Auntie 'cause it's quicker. She's a near and dear relative. See?" explained Jack Twinkleton. "She has a history, too. You'd never guess who used to own her, so I'll tell you. You've heard of Emile Voissard, haven't you?"

"Well, rather!" exclaimed Bob. "He's the wonderman they call the 'Flying Terror of France.' I've seen a lot of pictures of him. He's done great work in the air for the Allies. Never expected to meet anyone who knew him, though." Bob's features registered profound admiration.

"He's a cousin of ours," proudly informed Jerry. "Our mother was a Voissard. We're half French and the rest English. This plane is a back number. Emile was over here with it before the war began, giving exhibition flights. We lived in California then. He used it a lot out there. About the time he got ready to throw it on the scrap heap we made him give it to us. The engine was on the blink, etc., and he said it was a safe proposition for us, because we'd never be able to do more than run it over the ground. We tinkered at the engine a long while, but we finally made her go, and Auntie's been using her wings more or less ever since." [139]

"We only came east last July. We were in Stanford University," chimed in Jack. "We're a pair of 'orfin' twins. Used to spend our summers with an aunt in California, but she couldn't stand us after we got the flying habit. We got on her nerves. So she shipped us and Auntie out here to an uncle of ours. It suited us, though. He has a fine country place. He's a chemist and spends most of his time hanging out in his laboratory. Doesn't care much what we do as long as we let him alone. He's a sort of hermit and sticks off by himself. Now, come on. Jerry and I'll show you around. Guess you've heard enough about us."

With this the Twinkle Twins conducted a most willing trio about and up into the aeroplane, keeping up a running fire of explanation as they pointed out its parts and their uses. From the well-patched taut canvas wings to the once almost useless engine, which they had successfully repaired, they had demonstrated a skill and ingenuity that aroused the Khaki Boys to enthusiastic admiration. They were in the midst of a most interesting experience, consequently they asked questions to the stage of being ashamed to quiz further these affable new acquaintances. [140]

"It's risky when your engine stops all of a sudden. Is that what happened to you this afternoon?" Jimmy ventured a last query.

"Yep," nodded Jack. "When Auntie gets balky then we have to do some volplaning. Take a quick slide down, you know. She's all right; got a fine stability. Oh, fine! Except in banking or running across the wind. Sometimes wish she was a Bleriot. Then again, I don't."

"We love our Auntie, but oh, you dihedral angle!" put in Jerry fervently.

His tone made his listeners smile, though none of them had the slightest idea of what he was talking about. Jack immediately following his brother's remarks with a further account of their flight and descent that afternoon, the Khaki Boys forebore inquiring into the nature of that mystifying term "dihedral angle."

The tour of inspection concluded the twins launched a volley of eager questions concerning the Army and life at Camp Sterling, such as "How long have you been in camp?" "Do you like it?" "How long do you suppose it will be before you go over?" [141]

"Maybe we wouldn't like to give old Auntie a whack at the Boches," declared valiant Jerry. "I'll bet we could do up a few Prussians before we got ours."

"It's this way with us," confided Jack. "We've had practice and made some fair flights. Next week we're off to enlist in the Aviation Corps, if they'll take us. We're just past nineteen, but Uncle Edward has given his consent. We know a little bit about the flying game besides handling the plane. Ever since the war began we've been studying up on engines, machine guns, military law and all that. We can make maps and read 'em too. We'll have to go to an Aero school, if we're accepted, but when we get there we're going to pretty soon show 'em from the start that we're

regular flyers. A good many fellows that go into the aviation corps never see their chance to get off of the ground. But not the Twinkle Twins. We're crazy to go over quick."

"Maybe bob up in front of good old Emile and spring a surprise on him," averred Jerry, who seemed fond of supplementing his brother's remarks with one or two of his own.

"Hope we'll see you again before you go," Jimmy said warmly. "Why can't you come up to camp to-morrow? We'd be glad to show *you* around. We're all going home on Wednesday for Thanksgiving. By the time we get back you may be gone."

[142]

"Much obliged for the invitation. We'll take you up on it and drive over to-morrow afternoon in the racer. We went up there once when we first came east. Since then we've been pretty busy with Auntie. Never happened to fly so near Sterling until to-day. We've always started off in other directions. You'll have to wise us where to find you and all about it. We don't want to miss seeing you."

"Tell us what time you'll be there and we'll meet you in front of the Y. M. C. A.," proposed Roger. "How about two P. M. to-morrow?"

"O. K.," replied Jack.

"That'll suit us," from Jerry.

A cordial but hasty handshaking all around, and the Khaki Boys departed, casting frequent backward glances at the aeroplane. Its owners had already begun to busy themselves with "Auntie" preparatory to taking flight.

"It must be great to fly," glowed Bob. "Those twins are wonders. I mean the way they've rigged up that plane and all that. I had to smile to myself, though, at what that one said about flying Auntie against the Boches. You can figure how long that little light-weight, with its patchy wings and misfiring engine, would last against a Fokker. Bing, bang! Away goes Auntie; all shot to pieces. They've got the proper spirit, just the same."

[143]

"Wish we would meet 'em again in France," emphasized Jimmy.

"I was struck dumb when they claimed Voissard as a relative," declared Bob. "If it hadn't been for that Red Cross Bazaar we'd never have met the Twinkle Twins. Talk about looking alike! They certainly are the original duplicates. But for goodness' sake, what's a dihedral angle?"

"Don't ask me. You know more about planes now than either Blazes or I," shrugged Roger.

"I ought to know," deplored Bob. "Never was sent out to do an aeroplane story when I was on the *Chronicle*. I've read quite a lot about planes since the war began. Mostly about the newer types, though. That Antoinette of theirs isn't one of them. It's a fairly old-timer. I'm going to hunt up that dihedral angle puzzle in my dictionary."

Back in camp barely in time for mess, Bob was forced to postpone his search for information concerning the mystifying angle. Returned to barracks from the mess hall he consulted a medium-sized, fat, black dictionary.

"Here you are," he presently informed his still unenlightened bunkies. "Here's a picture of Auntie, and here's a Bleriot. See the difference? See the way the wings of this Antoinette are set in a slight V? There's your old dihedral angle. Look at this Bleriot. Its one plane is set in a rigid horizontal line. Now I'm going to read up on this. Oh, wait till to-morrow. I'll make the Twinkle Twins think I'm the man that taught Cousin Emile how to fly."

[144]

"Those two must have done a lot of studying by themselves," observed Roger. "I suppose being at Standford University has helped them some. I've heard that it's a fine college. Many of its students have gone into the aviation corps."

"Oh, those Twinkles have just absorbed knowledge of aeroplanes like a sponge takes up water," was Bob's sage opinion. "They've made it their chief interest in life. Sort of following in their cousin's footsteps, you know. They're lucky to have had the chance."

"I suppose it's hard for ordinary enlisted men in the aviation corps to get a chance to fly," mused Roger. "Our training must be easy beside what they have to go through."

"Most of 'em haven't the foundation to start with," rejoined Bob. "It takes a trained mind to get away with all a man has to learn before he ever starts to fly. Then again, with all he knows he may never develop into a flyer. It may not be in him to make good. It's a great game, but I'll bet it carries a lot of disappointed sore-heads along with it. I'd never want to tackle it. I'd sure be one of 'em."

The tardy arrival of Ignace who had been on detail in the mess kitchen of late, turned the conversation back to the subject of the Twinkle Twins themselves. The Pole was duly regaled with an account of the afternoon's adventure, to which he listened in rapt silence. Much to the surprise of his bunkies, he earnestly begged his Brothers not to introduce him to the illustrious twins on the morrow. "You no bring here," he entreated.

[145]

"What's the matter with you, Iggy? They won't bite you." Jimmy finally grew a trifle impatient. "We're going to bring 'em up here on purpose to meet *you*, 'cause you can't go to the 'Y' with us to meet *them*. Do you get me? That goes."

"So-o-o!" Ignace looked desperate but made no further objection. In fact he said little more that evening. Apparently losing all interest in his bunkies' new acquaintances, he retired to his cot and occupied himself in a laborious study of Roger's manual, which he had at last begun to "un'erstan'."

When, at precisely two o'clock on Sunday afternoon the twin guests arrived and were presently conducted in triumph to Company E's barrack by their boyish hosts, Ignace was missing from the squad room. Nor did he put in an appearance until just before time for the evening mess, at least half an hour after his bunkies had bade their visitors a reluctant farewell and watched them drive off down the company street in their racer. [146]

"You're a nice one!" greeted Jimmy in pretended disgust. "Where have you been keeping yourself? Maybe you were ashamed to be seen with us! What do you mean by quitting us cold? You're a fine sort of Brother, you are."

Jimmy's energetic salutation brought a dull flush to the Pole's cheeks. His china-blue eyes showed real distress. He gulped, sighed, shifted from one foot to the other, then faltered out: "Never I shame to go by you an' Bob an' Roger. So have I the respet to my Brothar. Such gran' fren' see me, think I no much, think mebbe you no much, too. You tell you have 'nother Brothar, all right, they don't see. They see—" Ignace made a gesture expressive of his lowly opinion of himself.

"Well of all the modest violets, you're the flower of the bunch!" was Bob's satirical tribute.

"You've a nice opinion of us, Iggy." Roger's twitching lips belied his reproach.

"Let's take him over to the shower bath and duck him," proposed Jimmy. "Of all the bosh I ever listened to that's the boshiest. Wake up, Iggy! You're not at a social tea. You're in the Army now, and in bad, too, just on my account. If you ever again do another vanishing act when we're going to have company, you'll be more than in bad with the Army; you'll be in bad with us. You'll be going around hunting three lost Brothers, who quit you because you couldn't tell the difference between a regular fellow and a snob!" [147]

CHAPTER XVI

UNKNOWN, UNGUESSED

 [148]

At noon on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, Roger, Jimmy and Bob said a regretful good-bye to Ignace and sallied forth to the station bound for a four days' furlough with the Blaises. Due to Jimmy's thoughtfulness, Ignace had that very morning received a Thanksgiving box of good things to eat from Mrs. Blaise that had astonished him almost to tears. He had never before come into such a windfall, and his round blue eyes grew rounder when after the departure of his bunkies he explored the contents of this holiday treat.

His first thought was of someone with whom he might share it. Franz Schnitzel appealed to him as most worthy of choice. Like himself, Schnitzel never received either money or gifts from home.

Thanksgiving Day ended Ignace's detail in the mess kitchen. The day following ended his period of punishment. On Saturday afternoon he and Schnitzel obtained passes and went into Tremont for a quiet but happy little celebration of their own. All in all, Ignace was not so lonely as he had expected to be. Though he sorely missed his Brothers, he was unselfishly glad of the good time they were having at Jimmy's home. Evidence of that reached him on Saturday afternoon in the shape of post cards from all three, which he lugged happily about in a coat pocket for a week after their return. [149]

Detail of Schnitzel to kitchen duty on Sunday morning robbed Ignace of his company at breakfast. During the absence of his bunkies, Ignace and the German-American had daily sat side by side at mess, saying little but nevertheless well content in each other's society. They were becoming very good friends.

Sunday noon landed Bob, Jimmy and Roger in barracks with a rush. They pounced upon Ignace with good-humored roughness and plied him with endless questions about himself and his doings during their absence.

"Now for the love of Mike, Iggy, do behave like a little tin soldier until Christmas," admonished Bob. "Jimmy's folks want us with them for the Christmas furlough. That means you. If you happen to see anybody trying to slay us all in a bunch, let 'em try, but you keep out of the slaying. You've done your stretch. Be satisfied. Let somebody else get it in the neck for a change." [150]

It was not until in the evening when the four Khaki Boys were leaving the "Y," where they had spent an hour after mess, that Jimmy bethought himself to ask Iggy, "Did Schnitzel have any trouble with Bixton while we were gone? I heard before we left that Bixton was wild because he had to stay in camp. I thought, maybe, he'd try to take it out on Schnitz."

"No. He no do nothin', no say nothin'. He have the big box to eat he get by home. Himself eat, no give nothin'. All time smoke an' look mad. Schnitzel no care. He stay by me. We are the frens."

"Himself eat," mimicked Jimmy. "I wish he would, and not leave a scrap!"

"You should worry. He's safe for a while. He won't risk any more run-ins with the K. O. for fear of getting canned up for Christmas. Bottled Bixton doesn't look good to him just now." Bob grinned at his own fanciful labeling of the obstreperous Bixton. [151]

"I guess he's about through as a trouble bird," observed Jimmy. "That detail in the mess kitchen must have cured him. I'll bet he hated to go to it."

"Never I like him that kitchen," sighed Ignace. "Schnitzel no mind. He ver' good solder. Say—say— What him say?" Wrestling with memory, Ignace ended with a triumphant, "Him say, 'All the duty him a line'!" [151]

"Oh, wow!" shouted Bob gleefully, slapping Iggy on the back. "That's a funny one!"

"You have the grow stron'er," placidly remarked the misquoter, unruffled by Bob's levity.

Taps that night left the Khaki Boys ready for a quick hike into dreamland. The next day dawned like any one day at Camp Sterling, with a concerted rush on the part of several thousand Sammies to get into their uniforms and line up for roll call.

"With all due credit to our hard-plugging cooks, I'm not what you might call a hearty eater," grumbled Bob to Roger, as the Khaki Boys of Company E stood before the counter in the mess hall at noon. "Mrs. Blaise's cook beats Mrs. Army's hash maidens all hollow."

"It *is* a come down." Roger smiled at Bob's nonsense. "I'm not very hungry, either. I've lost my appetite, I guess, from eating so much sweet stuff. No more of it for me to-day or to-morrow either."

"Nor me." Having received his portion in his mess kit, Bob eyed it with disfavor. "Beans," he commented. "I'll try 'em. This pale, simple, gooey rice pudding— No, thank you. Bobby has chok'lit candy and nice cake in his suit-case. Go 'way, nasty old pudding!"

His scornful repudiation of the unoffending rice pudding was not the only one. Neither Jimmy nor Roger were tempted to the point of trying it. Ignace swallowed one small spoonful and with a disdainful, "No taste nothin," ate no more of it. The glories of his wonderful Thanksgiving treat were still hovering over him, hence his will to criticize everyday fare. [152]

Shortly after one o'clock Assembly something happened to the platoon of Company E men of which the four Khaki Boys were a part. In the midst of drill a soldier dropped his rifle, clapped both hands over his stomach with a deep groan, and, doubling up like a jack-knife, pitched forward to the ground, a writhing heap. Hardly had the lieutenant commanding the platoon reached him when a second, then a third man collapsed in precisely the same fashion.

In the next few moments the lieutenant fully demonstrated his prompt ability to act in the face of an emergency. Taking instant command of the situation, he rapped out his orders with crispness and dispatch. Before aid had arrived, however, from the nearby base hospital, at least a dozen more men were showing signs of the strange malady. These last, Ignace among them, were still able to keep on their feet. Only the first three victims were entirely out of commission.

The arrival of an ambulance, manned by a detail of men attached to the base hospital, saw the work of caring for the sufferers speedily under way. Already ordered to "Fall Out," the still unaffected men of the platoon were dismissed with the order "To Barracks." They were also instructed to report at the hospital at the slightest sign of indisposition. [153]

During the excitement an ominous whisper had winged its way among the dismayed participants in the tragic scene which presently grew to an audible murmur of "Poison!" At that dread word, unspoken questions leaped into the strained eyes of the gray-faced men who had thus far felt no indications of that baleful seizure. In the same instant it had come home to each that in some stealthy fashion one of the myriad secret enemies of Uncle Sam had found his opportunity to strike. In the midst of apparent safety had lurked an unknown, unguessed foe.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WORK OF A FIEND

 [154]

Returned to barracks three more men of Platoon 4, Company E, were added to the list of sufferers from that sinister seizure. As a result those still unvisited by it were promptly ordered to report at the regimental hospital for treatment. The fact that a number of Company E men at drill in other platoons had also collapsed had increased the gravity of the affair to a point that required instant action on the part of the medical department. The symptoms of the peculiar malady were such as to indicate poisoning. They called for speedy investigation and the administering of a precautionary antidote to such of the men as had thus far showed no signs of sickening.

It was the first real catastrophe that had ever struck Camp Sterling and the news of it spread like wildfire throughout the camp. To one and all it seemed almost incredible that a "poison plot" had reached successful culmination in Company E mess kitchen. Undoubtedly it *had* centered there. None other than men from Company E's barracks had felt any ill effects from their noon meal. Yet who could guess as to how far such a calamity might extend? [155]

Released from drill for the balance of the day, the half hour between Retreat and mess that evening marked the ending of a troubled afternoon in Company E barracks. An air of deep gloom hung over the squad room in which the four Khaki Boys bunked.

Bob, Jimmy and Roger were in especially low spirits. Ranged in a dejected row on Roger's cot they were a most unhappy trio.

"It's awful," groaned Jimmy. "Poor old Iggy. He looked ready to croak when they took him to the hospital. What do you suppose it was that poisoned 'em? We ate the same stuff they did and we're all right—yet."

"Don't you know yet what poisoned 'em?" Bent forward, chin in hand, Bob straightened up with a jerk. "I'll tell you. It was the rice pudding. We didn't touch it, but poor old Iggy did."

"By George, that's so! I must be thick not to have doped out that much for myself. I'd forgotten about Iggy's starting to eat it."

"So had I." Roger looked disgusted at his own forgetfulness. "That's why a lot of men didn't get sick. They passed up the pudding, too, because Thanksgiving sweet stuff made 'em finicky." [156]

"I caught it the minute that rain-maker over at the hospital asked me what I ate for dinner," declared Bob. "He gave me a queer look when I told him 'no pudding' and made a note of it. I was going to mention it to you, then I thought I'd wait and let you figure it out."

"Then they must know it already at headquarters," asserted Jimmy.

"Sure they know it," nodded Bob. "Whatever was left of that rice pudding is under chemical analysis by this time. They have to act quickly in a case like this."

"Iggy may pull through all right." Jimmy brightened. "He only ate one spoonful of the stuff. I was watching him. He tried it and said: 'No taste nothin'.' Then he didn't touch it again. I know, 'cause right afterward we all beat it out of the mess hall. What about Simpson, though? I can see him yet, and hear him groan."

Simpson had been the first man to collapse.

"Poor fellow." Roger's tones vibrated with intense sympathy. "He's a fine man and a splendid soldier. I've been expecting every day to see him jump to corporal. Now——" He paused, reluctant to voice his doubt of Simpson's recovery.

"It might turn out not to be poison, you know," said Bob reflectively. "Somebody may have dosed the pudding with something that would make the men deathly sick and yet not finish 'em. Only hope that's the case. This will raise some ructions here in camp, believe me. Every one of those guys in the mess kitchen'll be held for a third degree. No one's supposed to have anything to do with the grub but them. Yet they might all be as innocent as babies. Some fiend may have doctored the rice or the milk before it ever struck camp." Wise in the ways of the newspaper world, Bob was already full of plausible theories concerning the dreadful affair. [157]

"Suppose it was poison, nobody could accuse a man on kitchen detail unless pretty good proof of it came up against him," stoutly asserted Roger.

"They'll grill the whole bunch to a standstill. If any one of 'em shows the least sign of guilt—Bing! Into the jug he goes for trial by a court martial. If he's found guilty, Bang! Porous!"

"I don't believe a man in this camp would do such a horrible thing!" Jimmy's voice rang with intense loyalty.

"We hope not," gravely rejoined Bob. "You can never tell, though. This whole country's honey-combed with spies and myrmidons of the Central Powers. The Secret Service has run down more of 'em than anyone can guess at. I know of a few things from being on the *Chronicle*. Sometimes I've thought we're all asleep over here. But we're waking up. Too bad it took us so long to do it." [158]

"Gee, but I'm glad Iggy went off kitchen duty before this happened! Missed it by only two days!"

"Just in time to get doped, instead of getting hauled up for doping," retorted Bob. "It's about as bad one way as the other."

"Oh, you!" Jimmy grew indignant. "You know I didn't mean it that way. Just the same, I'd rather he'd be in hospital than under a cloud because some others are there. I'd hate to see a friend of mine in bad for——"

"A friend of *ours* is in bad!" Bob fairly bounced to his feet. "Schnitz is on kitchen detail! Great Jehosephat! And he's a German-American, too!"

Into three pairs of eyes leaped a consternation born of this belated reflection. It looked as though Schnitz was in for it.

"Tough luck," emphasized Jimmy, equally concerned over Schnitzel's predicament. "Too bad it wasn't Bixton instead." Jimmy cast an unfriendly glance across the squad room to where Bixton, as usual, lounged on his cot. He also had escaped disaster.

"Oh, come now." Roger could not refrain from smiling. "You don't mean that, Blazes. It's wrong to wish trouble on any man, no matter what he may be. I don't believe even Schnitzel would wish that on Bixton, and he's had to take a lot from that sneak. Schnitz is too——" [159]

"By the way, where is Schnitz?" Jimmy was staring darkly at Schnitzel's empty cot. "Maybe he's in hospital, too. He wasn't at drill, so we don't know——"

"Whether he's in hospital or in arrest," finished Bob significantly, "I haven't seen a man on kitchen detail since noon. You can draw your own conclusions. Right after mess to-night I'm going out news-gathering. I'll bet I find out something, too. I know where I can get some information."

"Mess!" grimaced Jimmy. "I hate to think of it. I'm not hungry enough to risk getting mine to-night."

"We all feel the same," agreed Bob. "They say lightning never strikes twice in the same place, though. I won't be a quitter. I'll take a chance. Probably we'll get something solid to eat to-night"

that it would be hard to doctor. You can look for some new faces in the mess kitchen. Take my word for it."

Bob's prediction was verified almost to the letter. Supper that night consisted of bread, boiled potatoes and beefsteak, served by a new detail of kitchen men. Not one of the old detail was on duty, which went to prove that they were either ill or had been held on suspicion.

The three Khaki Boys never forgot that particular meal. Each felt that every mouthful of food he ate might contain a fatal dose of poison. Iggy's absence also greatly added to their depression. All hoped for the best, yet feared the worst. The same heavy oppression clutched their comrades, who alike had bunkies of their own to worry over. [160]

Bob returned to barracks with Roger and Jimmy, only to sally forth again on his quest for news. Jimmy was anxious to go with him, but for once Bob did not desire company. "Bobby's got to go it by himself," he objected. "You're a lovely young corporal, Blazes, but you don't fit into my plan. 'He travels fastest who travels alone,' you know. Any other time I'd be delighted, but, to quote our dear, I won't say departed, Iggy, 'no now.'"

Tattoo had sounded before Bob reappeared, his black eyes glittering with suppressed excitement. "I've had a busy evening," he announced, as Jimmy and Roger began hurling eager questions at him. "Pile onto my cot and I'll tell you what I know."

"Fire away," ordered Jimmy impatiently as the three gathered together, eager to hear what Bob had discovered.

"First of all, Iggy's better." Bob beamed, as he told this important news. "He wasn't nearly so sick as the rest. He may be back here to-morrow night."

"Hooray!" rejoiced Jimmy, though in a very moderate tone.

"That's fine!" Roger's sober features grew radiant. [161]

"Simpson's gone west." The light faded from Bob's face.

"When—did—he——" Jimmy could not bring himself to say the dread word.

"Soon after they took him to hospital." Bob was silent for a moment. "He—he—suffered terribly. One of those two that dropped right afterward is—is—gone. Brady, that slim, curly-headed fellow, that was always laughing. The other may pull through. All the rest will, I guess. They're pretty sure it was the pudding. Simpson asked for a second portion of the stuff. I'd like to get my hands on the fiend that poisoned it. I'd choke the life out of him!"

"They're taking it hard at headquarters," Bob continued. "The K. O.'s wild about it. Says he'll never rest till he gets the one who did it. That's what I heard. I didn't have a personal interview with him." This last with grim humor. "They gathered in the k. m.'s before they'd finished their work. Don't know what's been done to 'em, so far. Couldn't get a line on that. Don't know whether the story broke in time for an evening extra or not. I couldn't get one. The morning papers will be full of it. There'll be a bunch of reporters on the scene to-morrow. It's hinted that arsenic was used. Nobody'll know that, though, until the pudding's been analyzed and post mortem held on—on——" Bob drew a sharp, whistling breath. "A dog's death for two brave fellows to die," he went on with intense bitterness. [162]

"Yet they died in their country's service," reminded Roger softly. "They did their level best for Uncle Sam while they lasted. Brady and Simpson; splendid boys and good soldiers." Unconsciously, Roger had voiced the finest eulogy that a man could desire to have spoken of him.

"Yes, we mustn't forget that," assented Bob sadly. "This has been a horrible day. I wish I could wipe it off my slate. But I can't. And then there's Schnitz to think of. Anything out of the ordinary happen while I was gone?" he asked with sudden irrelevance.

"Not a thing. Why?" Jimmy detected anxiety in the question.

"I thought maybe there'd be a guard detail sent to go through the kitchen men's stuff. It's too early for that, I guess. You don't suppose Schnitz would have anything among his traps that might look bad for him, do you?"

"What could he have?" wondered Roger. "We know he couldn't have any poison. What else could there be?"

"Nothing." Bob hesitated. "It's only on account of his nationality. You know how Bixton's talked about him. You know, too, why our fellows were poisoned. He's the only G. A. in this barrack. He was on kitchen duty. Now suppose he had some trifle among his belongings that was perfectly all right in itself, but looked fishy to the search party? It's not likely to be so, but it might be." [163]

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CLUE

What transpired the next day seemed to the Khaki Boys more in the nature of a wild nightmare than stark reality. As Bob had foreseen, morning brought a flock of newspaper men from not too far distant cities to the scene of the disaster. [164]

Excitement, however, reached fever heat when the latest editions of the evening papers flaunted black scareheads such as, "Soldier Suspected of Poisoning His Comrades."

"Incriminating Evidence Found Among Soldier's Belongings." "Franz Schnitzel, a German-American, Accused as Poisoner," and similar glaring headlines.

That same morning a guard detail had entered Company E's barracks with instructions to search the belongings of such of the kitchen men detained on suspicion who were housed in those barracks. Nothing of importance had been unearthed except in the suitcase of Schnitzel. What had been found there was deemed sufficiently serious in character to warrant holding him on a charge of murder, to await trial by a court martial. Not only had a medium-sized bottle of powdered glass been taken from the suitcase, but also a typed sheet of paper, listing various poisons, together with annotations as to the effect, length of time required to act, and the more or less deadly qualities of each. [165]

"I'll never believe it of Schnitz. Never!" exclaimed Jimmy Blaise passionately. Tucked into a corner of the "Y" writing room, with Roger and Bob, the three had just finished reading the account of the affair, as set forth in the evening papers. "Schnitz isn't guilty any more than I am."

"Schnitz isn't guilty, of course." Bob gave a contemptuous snort. "In the first place, I don't believe it was powdered glass that went into that pudding. I'll bet the findings of the autopsy and chemical analysis will prove that it was something else."

"Then he'll be cleared of the charge, won't he?" eagerly asked Jimmy.

"Cleared nothing," was the gloomy retort. "He'll be third degreed to a frazzle to make him confess that he used the poison that did the killing. That list of poisons and the bottle of powdered glass are too strong evidence against him to be overlooked. He's been caught with the goods, you might say. I say he's been caught in a trap laid by an *enemy*."

"You don't mean you think that——" Jimmy paused. [166]

"I do mean just that. But before I say more, let me ask you something. Was Bixton in the squad room all last evening while I was out?"

"I don't remember." Jimmy frowned reflectively. "Let me think. I saw him sitting on his cot around seven o'clock. After that——"

"He *did* go out," interrupted Roger. "I saw him go. It was about half-past seven, I guess. He came back in a great hurry, too, about ten minutes before Taps sounded. I was just turning in. You fellows were both in bed. I was thinking about poor Schnitz when I saw Bixton and Eldridge hustle in."

"He's done it then; queered Schnitz just as he threatened." Bob's accusation contained savage conviction. "He put that stuff in Schnitz's suitcase some time during the night. It would be a cinch for him, because he bunks next to Schnitz."

"But how and where could he get the glass in such a hurry?" demanded Jimmy. "There's the list, too. Bixton's not smart enough to make any such list himself. Besides, he wouldn't be able to get hold of a book on poisons in this camp, and he certainly wasn't away from camp in that short time."

"Those are some of the things we must figure out." Bob's lips set in a straight line. "This is no joke. It's a life or death proposition for Schnitz. Very well. Now we're going to keep close mouths and run this thing down." [167]

"Let's go to the K. O. and tell him about it," proposed Jimmy eagerly. "He'd take it up in a hurry."

"Where's your proof to back it?" shrugged Bob. "You can't accuse a man offhand of such a serious thing. No; we must watch and wait and work, and spring the trap on Bix just the way he watched and waited, and sprang the trap on Schnitz."

"We might be too late to do any good," demurred Roger gravely.

"Don't you believe it," disagreed Bob. "This affair won't come to a head in a hurry. There'll be more or less delay and argument over the poison itself. Then there'll be a merry chase for more evidence. The K. O.'s not anxious to see one of our men condemned for murder. There are so many German plots floating around that this business will be thoroughly sifted first. Suppose the poison had been mixed in the rice before it was cooked or put in the milk. All that has to be looked into and it will be. The papers say that the Secretary of War intends to investigate this thing to the limit. That means he's going to give Schnitz a chance for his life."

"Maybe Bixton had something to do with the poisoning," Jimmy theorized. "He's a slacker. We know that. Maybe *he's* a traitor, too."

"Nothing doing." Bob shook his head. "He's only mixed up in queering Schnitz. He saw his chance and grabbed it. I'd sooner think it might be one of the fellows on kitchen detail with Schnitzel than Bixton. Bix and Iggy both finished their kitchen detail at the same time." [168]

"Tough luck." Jimmy vented his feelings in his favorite expression.

"Tough it is, but maybe not forever. My fighting blood is up, and I'm going to camp on the trail of that hound, Bixton, until I get something definite to hang on him," vowed Bob. "I want you two to keep an eye on him whenever you can. Watch where he goes, what he does, and the men he talks with. Be careful not to let him catch you at it, though. That'll be your part of the scheme." Bob rose and rolled up the newspaper he had been reading.

"What are *you* going to do. What's your part going to be?" Jimmy wanted to know.

"Same as yours, only more so," grinned Bob. "I'm going to gather information about that kitchen detail, Bixton, Eldridge and anyone else who needs looking up. I'm going to be an investigator."

Bob's earnest proposal that the three of them take to sleuthing on their own hook fired the enthusiasm of both Roger and Jimmy. Here was a real mystery to solve, more baffling than any they had ever followed in fiction. On their ability to ferret it out rested not only Schnitzel's life, but the saving of his good name from eternal dishonor. [169]

The next two days, however, were painfully devoid of results. Close and constant watch on Bixton developed nothing that could be used against him.

Ignace had now returned to the fold a paler and slightly thinner edition of himself. According to himself he had been "'ver' seek, but no so seek som' other." He was greatly cast down over Schnitzel's plight, and sturdily expressed his belief in the other's innocence. He was equally eager to do whatever Bob advised, and solemnly promised, "Watch all time."

On the afternoon of the third day after Schnitzel's arrest, Jimmy, Roger and Ignace received a summons to headquarters. At a loss to recollect any misdemeanor on their part, they went, wondering mightily why the K. O. should wish to see them. Once in the presence of their commanding officer they met with a shock. Before them, spread out on the major's desk, lay several letters, minus their envelopes, which reposed beside them. Each man was in turn requested to glance over the letter to which was affixed his signature, and state whether he had written it and at what time. It is needless to say that all told the same story. The letters on the major's desk were the letters that had so mysteriously vanished during the Khaki Boys' first week in camp.

Having duly explained this to the K. O.'s satisfaction, they were treated to a second bewildering surprise. These very letters, it seemed, had been found in Schnitzel's suitcase. Major Stearns had opened them, as a point of duty, and had claimed the right to withhold them in order to make an inquiry. Shown to Schnitzel, he had stubbornly denied ever having seen them before. [170]

"You state, Blaise, that these letters were stolen from a shelf over your cot on the same night that they were written?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you any reason for believing that it was Schnitzel who stole them?"

"No, sir. I *know* Schnitzel didn't steal them." Jimmy emphasized the 'know' strongly.

"Why are you so positive that he did not?"

"Because, sir, Schnitzel wasn't that sort. He's a true man, and he's innocent of the crime he's charged with." Jimmy's sympathies overcame his awe of Major Stearns.

"Humph!" The K. O. allowed this opinion to stand unrebuked. He was fond of Jimmy, and rather admired him for his staunch defense of the accused soldier. "Is that your only reason?"

Tardily recalling Bob's injunction to secrecy regarding Bixton, Jimmy hesitated, then cautiously answered: "We were not acquainted with Schnitzel, sir, at the time we wrote those letters. There was no reason why he should want to take them." [171]

"Still you can't give me any proof that he didn't, can you?"

"No, sir." Jimmy breathed freely again.

Receiving this negative, the major proceeded to question first Roger, then Ignace, with practically the same result. Profiting by Jimmy's mistake, neither volunteered more than was necessary. In the end they left headquarters without their letters. The fact that these had been stolen added to the case against Schnitzel.

The Khaki Boys left headquarters in a state of intense excitement, manifested in their eager exchange of remarks the moment they were safely outside the building. Directly after the disappearance of their letters they had suspected Bixton of the theft. His later attempt to get at Jimmy's equipment had strengthened the suspicion. Now the lost letters had, at this late date, turned up in Schnitzel's suitcase. Actual proof against Bixton they had none. That did not matter so much at present. It would come. Why? Because at last they had a clue, or what seemed to them a clue. At least, it was a circumstance that connected Bixton with Schnitzel. If Bixton had stolen the letters that were found in Schnitzel's suitcase, it followed that no one save Bixton would have placed them there, and not only the letters but the bottle of powdered glass and the poison list.

CHAPTER XIX

A FRUITFUL RUBBISH CAN

December heralded many comings and goings at Camp Sterling. With almost every day, a detachment of soldiers marched to the station to return no more. Traveling seaward by circuitous routes, the waiting transports claimed them and bore them away to "Over There." The draft now in full swing, hundreds of men constantly arrived to replace them. Soldiering went on with a rush. Across the water had come the Allies' cry, "More Men!" and Uncle Sam did not propose to be behindhand in furnishing his trench quota. [172]

On the Saturday before Christmas our four Khaki Boys departed in high glee on a four-days' furlough, to be spent with the Blaise family. Only one regret lurked beneath their exuberant joy. It had to do with a forlorn comrade, shut in the guard house, and apart from all Christmas cheer. Schnitzel was still awaiting trial, due to numerous halts in the machinery of military law, occasioned by the thoroughness of the investigation. Once definitely established that Company E's men had been the victim of arsenic poisoning, instead of powdered glass, it became less easy to establish Schnitzel's guilt.

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Grilled over and over again as to where he had obtained the arsenic, his undaunted protest of innocence was not without effect. Undoubtedly he could not hope to escape trial. He was the only man in camp against whom anything incriminating had been discovered. Rigid testings of supplies in the commissary departments had yielded no further traces of poison. This did away with the theory of outside agency, and fastened the opprobrium more strongly on the German-American.

"A friend in need is a friend indeed." Shut off from any possible opportunity to see Schnitzel, the four Khaki Boys did not forget him. Many verbal battles were fought by them in his behalf. Few others beside themselves believed him innocent.

Each of the quartette, including Iggy, had written to Schnitzel cheerful, hopeful letters, breathing firm belief in his innocence. All had planned to buy him some token of remembrance as soon as they went on their furlough.

Bob's secret campaign to gain information concerning Bixton, Eldridge and the kitchen men on duty with Schnitzel at the time of the poisoning had not been specially fruitful. He gathered considerable data concerning Bixton, not specially useful to his purpose, in that it had no bearing on the mystery. What Bob burned to know was the origin of the tabulated list of poisons. He was now certain that Bixton had not compiled it. He suspected Eldridge, but of the latter he could find out little. He was considerably older than Bixton, fairly well-educated, but most uncommunicative except to his bunkie. He claimed Buffalo as his home town, but Bob believed him to be from the middle West. His walk, voice and mannerisms smacked faintly of the Hoosier.

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On the Wednesday after Christmas, the noon train into Camp Sterling unloaded its freight of returned soldier boys, the four Brothers a part of the throng that passed through the big gates, and tramped the snowy roads to their various barracks.

Much to his disgust, Bob found himself "settling down" a good deal sooner than suited him. According to the cold information of Sergeant Dexter, a quantity of discarded wrapping paper, together with numerous ends of string, had been found under his cot on the previous Saturday evening. Rebuked for untidiness, he was condemned to a detail of policing barracks that filled him with righteous wrath.

"I can guess who was to blame for that," he sputtered angrily to Jimmy. "Eldridge put up that job on me. Bix went away on the same train we did. The other sneak didn't. It's up to him. I know it."

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"Funny he didn't do the same to the rest of us," commented Jimmy.

"Oh, he wasn't particular as to which of us got it," snapped Bob. "Probably he just dumped those papers and beat it in a hurry. Makes me sick. It's the first time I've got it in the neck since I came to Sterling. I don't mind the detail. It's being dished that makes me sore. The worst of it is, I couldn't say a word. Just had to stand and take it from the Sarge."

"Oh, well, it's no great disgrace," comforted Jimmy. "Think of poor Schnitz."

"I am and I have. Do you realize that his trial is bound to come off before long? According to our manual, thirty days, with an additional ten added if approved by military authorities, is the longest a case can hang fire. I don't know whether that holds good in Schnitz's case. I should think so, though. Anyhow, we've not done a thing for him. We've got to get busy and do something."

"What?" Jimmy made a gesture of despair.

"I don't know yet, but I do know that it's got to be done mighty soon." Bob shot a baleful glance across the squad room toward Eldridge, who was seated cross-legged on his cot, undoing a small package. "Look at him!" muttered Bob, as the man proceeded to tear the outside wrapper into strips. "More rubbish for Bobby to cart away."

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Jimmy's eyes followed Bob's. Suddenly he gripped the latter's arm. "Maybe he got that package in the mail. Maybe it's from his home. Maybe—"

"Great guns!" exclaimed Bob softly, and swung round, his back toward Eldridge. "Don't let him see you rubbering, Blazes. You've given me a jolt, though. I'm going to watch what he does with those strips of paper and nab 'em. Oh, boy! Why is Bobby on police duty?"

The paper presently went into a receptacle at one end of the squad room, provided for that purpose. When supper call sounded, Bob declined to answer it. "You fellows go ahead," he directed. "I don't want any supper. Later on I'll go down to the canteen, and fill up on cakes and milk. This is my chance, and I'm going to take it."

The moment the squad room had emptied itself, Bob sped to the rubbish can. Fortunately for him, the scraps of paper he sought were of a dull grayish green, and thus easily distinguished from the rest of the can's contents. Quickly, but thoroughly, he searched, making sure that he had every scrap of the paper he sought in his possession. Too shrewd to attempt to piece them

together in the squad room, he wrapped them in a handkerchief, and hurried off to the Y. M. C. A. [177]

It was over an hour later when he returned to barracks, his black eyes snapping with triumph.

"I know what I know," he exulted, dropping down beside Jimmy, who was seated on his cot. "Come on outside and I'll show you something. Where are the fellows?"

"They just went over to the canteen. Rodge wanted to buy some soap to do his family washing with. I told 'em I'd wait here for you."

"Let's find 'em. I'm going canteenwards myself to feed. We'll probably meet 'em there."

"Now show me," demanded Jimmy, the moment they were out in the company street.

Bob took a small flashlight and something else from a trouser's pocket. The "something else" was a half-sheet of paper. Training the flashlight upon it, he read, "'Alice E. Eldridge, 1205 N. Clark St., Chicago, Illinois.' That's a return address. I copied it, then got rid of the papers. Had a great time piecing them together. Regular Chinese puzzle. Now this is what I'm going to do. I've a friend on the *Chicago American*. As soon as I feed, I'm going back to barracks and write to him. I'll send him this address, and ask him to get me all the data he can about the Eldridge family."

CHAPTER XX

A LEAP IN THE DARK

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Thursday, the day following the writing and mailing of Bob's letter, brought its own surprises. Came the order that a part of Company E's men, along with a number housed in other barracks, were to be transferred to a camp many miles south of Sterling. This in itself was to be expected. The majority of the men ordered to pack received the command with admirable tranquillity. It threw the four Khaki Boys into panic, however. Not because, with the exception of Jimmy, they were to be among those to go. Even Jimmy was to return. He was to have the proud honor of going along merely to help escort the detachment to their new quarters. What upset the equanimity of the four Brothers was the fact that Bixton was among the number to be transferred. Fate had evidently elected that Bixton should not suffer for his villainy.

Corporal Jimmy was divided between pride in the coming detail and discouragement of the defeat of their crusade of Justice. [179]

"I'd be all puffed up with pleasure over this trip if it weren't for this business about poor Schnitz," he confided to his bunkies on the Friday night before the start.

"I never thought I'd hate to see the last of Bixton," grumbled Bob, "but I certainly do. It puts a crimp in the Slippery Sleuths' Society, all right, all right. Anyhow, Eldridge is left. We may be able to tree him. Keep your eye on Bixton, Blazes, all the way down. You might just happen to stumble upon something."

"I would by Jimmy go, the care to him take," broke in Ignace. Up to this point, he had watched his favorite Brother's preparing for sleep in round-eyed, gloomy silence. "You take the good care yoursel', Jimmy," he anxiously enjoined. "You get the hurt never I smile more."

"You never smile anyway, you old sobersides." Jimmy flashed him an amused, but affectionate glance. "Don't you worry about me, Iggy, 'cause I'll come back safe and sound. I'm not going across. I'll only be gone four days."

"We'll sure miss you," declared Bob. "Now I move that we turn in, too, and let Blazes alone. He has a hard trip ahead of him, and he needs a long night's rest. You'll be up first in the morning, old man. If we're asleep, waken us so we can say good-bye and good luck."

Bob and Roger were awake as soon as Jimmy. Ignace, however, slept peacefully on until Jimmy roused him to say a hasty good-bye. Three pairs of affectionate eyes watched Corporal Jimmy to the stairway, their owners sincerely glad that they had the assurance of his return. There was but one Jimmy Blaise. [180]

Marched to the station under the graying light of a cloudy dawn, the majority of the departing soldier boys were in good spirits. The detachment numbered a little over three hundred men, including a sergeant and two other corporals besides Jimmy, who would return to Camp Sterling with him once their detail had been accomplished. Brimming with the adventurous spirit of youth, the travelers were, for the most part, exultant to be at last on the way "to the front."

Yet in the breast of one of the gallant little company, mingled fear and resentment raged. Bixton was taking the removal very badly, though no one save himself and Eldridge knew it. On the previous night he had unburdened himself to his bunkie in a bitter denunciation against the Service.

"Once they get you in the Army, they use you like a dog," he had savagely asserted. "Expect you to crawl to every smarty that wears chevrons, treat you as if you were dirt, and then think you ought to run all the way to France to get croaked. It would serve this country right if it lost out in this war. I was a fool to enlist. I could have side-stepped the draft. A lot of fellows have. Don't see why I should make a target of myself for a government that don't care a hoot about me. I don't want to die. I want to live." [181]

Now started on his way toward the thing he most dreaded, Bixton had determined to take the bit in his teeth and bolt. From the time he entered the train he busied himself with concocting

schemes for a successful get-away.

As the day wore on toward evening, Bixton grew desperate. He had managed on entering the train to place himself in a seat near the rear end of the last car. Only a few feet from the rear platform, it seemed impossible to win it without being observed. To add to his difficulties, Jimmy Blaise was also in the same car as himself. To be sure, he made frequent trips to and through the two cars ahead, specially reserved for the detachment. Still, he appeared to be spending most of his time in the last one. Bixton regarded this merely as a "happen-so."

Following Christmas, the weather had moderated. A thaw had set in on the Wednesday afterward that had rapidly turned the recent snowfall to slush. Two days of brilliant sunshine had left the ground fairly bare of white. Dawn that morning had hinted of rain before evening. Bixton fervently hoped that it would rain. Given an early twilight, and a pitch-black night, he could make good use of it.

By nine o'clock that evening the rain had come—a slow, dispiriting mist, reinforced later by a heavy fog. It was an ideal night for a deserter. Hunched in his seat, Bixton feigned a drowsiness he was far from feeling. From under his half-closed lids his pale blue eyes divided their vigil between his companions and the foggy world glimpsed through the car windows. As time dragged on the low hum of voices around him began to die out. One after another grew sleepy and dozed off. By ten o'clock comparative silence reigned. Occasionally a soldier roused himself with a jerk to make a trip to the water cooler directly behind Bixton. [182]

At five minutes to eleven o'clock, Jimmy Blaise walked through the car, and dropped rather wearily into a vacant seat on the opposite side from Bixton, but a little ahead. Jimmy was beginning to feel the strain of the long day's responsibility. Still wide awake, he felt very tired, but well content. Everything was moving along smoothly. Half the trip had been made, and all was well. Not a man had yet attempted to desert. He doubted if anyone would. Even Bixton had behaved like a lamb. Small chance now of doing anything for Schnitz. With this thought Jimmy's contentment vanished in a rise of bitter reflection against the injustice of Fate. Poor Schnitz! How terribly he had been already misjudged! And the worst was yet to come! With a deep sigh, Jimmy closed his eyes and leaned back in the seat, sick at heart. [183]

For perhaps ten minutes he remained thus, eyes closed, but otherwise keenly aware of his surroundings. Due to increasing fog, the train was running more slowly over a flat stretch of country, the roadbed of which was almost level with the rails. Alert to catch every sound, the monotonous hum of the train itself, as it sped along through the night, had a slightly blurring effect on his acute hearing powers—not great enough, however, to prevent him from distinguishing above it a faint click from behind him. It brought him instantly to an erect sitting posture, his head turned in the direction whence it had come.

There came a muffled cry, a flash of olive-drab down the aisle, the reverberating slam of a door; then silence. At intervals throughout the car, drowsy heads bobbed up, the glances of their owners sleepily directed toward the rear door. Several of their comrades nearer to the door than themselves were up, and making for it. Undoubtedly, something unusual had happened. But what? They could not then know that already some distance behind them, two soldiers, mud-plastered, and shaken by their mad leap in the dark, were, nevertheless, engaged in the fight of their lives. A battle in which Honor strove against Dishonor; a conflict between Loyalty and Disloyalty.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FIGHT

Shut in on all sides by the fog, ankle deep in the mud, Corporal Jimmy Blaise and Private Bixton were locked in a savage grip, from which one of them fought desperately to free himself. Bixton had no will to fight—he wanted to run. Once clear of his hated antagonist, he could dash off into the blackness, and defy pursuit. Only one man stood between him and liberty. He had risked too much already to endure defeat and capture. He *must* break away.

Jimmy was as fully determined in an opposite direction. Reckless disregard for himself had caused him to act with his usual impetuosity. He had reached the door just in time to see Bixton about to swing off the train. In the next instant he had followed his quarry. Luckily for him, the force of Bixton's descent had sent him sprawling in the mud, for an instant stunned. Had the train been going at full speed, he must undoubtedly have been killed. Jimmy, on the contrary, had landed on his feet like a cat. Turning instantly, he ran back to where Bixton was just picking himself up. [185]

With a hoarse shout of triumph, Jimmy leaped upon Bixton and slammed him back to earth. Simultaneously with the onslaught, Bixton's brain began to act. His long, wiry arms flung about Jimmy, he put his full strength into use. Over and over in the mud they rolled, neither able to gain the advantage.

It was a sickening struggle, calculated to wear out both combatants in short order. The collapse of one meant the supremacy of the other. Evenly matched in sheer brute strength, it soon became a test of which could endure longest.

Forced by the growing knowledge that he was beginning to weaken, Jimmy came into a last fierce rush of strength that tore him free of that devastating hold. Before Bixton could rise, Jimmy was upon him like a whirlwind, striking ferociously in the dark. His first blow landed full on the

deserter's chest, eliciting from him a deep groan. It was followed by a rain of blows planted with all the strength that Jimmy had left in him. Nor did his arm cease to descend until it began to dawn upon him that he was having things all his own way. He had won; knocked out Bixton. Perhaps he had killed the man. He hoped not. If he had— Jimmy slid off his foe's motionless body, and groped in his trousers' pocket for his flashlight. It had no doubt been wrecked, he thought. He found it, fumbled it over in the dark. A white light sprang into being. Turning it directly on Bixton, Jimmy proceeded to make investigation.

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He finally raised up with a relieved sigh. Bixton was breathing. Now came the question of what to do next. Bixton would have to be put past the power of doing further fighting that night. Perhaps he was, already. Jimmy intended to take no chances as to that. Bixton must be tied. But with what? Hastily rising, Jimmy went through his pockets, producing two handkerchiefs. Studying for a moment, he bent down and turned Bixton over. With one handkerchief he bound the man's hands tightly behind his back, with a secureness that was warranted to hold. This finally done, he again paused to consider.

His money belt next went to decorate Bixton. Of soft, pliable leather, he managed with some difficulty to tie it about Bixton's neck, allowing sufficient laxity for breathing, but that was all. Tearing the other handkerchief diagonally across, he knotted it together, twisted it into a rope, and knotted one end of it around the belt. Now he had a halter by which he purposed to lead Bixton, provided he was able to walk. It would not be a pleasant business, but it was the only way. All he could now do was to await the awakening of his captive.

That awakening took place about ten minutes after Jimmy had concluded his preparations. It began with moans, was succeeded by indistinct mutterings, and ended in a volley of curses, as Bixton endeavored to sit up, only to find that something peculiar had happened to his arms. Promptly getting behind him, Jimmy helped him to his feet, not forgetting to obtain a good grip on the improvised halter.

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"Now listen to me, you deserter," he began sternly, still behind his man. "I've got you where I want you. You can't get away from me. If you try to you'll only succeed in shutting off your own wind. So don't start anything. I've put your arms out of business, too. You've still got a pair of legs, though, and you're going to use 'em. We're going to start now for somewhere. You'll be ahead and I'll be about two feet behind you, treading on your heels. We'll follow the railroad track until we get to some place where I can hand you over as a deserter. But before we start you're going to tell me a few things."

Bixton's only reply was a series of violent jerks that soon ceased. Half-strangled by his efforts, and still groggy from his recent punishment, he soon ceased struggling, and stood still.

"Thank you." Jimmy's voice quivered with irony. "Now I guess we're ready for our talk. First, where did you get that list of poisons, and that bottle of powdered glass that you put in Schnitzel's suitcase? I know you stole our letters, and put 'em with the other stuff."

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"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't lie. You do know. Answer me with the truth." Jimmy jerked the halter.

"Stop that! Do you want to kill me?"

"You won't die. Don't worry about that. Now tell me quick, or I'll repeat my little halter stunt." Realizing that he had a coward, as well as a villain to deal with, Jimmy pretended a cold-bloodedness which he did not feel. He had no desire to do Bixton personal injury. He was merely set on wringing a confession from him.

"I don't know anything about a poison list," quavered Bixton. "I pounded up the glass myself, and put it in that Fritzie's suitcase for a joke. I took your letters to get even with you. I kept 'em till I got a chance to stick 'em onto Schnitz when they'd raise a fuss."

"It's a pretty streaked joke that will put a man in prison on a murder charge. Anyway, you've admitted it. You'll do it again as soon as we get to where you can make a full confession and sign it. After that you can answer to a charge for deserting from the Service. Now, Forward March, and remember I'm right with you. The track's straight ahead."

It is difficult for one man, wholly unimpeded, to travel sure-footedly in the darkness. A journey such as Jimmy made that night, in company with Bixton, he regarded ever afterward as the supreme feat of his military career. The night wore on, and the fog lifted, but still that strangely assorted pair tramped the ties, stepping off twice to let trains go by them, which Jimmy vainly hailed. Toward five o'clock the myriad lights of a large town began to gleam ahead of them. Traveling with such painful slowness, Jimmy had no idea of how far they had walked. Neither did he care. All he wanted was to reach some place where he could rid himself of his detested captive.

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It was half-past five when they entered the railroad yards of the town. Dawn just beginning to show in the east, their first encounter was with a railroad policeman who stood transfixed in the middle of a yawn at sight of them.

"Hello, there!" hailed Jimmy. "I need you. This fellow is a deserter. He was on the way to Camp Abbott and jumped the train. I jumped after him and nailed him."

"It's a lie," shrieked Bixton. "He's the deserter. It's the other way round. He deserted and I jumped off after him. We had a fight and he nailed me. I—"

"I'm Corporal Blaise from Camp Sterling." Jimmy pointed to the insignia on his sleeve. "I was

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sent to help conduct a detachment of men to Camp Abbott. What I want to do is to turn this man over to you, so that I can telegraph my K. O. After that he has a confession to make that I want taken down before proper authorities and signed."

"You're a pretty smart Sammy." The policeman viewed Jimmy with admiration. "Now you just let me handle this. I'll run this yellow dog in while you go and get cleaned up and do your telegraphing. You'd better take time to eat a bite, too. Afterward you take a hike up to Station House No. 10. It's about three blocks from here. You can find it. That's where this un's going on the jump. Some harness you put on him! Guess you give him a mud bath and took one yourself. You're a good 'un, blessed if you ain't."

"Oh, I'm not so much." Jimmy grinned, his face flushing under its liberal coating of mud. "Well, I'm going to beat it. So long."

Heading on a run for the nearby railroad station, Jimmy felt in a pocket and fished up the little wad of notes he had extracted from his money belt before decorating Bixton with it. Entering the station telegraph office, he sent his message.

"Guess that'll give 'em a surprise at headquarters," he reflected as he left the telegraph office. "It's been some night and it's going to be some day. A fine, peaceful, quiet Sunday at that. I'll have to stay here, I guess, until I'm told what to do next. But, oh, boy! Wait till I get back to Sterling!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE ROUND-UP

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Meanwhile at Camp Sterling, Saturday and Sunday passed uneventfully for Jimmy's bunkies. Following Retreat on Monday afternoon Bob was called to the company post-office to sign for and receive a special delivery letter. He rushed back to barracks in a state of jubilant excitement. Calling Iggy and Roger to him, he read it to them just above a whisper. It was from his newspaper friend in Chicago. He had gone out to look up Eldridge on the same day he had received the letter. It had been no trouble to gather information concerning the man. He had gone straight to the given address, and inquired for Eldridge, pretending to be an old acquaintance who had lost track of him. He had been received by the man's sister and by adroit questioning he had learned much. Eldridge, it seemed, had been a prescription clerk in a drug store until shortly before his enlistment.

Obtaining the name of the druggist from the sister, he had later that day visited the store and learned that Eldridge had been discharged by his employer for reasons which the druggist declined to state. He characterized Eldridge as a sneak and unreliable. The writer of the letter ended by saying that he hoped the data would be of use to Bob in helping to clear Schnitzel.

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"I've found out now the thing I wanted to know most. It's a safe bet that Eldridge furnished the poison list. A prescription clerk would of course understand a lot about poisons and their effects. He'd be pretty sure to know typing, too. Most medicine labels are typed."

"What shall you do about it?" asked Roger. "Put it up to Eldridge he'll just deny it."

"I shan't stop at him. I'm going to the K. O. after mess to-night. What I've discovered isn't much but it may help some. *He'll* send for Eldridge and maybe get out of him what I couldn't. I'm going out now to get a paper before every last one of 'em is gobbled up."

So saying, Bob tucked his letter into his pocket, grabbed his hat and hurried off to the canteen. Stopping to glance at the newspaper he had just purchased, he vented a wild whoop, waved it over his head and raced for barracks.

"Oh, Glory! Blazes has done it!" he caroled, regardless of the noise he was making. "Just listen to this: 'Corporal Blaise Leaps Off a Moving Train after Deserter.' *What* do you think of that? Oh, you Blazes!" Bob pranced about, flapping the paper.

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"What's the latest?" called a man from across the squad room. "Has Bill committed suicide?"

"Not yet. Come over and bring your friends. This is too good to keep."

Two minutes afterward, surrounded by curious soldiers, Bob read to them the story of Bixton's attempt to desert, and of the star part Jimmy had played in his capture. What elicited a fresh volley of astonished ejaculations from the listeners, however, was: "Bixton has also confessed to the placing of a bottle of powdered glass in the suitcase of Private Franz Schnitzel, the Camp Sterling alleged poisoner, who is now awaiting trial for the murder of two of his comrades. Schnitzel was on kitchen detail when the tragedy occurred. The bottle of powdered glass and a list of poisons found in his suitcase linked him so suspiciously with the poisoning as to cause his arrest. Bixton confessed to having done this to be revenged on Schnitzel for past wrongs at the hands of the latter. He denied, however, all knowledge of the list of poisons."

Call to mess cut the rest of the reading short.

Leaving his precious paper and mess kit with Roger, Bob set sail for headquarters the moment he had finished eating. There he was obliged to wait some time as Major Stearns, being only human, was at dinner, a fact which Bob had not stopped to consider. Eventually he was ushered into the presence of the K. O. and proceeded to regale the major with a story that continually brought the K. O.'s favorite "Humph!" to his lips. When he had finished he went back to barracks

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well pleased, leaving the letter from his Chicago friend in the major's possession.

Surprise, however, had not run the gamut for that night. Shortly before Tattoo a guard detail marched into Company E squad room and arrested Eldridge. The latter was undoubtedly more surprised than anyone else. In reading the account of his bunkie's downfall he had been signally relieved to find that he had not been implicated in the suitcase tangle. He was confident that Bixton would never betray him and thus believed himself quite safe.

What greatly interested the three Khaki Boys was how soon Schnitzel would be freed. They were fairly sure that Eldridge would not stand out long against the grilling he was due to receive. Add his confession to Bixton's and it left no more evidence against Schnitzel than there had been against the rest of the kitchen detail held at the time of the poisoning and afterward exonerated of all suspicion. It was, as Bob joyfully declared, "a safe bet" that "Schnitz" would soon be back in barracks with "a smiling face and a clean record."

CHAPTER XXIII IGGY TURNS SLEUTH

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Vindicated at the eleventh hour by the confessions of Bixton and Eldridge, Franz Schnitzel returned to barracks completely exonerated of the crime of poisoning his comrades. Bixton and Eldridge both underwent speedy trial by a court martial. Bixton was charged with desertion and conspiracy, and sentenced to several years in a Federal prison, while Eldridge escaped with a year. As an accomplice of Bixton in the matter of the suitcase affair, he was deemed equally guilty of conspiracy.

During the first week or two after his return to his company, Schnitzel showed a depth of gratitude toward the four Brothers that only one who had been so long in the shadow could exhibit to those who had led him back into the sunshine. As time went on, however, he relapsed into his old taciturn ways. He took to prowling about by himself seeming almost to resent the Khaki Boys' kindly invitations to accompany them on their little adventures about camp or to Tremont or Glenwood.

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In fact Schnitzel showed a decided predilection for the society of a Cuban, named Fernando, who lived in Company E's adjoining barrack. Fernando was a man who had almost as little to say as had Schnitzel. Though not a citizen of the United States he had enlisted shortly before the four Khaki Boys had come to Camp Sterling. At the time of the poisoning he had been on kitchen detail also and, soon after Schnitzel's release, the German-American had struck up a friendship with him.

"I no like him, that Koobain," Ignace frequently protested to his bunkies. "Never I see why Schnitzel go by him all time. He no good."

Growing distrust of Fernando prompted Iggy to poke about in the discreet wake of Schnitzel and the Cuban. His frequent absences from barracks in the evening occasioned a good deal of curious comment on the part of his bunkies.

One night as they discussed this Iggy was hiking along through a fine rain after his quarry. He had followed Schnitzel out of barracks and seen him meet Fernando. This evening the two had elected to walk far despite the bad weather. Coming at last to an outlying barrack in an early stage of the process of erection, the two paused before it and began to talk. Seeing them stop, Iggy stopped also at a safe distance. He dared go no nearer to them. Deeply disappointed, he was about to turn back when a brilliant idea assailed him.

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Keeping well in the shelter of a neighboring barrack which was almost completed, he made a wide circle and approached the skeleton of the other barrack from the back. It would be easy enough for him to climb into it and make his way to the partially open front, provided he could do it without being heard. Once there he could crouch low within a few feet of the two men and perhaps overhear what they said. He had already heard at different times enough of their talk to worry him. Now he proposed to hear still more—if only they did not go away before he got to them. The first words he heard, spoken in German, nearly toppled him over.

"You are willing to do this for the Fatherland?" It was the supposed Cuban who spoke.

"Yes. I long to be of use to Germany. Nothing else can wipe out the trouble that these cursed Americans have made me. I wish now that I had been the one to poison those dogs. Then I would have gloried in it."

"You have been spared for a greater work. What you will do to-morrow night will well recompense you. Now remember. Meet me here at six to-morrow evening. I will give you the camera. Be sure and set it in the rubbish can with the tripod socket downward. The shutter release is on the side. You will have fastened one end of this piece of fishing line to the trigger of the shutter release. Fishing line does not stretch. Loop the other end round one of the bolts on the inside of the cover that hold its handle on. I have examined those covers and there is a bolt end coming through which makes this possible. Tie it with as little slack as possible and fit the cover on the can. The first man who lifts it will do the trick."

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"What will happen when that release is pulled?" asked Schnitzel.

The other man chuckled grimly.

"A snap shot will be taken somewhat different from the usual sort. That release controls an

electrical contact intimately connected with a certain kind of fulminate and behind that again is—the stuff that means the finish of Company E barracks. The explosion will be so destructive that no trace will be left of either the camera or the can. Very soon afterward Company E's other barrack will follow yours. This is a trick which can be successfully worked twice. Now heed what I tell you, as this is our only chance to talk. To-morrow night I will meet you here only for a moment to give you the camera. You must then hurry back and do your work, while the men are at mess. We can only trust that no one will disturb the can too soon. We must destroy as many of our enemies as we can before they are sent out against us. You are not afraid to do your part for the Fatherland?"

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"*Deutschland über alles,*" was Schnitzel's low, fervent answer.

"*Gut!* Now we must return. Go you first and I will follow slowly. I shall not see you again until I meet you here at six to-morrow evening."

Trembling with horror at what he had heard, Ignace waited breathlessly for the plotters to depart. After five minutes he straightened up cautiously. All was silent. Growing bolder he stood erect and peered out of one of the open spaces in the frame-work of the barrack. No one was in sight. Making a hasty exit he set off for headquarters on the mad run.

Arrived at headquarters he had his own troubles with a supercilious orderly, who demanded to know the nature of his business.

"I will no tell," was the Pole's dogged refusal. "You no say him Pulinski want see, you ver' sorry."

This threat was effective in gaining for him the desired interview. His tale told, Ignace became alarmed at the major's lack of agitation.

"You no believe, sir, what I do?" he ended desperately.

"I believe you, Pulinski." The K. O.'s tone was extremely kind. "Now I'm going to ask you to go back to barracks and say nothing to anyone about this. You've done your part and done it well. Leave the rest to me, and remember the Army will protect its own."

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"So will I, sir. For Schnitzel have I the hurt here." Iggy laid a hand on his heart. "Never have I think he spy. Once fren's. Now him enemy my country, my enemy, too. I am the solder."

Saluting, Iggy departed wholly unconscious of the nobility of his little speech.

The next day broke in a torrent of rain that gradually slackened to a fine mist that continued to fall all day, bringing on an early dusk. Painfully on the alert, Ignace had watched vainly all day for the "som'thin'." He had had no trouble in avoiding Schnitzel. The latter had not come near the four Brothers. When at ten minutes to six Ignace saw him go down the squad-room stairs, he was in a fever of dread. The time had come and the "so cross major" had done nothing. He had not believed, then, after all. Ignace decided that he would have to take the initiative. He would say he was not hungry. He would not go to mess. He would stay in barracks and watch the rubbish can. If Schnitzel attempted to go near it, he would fight him away from it.

Meanwhile Schnitzel was forging along through the mist toward the rendezvous. As he neared the spot, he could see no one. Drawing close to the barrack he waited, eyes and ears trained to catch first sight and sound of Fernando. It was only a moment or two until he heard the swashing contact of running feet with mud. Next a rain-drenched figure made port beside him, flashing a white ray of light upon him.

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"It is you," spoke a relieved voice in German. "Here is the camera. Take it quickly. I must return. Fail you not. Strike well for the Fatherland!"

"Hold it just a second," replied Schnitzel. "I brought a paper for it to guard against the rain."

"*Gut,*" approved the voice. "*Bitte, schnell!*"

"All's well!" Schnitzel exclaimed loudly in English.

"Shh! Are you mad that you——"

The question was never answered. Forth from the skeleton of the barrack leaped a succession of dark forms. They closed in on the pair with incredible quickness.

"Traitor!" came a savage cry uttered in German. "Die then, with your kind!"

"Not yet," panted Schnitzel as the supposed colleagues fought desperately for the possession of the camera case, to which Schnitzel clung like grim death. "Got it," he bellowed. "Hold him tight! He's Freidrich, not Fernando! He's a German spy! He poisoned the boys! He tried to blow up the barracks! I swore to run him down! I've done it. Let him die like a dog! Shooting's too good for him!"

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CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION

"We're here because we're here!" announced Bob, beaming fatuously on four young men gathered about a round table in a Tremont restaurant.

A week had elapsed since Franz Schnitzel had sprung the dramatic dénouement that had rid the world of one more fiend. Johann Freidrich, alias Juan Fernando, had been shot at sunrise of

the morning before. Bob whimsically declaring that the event needed celebrating, he had straightway invited his Brothers and Schnitzel to a celebration in Tremont.

"We're not going to be *here* long. I mean at Camp Sterling," smiled Roger. "I expect any minute to get the order to pack."

"We should worry," rejoined Bob. "We've stirring times ahead of us. We've had a few right in camp, too."

"Gee whiz, Schnitz, you must feel great!" glowed Jimmy. "Think of all you've done already for your country. I thought I was some when I nabbed Bixton. Beside you—well—I'm not so much. What a shame there aren't any medals handed out in the Army. You ought to get enough to cover up your chest. You're due for a rise in ranks, though. Bet you my hat on that. Now you've got to tell us how you did it all. You've never peeped. We've been laying for you. Got you down here on purpose to-night. Now spill." [203]

"I intended to tell you fellows." Schnitzel's melancholy dark eyes wandered over the group. Ever since that eventful evening in the rain he had been the observed of all observers. As a result he had promptly retired into his shell, declining to be lionized. Even to the four Khaki Boys he had granted only the barest details of his exploit.

"Somehow I couldn't bear to talk about it. It was all so sickening. But I don't mind telling you fellows now. There isn't much to tell. I never suspected Freidrich until after I got out of the guard-house. One day he came to me and started saying how sorry he'd been for me. He began asking me about myself and my people. What they thought about the war and if they had any relatives in it in Germany. He said many of the Germans were fine people who'd been misunderstood. He gave me a kind of a queer look and, I don't know why, but it somehow made me distrust him. So I said I didn't know how my folks felt about it because I hadn't seen them for several years. That wasn't true, but anyway it wasn't any of his business. I told him I didn't know if any of our relatives in Germany were in the war. That was true enough. I didn't say what I thought about the Germans themselves." [204]

"That was all he said that time. He kept coming around after me and sympathizing with me. I thought at first he was trying to get me to queer myself. Thought maybe headquarters had put him on my trail to see if I was really all O. K. So I was pretty careful. I found out he could speak German, too. I thought that was rather queer and said so. He explained that he'd learned it from a German overseer on his father's plantation in Cuba. I didn't believe it. He spoke it like a German. He had more of the way of a German than a Cuban.

"All of a sudden I made up my mind not to go on in the dark. I went to the K. O. and asked him flat if Fernando had been set to watch me. He nearly had a fit until I told him a few things that I suspected. Then he gave me leave to spring a bluff on the fellow that I was down on the Army, just to see what he'd do.

"So next day I went to him and gave him a great line of talk about how sick I was of Camp Sterling and what a mistake the U. S. had made in declaring war on the Fatherland. That made him prick up his ears. But he was no fool. I had to string him along good and hard before he bit at the hook. One day he asked me why I'd enlisted. I just smiled and threw him a funny look. He stared hard at me and muttered: 'Hoch der Kaiser,' and I said: 'You bet.'" [205]

"Then I had him going. After that it was easy. He soon got so he'd talk for hours about how bad the Germans had been treated. He'd almost always end by saying, 'It is for you and me to avenge the great wrongs done the Fatherland.' But he'd never said what we ought to do until about a week before the bomb business. Then he asked me to go for a walk. We went away out past the trenches. After a while he stopped me and asked if I was willing to do my bit for the Kaiser. I said I was and he put me through an oath of allegiance to Kaiser Bill and then told me what the 'great work' was to be. He was careful not to let me know how he got the bombs. He had two or three of them, you know.

"I put it up strong to him then about the poison. Gave him a lot of guff about our being Brothers in the cause, and all that. He didn't say in so many words that he did it, but he let me understand it just the same. You know the rest. Thank God, I got that bomb away from him. I'm glad I could do something to help the United States and I'm glad, too, on my own account. I'd never have rested easy as long as that poison affair wasn't cleared up. I feel now as though I couldn't go over quick enough to help even the score for Simpson and Brady." [206]

"That's the way we all feel," declared Jimmy.

"I would to-morrow go," declared Ignace.

"Well, I'm ready to hike along the little old Glory Road," smiled Roger.

"Here, too," echoed Bob.

"Take the Glory Road to France;
Hike along to join the fray.
With the Sammies take a chance,
'Neath the Stars and Stripes to-day,"

hummed Jimmy.

"That's us," approved Bob. "Lead us to it!"

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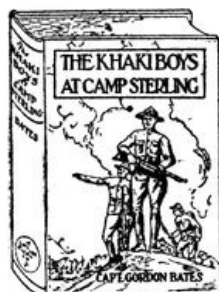
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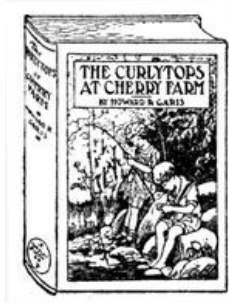
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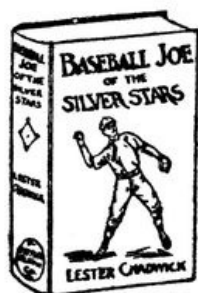
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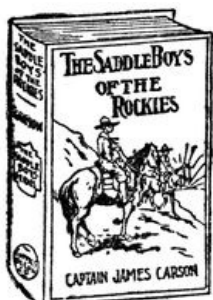
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