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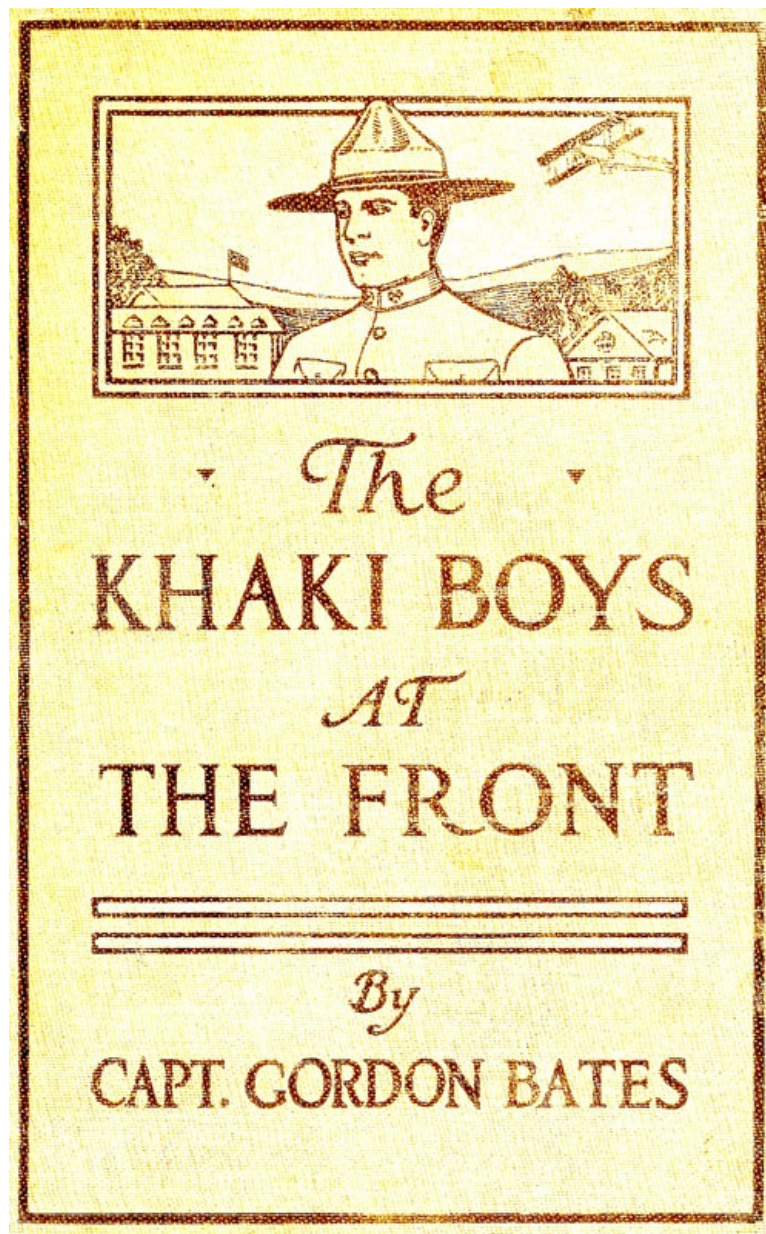
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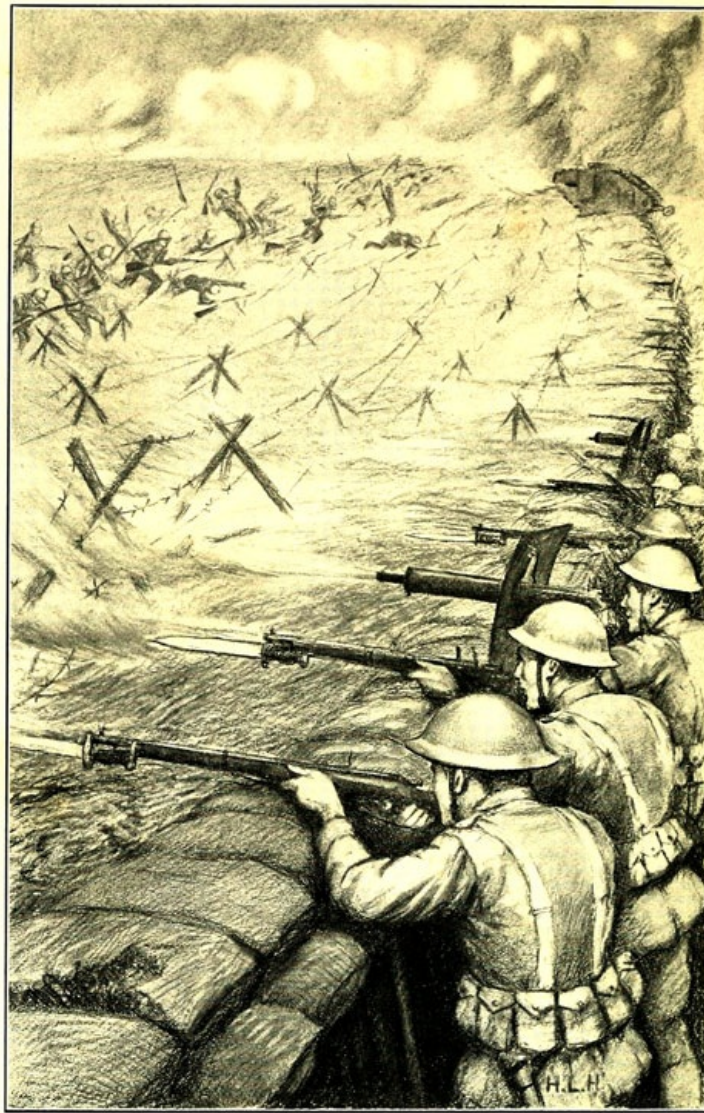
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE KHAKI BOYS AT THE FRONT; OR, SHOULDER TO SHOULDER IN THE TRENCHES ***





**SAMMY MACHINE GUNS AND RIFLES MOWED THEM
DOWN.**

The Khaki Boys at the Front. Page [127](#)

**THE KHAKI BOYS
AT THE FRONT**

OR

Shoulder to Shoulder in the Trenches

By

CAPT. GORDON BATES

Author of "The Khaki Boys at Camp Sterling"
"The Khaki Boys on the Way," etc.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK

CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY

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THE KHAKI BOYS AT THE FRONT

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THE KHAKI BOYS AT THE FRONT

CHAPTER I

A JOYFUL REUNION

"I suppose we might as well be hiking along," announced Roger Barlow regretfully, as he consulted his watch. "We've lots of time yet, but we'd better be early than late back to camp. We are strangers in a strange land and we've quite a long way to go."

"I'm satisfied to go. I came up here to see Paris and I've seen it. That is, a scrap of it. I guess it would take a long while to get really wise to it. I sure would like to use up a little time poking around *la belle* Patee. My, but this hash house is a dead place, though! Nobody alive here but us."

Bob Dalton glanced disapprovingly about the unassuming little café in which he and his four Brothers had elected to dine. Its hushed atmosphere oppressed him. [2]

"Oh, Paris is altogether different from what it used to be," informed Sergeant Jimmy Blaise. "It's lost a lot of pep since this war began. Can you wonder?"

"It's lost more than pep," cut in Franz Schnitzel. "It's lost a whole lot of its best citizens. Almost every woman one sees is dressed in black. That tells its own story."

"So think I no many Franche solder more," sighed Ignace Pulinski. "Mos' is died."

"Oh, there are probably a dozen or two left," was Bob's cheering reassurance. "I guess they need

the Khaki Boys over here all right enough, though."

"I wish we'd get orders to move on," grumbled Jimmy. "I'm dying to take a ride in one of those 'Eight Horses' affairs—not."

"We've been in training here longer than I expected." This from Roger. "I guess we needed it. When the war began, before the U. S. got into it, they used to rush the Tommies to the front pretty fast. They got about ten days' or two weeks' training and that was all."

"The war game's been systematized a lot since then," commented Bob. "We have fared better than those fellows did. They had to put up with most any old thing. So far we've led a peaceful, happy life over here."

Several weeks had passed since those of the Khaki Boys who had come safely through the disastrous sinking of the *Columbia* had been landed "somewhere in France." [3]

Readers who have followed the fortunes of the quintet of Khaki Boys, known among themselves as the five Brothers, will at once remember them as old friends. What happened to these young soldiers during the period in which they were in training at an American cantonment has already been set down in "THE KHAKI BOYS AT CAMP STERLING."

It was while on the way to Camp Sterling that Jimmy Blaise, Roger Barlow, Bob Dalton and Ignace Pulinski met and instantly became friendly. From being merely friendly they soon grew to be bunkies, loyal to one another through thick and thin.

Later they took into their little circle a young German-American, Franz Schnitzel, who had had the misfortune to be entirely misunderstood by his comrades. Suspected of being in sympathy with Germany, Schnitzel was accused of poisoning a number of men in his own barracks.

Due to the untiring efforts of the four Brothers, his innocence was proven, and his good name restored. Afterward Schnitzel himself was responsible for bringing the real poisoner, a German spy, Johann Freidrich, to justice.

Their fortunes firmly linked to Schnitzel's by trouble, he had become a real brother to the four Khaki Boys, who decided that thereafter they would call themselves the five Brothers. [4]

After an exhaustive course of training at Camp Sterling, the five Brothers had been sent with a large detachment of their comrades to Camp Marvin, a southern cantonment. While at this camp they met with at least one exciting adventure, which was the forerunner of a series of amazing events.

In "THE KHAKI BOYS ON THE WAY" will be found the details of that adventure, which had to do with an attempt made by an unknown man to blow up a bridge near the camp. Readers of this story will recall Jimmy Blaise's fight with the miscreant under the bridge, and his narrow escape from death.

This narrative also contains a full account of the Khaki Boys' journey to the seacoast, where they boarded a transport for France, and of the hazardous voyage over, which ended in the torpedoing, by a U-boat, of their transport the *Columbia*.

Though many of their comrades perished at sea, the five Brothers were spared. Briefly separated by the catastrophe, they were re-united in Ireland. From there they had gone on to a rest camp in England, from which, re-uniformed and re-equipped, they had at last set sail across the channel for France.

Landed in France, they had gone directly to a training camp, there to receive the final necessary instruction which would fully prepare them for the strenuous life of the trenches. [5]

Since arriving in the French town where a concentration camp had been established, they had been kept constantly busy learning new things about trench warfare.

At Camp Sterling and Camp Marvin they had undergone considerable instruction along this line. Compared to the experience they were daily gaining, their past training seemed a trifle rudimentary to the Khaki Boys.

Under the competent direction of French officers who had seen service at the front, the Khaki Boys were rapidly acquiring fresh knowledge concerning bomb-throwing, reconnoitering, listening posts, methods in attack and defense, wiring parties, mass formation, and the proper procedure for poison gas attacks.

They had learned to construct and repair barbed wire entanglements. They had now become familiar with the intricate inner construction of the trenches. They knew how best to shelter themselves when in these trenches. They had learned trench cooking and sanitation, and were now beginning to feel that they were really ready to live at the front.

Their camp being situated in a village not many miles from Paris, the five Brothers had been most eager to spend a few hours in the beautiful city. Although they had seen much to interest them since coming to France, their minds were set on seeing Paris. [6]

For one reason or another, however, they had put off the trip until Roger had declared that if they didn't "make a break" at seeing Paris soon, they were not likely to see it until the end of the war, if ever.

The upshot of the matter was a concerted request for passes on the part of the five Sammies. Mid-afternoon of a cold, though gloriously sunshiny day, saw them invading the city they had so earnestly wished to visit. Strangers in a strange land, they had, nevertheless, hugely enjoyed poking about the French metropolis, constantly drawing comparisons between it and their own "big town" in America.

Long familiar with the French language, it fell to Jimmy to do most of the talking. For once Bob did not take the lead in this respect. Both he and Roger were able to carry on a halting conversation in French and that was about all. Schnitzel knew even less of it than they, while Ignace had added but little to the "six word by Franche," of which he had earlier admitted as being his entire French vocabulary.

Content to follow their own bent, the five bunkies had asked few questions of the friendly passersby, who invariably beamed on them in passing. The Sammies were at any time a very welcome sight to the French people, but the five Brothers were an especially striking example of stalwart young American manhood, and attracted an amount of attention of which they were quite unaware. [7]

Toward six o'clock steadily growing hunger had prompted them to drop into one of the many excellent restaurants of which Paris boasts. Having ordered a most delectable dinner, they had taken their time about eating it. In consequence, it was now after seven o'clock and, as Roger had reminded, "time for us to be hiking along."

"There's always a calm before a storm, you know."

It was Jimmy who spoke. The remark followed Bob's assertion regarding the peacefulness of the life they had been leading since their arrival in France.

"Yes, it's the last lull before we get into the real thing," nodded Roger. "We'll soon be getting up in the morning and turning in at night to the music of the big guns."

"I hope it'll be Allied artillery that'll make the most of that music," put in Schnitzel.

"Yes, and I hope a Fritzie trench gets it in the neck with every blamed tune our fellows hammer out," was Bob's vengeful rejoinder. "What I've heard since I came over here about the way those Boche brutes have treated the Belgians makes me hot under the collar."

"They say the Fritzie have it in for us Sammies," shrugged Roger. "They're crazy to take us prisoners. They want to make an example of us. Think they'll scare the U. S. into putting up a big yell for peace. Wonder what they'll do if they do manage to grab any of our men?" [8]

"Hard to tell. Crucify some poor fellow, maybe." Bob's dark brows drew sharply together. "That's one of their pleasant little methods of getting even." Bob's tones quivered with loathing. "If it ever came to that with me, I'd die game. I'd never let 'em think they'd got my goat."

"Oh, can the croak!" exclaimed Jimmy impatiently. "We came out to enjoy ourselves. What's the use in dragging up the horror stuff?"

"So think I," agreed Ignace, who had been listening round-eyed to Bob's dire surmising. "We ver' smart, so then we don' be it that prisonar. I no like."

"You *don't*? I'm surprised," bantered Bob. "I thought you were just aching to be run in by a Boche patrol."

"Now you mak' the fon to me," snickered Ignace. "Only you wait. Som' day I mak' the fon to you."

"Go as far as you like," challenged Bob, grinning benevolently at his Polish Brother.

"Come on," urged Jimmy. "Let's settle with the *garcon*, and beat it. Where did he go to, anyhow? He was standing right over there a minute ago." [9]

Five pairs of eyes immediately busied themselves in an effort to locate the waiter.

"He's in the kitchen, I guess. Don't see him. He'll show up in a minute."

Leaning back in his chair, Roger continued idly to survey the few diners scattered about the café. His eyes rested amusedly upon a pair of elderly Frenchmen, who appeared to be conducting a vigorous argument. Their wagging heads, shrugging shoulders, and the almost continual play of their hands entertained him immensely.

"Look at those two old grandpas over there near the door," he said to Bob, who was seated beside him. "I'll bet you most anything they're arguing about the war. They're not a bit huffy with each other; just dead in earnest."

Bob's gaze obediently traveled toward the two ancients. It interrupted itself on the way, however, to take stock of three men who were just entering the café.

"For the love of Mike!"

His shrewd, black eyes widening with amazement, Bob leaped to his feet.

"*Look* who's here!" he exclaimed so loudly that his voice reached the entering trio. "Oh, you Twinkle Twins!"

MEETING COUSIN EMILE

"Where, where?"

Seated with his back to the door, Bob's gleeful announcement brought Jimmy also to his feet. By this time Bob had deserted his bunkies and was making straight for two young men in the uniform of the U. S. Aviation Corps, who were advancing to meet him.

"Well, well, *well!* If it isn't old Bob and Blazes!"

The blue-eyed, broadly-smiling youth who uttered this jubilant recognition, now had Bob's hand in a firm grip, and was shaking it vigorously. Standing beside him, his brother, an exact counterpart of himself, was engaged in greeting Jimmy with equal cordiality.

"Let me in on this," commanded a laughing voice, as Roger joined the delighted quartet. "I believe I've seen the famous Twinkle Twins before to-day."

"You'd better believe it," retorted Jack Twinkleton. "How are you, Rodge? You're looking all to the mustard." [11]

"Put her there! How's the good old scout?"

Jerry Twinkleton now claimed Roger's attention.

"Oh, we're simply fine. You can't lose us. It isn't being done, don't you know, with this gang."

Roger's face glowed with friendliness as he greeted the illustrious twins. They were truly a welcome sight.

"How long have you been over, and where do you go from here?" were Jimmy's quick questions. "We've been keeping an eye out and an ear open ever since we landed in France. Thought we'd see you or, maybe, hear news of you."

"You're the great little scribes, you are," declared Bob. "We haven't had a line from you since just before we left Sterling."

"When was that?" promptly asked Jack.

"Oh, early in February. You fellows wrote that you were expecting most any day to go across."

"Well, we went; right after that," grinned Jack. "We've written you gazabos three letters since then, and never got even a post card in return. We've abused you to each other for fair. Slackers; that's our pet name for you."

"Yes, that's it," immediately chimed in Jerry, always his twin brother's faithful repeater. [12]

"We never got 'em." Bob shook a disgusted head. "We didn't get half of our mail at Camp Marvin. I suppose it's chasing us around yet. We'll get it some day if we live long enough."

"We wrote you fellows a couple of letters, too," informed Jimmy, frowning.

"Then we've got something coming to us, too," was Jack's cheerful retort. "Now let's flop and have a chewing-bee. Come on over to our table. We've a fine surprise for you. We want you to meet—"

"Cousin Emile," supplied Bob. "I spotted him right away. We have a couple of fellows with us. They belong to the gang. One of 'em is Iggy. You remember? We told you about him. The other is a new pal of ours. We're the five Brothers now. Oh, maybe we haven't a bag of beans to spill!"

"Get your two Buddies and bring 'em over to that table," directed Jack, pointing to an alcove table, larger than the others. "I'll steer Emile to it, by the time you round up your strays."

With this he and his brother turned and bolted for their table, at which the famous aviator had already seated himself. An amused smile touched his firm mouth, as he watched his lively cousins and their friends.

"Now listen to the howl Iggy's'll put up," laughed Jimmy, as the three Brothers returned to their table. "This time he can't fade away and disappear, the way he did when the Twinkle Twins came to see us at Sterling." [13]

"I can no go," was the prompt refusal Jimmy met with.

Half rising from his chair, Ignace showed signs of making a quick retreat from the café.

"I can no go," mimicked Jimmy. "You're going, you old clam, if I have to lead you along by the ear."

Noting signs of refusal on the German-American's face, he next warned: "Don't you get panicky, either, Schnitz!"

"If you two mules go to balking, we'll turn you out to shift for yourselves," threatened Bob. "Cousin Emile won't eat you. He's careful about what he eats."

Bob's last flippant assertion caused Ignace to snicker. It also brought a faint smile to Schnitzel's somber face.

"All right. I'll be good," he assented, and obligingly got to his feet.

"If Iggy doesn't want to be a good fellow, just let him sit here all by his lonesome while we have a good time," suggested Roger slyly. "We'll tell the Twinkles and Cousin Emile that he's very particular about whom he meets."

Roger winked at Bob, as he made this innocent suggestion.

"No!" Ignace fairly bounced from his chair.

"You say so, you ver' mean! I go by you. So is it." [14]

"Oh, just as you please," teased Roger.

"I please!"

With the expression of a martyr on the way to execution, Ignace followed in the wake of his bunkies, as they toured the length of the room to the alcove.

Already there, and seated on either side of their illustrious cousin, the Twinkle Twins rose to do the honors.

Each one of the five Brothers experienced a thrill of excitement, as, in turn, he shook hands with the great aviator. They saw a rather tall, thin-faced man of perhaps thirty, with bright, dark eyes, and very black hair. They admired his strong chin and close-lipped, pleasant mouth. Neither could they fail to note his litheness of movement, as he rose from his chair when the Khaki Boys were introduced to him by his cousin Jack.

"Have you been long in France?" he questioned courteously, as the party took seats at the round table.

"Only a few weeks, sir." Jimmy became spokesman. "We are in training at R—. We hope to go to the front soon."

"You are eager for a taste of the fighting, I suppose." The aviator smiled. "That seems to be the prevailing spirit among the American soldiers. We of France admire it."

"France has set us an example, sir, that we glory in following. The whole world knows what France has done in this war." [15]

Jimmy's face lighted into glowing enthusiasm.

"I thank you, in the name of my country."

The aviator's hand lightly touched his forehead in salute.

Instantly seven hands went up in prompt return of the salute.

"Now let's drop the form and ceremony act," proposed Jack Twinkleton. "I'll salute you, Emile, when I have to, but I'll be blamed if I will when I can get out of it. I've a great deal of respect for you up in the air, and some when we're down on the ground. Don't forget that, will you?"

"I will endeavor to remember." The Frenchman showed white teeth in an indulgent smile. "It will be, perhaps, a trifle difficult," he slyly added.

"Ha, ha! Emile's onto you, Jack!" rejoiced Jerry.

"You're my twin," flashed back his brother, with the wide, jovial grin that so characterized the Twinkle Twins.

"I'm sorry, but it can't be helped," retaliated Jack, duplicating Jerry's grin. "Now let's side-track these playful little compliments and get down to business. I'm crazy to know what you fellows have been doing since you left Sterling. You tell your tale and then we'll tell ours. Wait a minute till I shoo this waiter away. We don't want to order yet. We want to talk." [16]

"We were down south at Marvin for a while, then one day we started out on a hike with a big detachment of Sammies, and we never went back any more," began Bob, when Jack had temporarily banished the waiter from their vicinity. "First thing we knew we were piling into a train and after we rode awhile in that we got tired of it, and switched off to a transport for a change. It was the *Columbia*, and I guess—"

"The *Columbia*!" exclaimed three voices in unison.

"Yes, I guess we *do* know what happened to the *Columbia*," emphasized Jack. "And you fellows were in that mix-up and came out O. K.! Well, what do you think of that?"

"How'd you get away from her, and what happened to you?" was Jerry's excited question.

"Three of us were taken off her by a destroyer. Bob got into a lifeboat, and another destroyer

picked up that crew. I was the only one who got wet. I had a swim in the nice cold water, and a trawler took me in when I got tired," ended Jimmy whimsically.

"That's the way he tells it," sniffed Bob. "Now let Bobby speak his piece."

Whereupon Bob launched forth into a vivid account of Jimmy's adventures on that terrible night, to which the Twinkle Twins and Cousin Emile listened with ever-deepening interest. [17]

Quite naturally Bob was obliged to go further back than the torpedoing of the Columbia in order to explain the events that had led up to the murderous attack made upon Jimmy by the German wireless operator. Inevitably, too, he made a hero of his bunkie, regardless of the warning signals that the irate Blazes flashed at him from two resentful gray eyes.

"Some little hero!" was Jack's verdict, his deep blue eyes resting admiringly on Jimmy, who was looking embarrassed and a trifle sulky.

"Oh, I'm not so much," he muttered.

"Always he say!" broke in a solemn voice.

Temporarily bereft of speech in the presence of the Twinkle Twins and their distinguished relative, Iggy rallied to the cause of his beloved Brother.

"So is it Jimmy think," continued Ignace stolidly, now bound to be heard. "He have the much do, ver' good, ver' brave."

"I agree with you." The aviator bent a kindly glance on Ignace that caused him suddenly to realize that this wonderful "fly man" had "the kind heart." In consequence, he forgot his awe of the great Voissard and beamed genially upon him.

"Just to be even with *you*, Ignace So Pulinski, I'm going to tell what *you* did," announced Jimmy. [18]

"No-a!" Ignace raised a protesting hand.

Nevertheless, Jimmy recounted the incident relating to his Polish bunkie's firm faith in the destroyer, which immediately raised a laugh.

"Now you even, you don' say no more nothin'," decreed Iggy, very red in the face.

"All right, I won't," promised Jimmy. "I haven't anything more to say, anyway, except that we all got together again in Ireland. We went to England to a rest camp and from there to France. Now let's hear what happened to the Twinkle Twins since we saw 'em last."

"Just a minute and we'll tell you," nodded Jack. "Did you ever hear whether the body of this bridge fellow was recovered? A good many of the bodies of those poor Sammies were washed ashore."

"This fellow isn't dead." Jimmy's eyes grew briefly troubled. "Bob forgot to say in his wonderful story that I saw him afterward in Belfast. We were on the train just getting ready to pull out of Belfast. I was watching the crowd on the station platform from the window. I saw him, sure as guns. He saw me and he recognized me. He gave me one awful look and beat it through the crowd."

"Quite remarkable!" Voissard's dark eyes were fixed reflectively on Jimmy. "Describe the appearance of this man. I may be able to place him. The Prefect of Police, here in Paris, is my personal friend. Through him I have learned much regarding criminals. I have seen photographs of many Germans badly wanted by the Allied powers, either for particularly serious crimes, or because they are known to be spies of unusual cleverness and daring." [19]

"This Charles Black, as he called himself, is no common criminal," began Jimmy, then continued with a detailed description of the "tiger man."

The aviator listened attentively, a slight frown contracting his dark brows.

"I cannot place him," he said when Jimmy had finished. "My friend, the Prefect, may be able to do so. I intend to remain in Paris for a day or two. I expect to dine with him to-morrow evening. I will make inquiry of him. In case I should learn anything of interest I will communicate it to you either in person or by letter. It is possible that I may soon visit your camp at R——."

"I wish you would sir," Jimmy responded with a fervor that conveyed his utter delight of the prospect.

"*Merci*." The one simple word was spoken as only a Frenchman can say, "Thank you."

Their eyes meeting levelly, boy and man each realized that he had found a friend.

CHAPTER III

TRAILED

"You made us tell our troubles first, now it's time the Twinkle Twins took a turn at talking," Bob presently suggested.

The *garçon* having at last been allowed to take the dinner order of the new arrivals, a brief lull in conversation had ensued.

"Oh, we haven't much to tell," Jack responded lightly. "We made good in a hurry at Berkley. You can't keep a good man down, you know."

"A couple of good men," insinuated genial Jerry.

"Twins that are equal to the same twin, are equal to each other," supplied Jimmy, smilingly misquoting a well-known axiom in geometry.

"That's us." Jack beamed widely. "We hunt in couples. There's only one drawback. Some day when I go up in a Nieuport and bring down a Zep, Jerry'll probably get the credit for it." [21]

"You mean it'll be just the other way round," retorted Jerry.

"It's a sore subject. Let's can it. Where was I when my beloved twin butted in? Oh, yes. We did pretty well at Berk. As soon as we showed 'em, we put up a howl to go over. We kept it up, too. They got so sick of us, they shipped us out of the States to get rid of us.

"We had a peach of a voyage over. Fine weather, and neither of us seasick. We were used to the old pond, you know. When we landed we were sent to an American aviation station near Paris. We've been there ever since. That's only a few weeks, though. We've been studying like anything, and making a few flights. Haven't yet had a chance to go out on a real fighting expedition."

"Emile's trying to get us transferred to the French Flying Corps," put in Jerry eagerly. "We pestered him about it until he promised in self-defense. We want to fly a Farman or a Nieuport. It's hard to get on the Nieuport squad. We'll have to do a lot of practice work before we're ready to handle one."

"Emile thinks we can make good," Jack declared jubilantly. "Don't you old coz?"

"Yes. These two have greatly surprised me." Voissard directed this last to the Khaki Boys. "I did not know they had enlisted in the aviation corps until they wrote me from the American station in France. I am not sure that a transfer to the French Flying Corps can be arranged. However, these boys were born in France, and of French and English parents. This fact will, perhaps, be of much help in arranging the transfer." [22]

"We feel nearer to France, somehow, than to the U. S., even though we've lived in the States a good deal," explained Jack. "We should have piked over here and signed up with the French Flying Corps in the first place. It would have saved a lot of red tape."

"Leave it to old Emile," was Jerry's disrespectfully affectionate comment. "We should worry. Let Emile do it."

"You see!" Cousin Emile's eyebrows and shoulders went into amused play.

"They're a lucky pair of twins," was Bob's hearty rejoinder.

"Not yet," demurred Jack. "Wait until we're 'aces.'"

"And after that '*Communiqués*,'" added Jerry soulfully.

"To be an 'ace' you have to kill five Boche flyers, and bring down their planes," explained Jack. "Ten is the number to be a '*Communiqué*.' Emile is four times a '*Communiqué*' and five to boot. He's clipped forty-five Boche birds of their wings and lives. Some record! He has medals enough to cover his chest, only he won't wear 'em. He's the 'Flying Terror of France,' all right." [23]

With one accord the Khaki Boys fixed wondering eyes on the "Flying Terror of France." His sky-blue uniform flaunted but two of the many emblems of valor he had daringly won.

His honors appeared not to trouble him in the least. He merely smiled and said in his inimitable way:

"I have been fortunate. It cannot continue." He shrugged faintly. "Our career in the air is, of a truth, brief. The danger is great, but the reward greater. When we have, as the English say, 'done our bit,' France has many more ready to replace us. That is, indeed, of a satisfaction."

A momentary silence reigned as the aviator ceased speaking. His calm disregard of self brought home anew to the Khaki Boys the gallant, indomitable spirit of France in the great war. Each cherished the secret hope that he, too, should never be found wanting in the high quality of loyalty to the cause which Voissard possessed to such a degree.

Apparently desirous of leading the conversation away from himself, Cousin Emile began asking the Khaki Boys numerous interested questions concerning their training in America. Though his eyes frequently rested on Jimmy, to whom he had taken a decided fancy, he slighted no one of them.

Bob's humorous manner and breezy speech evidently amused him considerably. Quick to note this, Bob laid himself out to be entertaining, and succeeded to the extent of making the great [24]

man laugh in a delightfully boyish fashion that put his somewhat awed group of soldier admirers quite at their ease. Voissard was, after all, "just a good fellow."

The reappearance of the waiter with the dinner, ordered by the Twinkle Twins and Cousin Emile, reminded the five Brothers that considerable time had passed since they had finished their own meal.

"It's after eight," Jimmy Blaise announced regretfully, after a glance at his wrist watch. "We'll have to be moving along. If we were back in the U. S. now, we'd hang on till the last drop of the hat and then hot-foot it. But not in gay Patee, with the gay knocked out of it by the Boche scrap. If we get back to the station O. K., and on the right train, we'll think ourselves some smart little Sammies."

"Oh, that's too bad!" exclaimed Jack ruefully. "Why beat it so soon? You don't have to be back in camp before midnight, do you?"

"We're free till then, but we'd rather not risk starting any later," Roger answered. "We don't know Paris as well as you do."

"It's a blooming shame," deplored Jerry. "We wanted to take you around with us for a while after dinner."

"Maybe we'll have a chance to come up to Paris again," was Bob's hopeful reply.

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The Khaki Boys had now risen most reluctantly, and were about to say good-bye.

"We'll try to run down to your camp to see you," promised Jack. "We'll send you a line beforehand."

The twins and their distinguished cousin were now on their feet.

"Make it soon, then," stipulated Jimmy. "We think we're going to start for the front before long. 509th Infantry's ours, you know. You won't have much trouble finding us."

"If it happens that we don't see you again there, we'll hope to meet you somewhere back of the firing line," declared Schnitzel earnestly. "I've surely enjoyed meeting the Twinkle Twins."

"And you, sir." He turned to Voissard. "It has been a great honor to me to shake your hand."

"*Merci*. I have also much enjoyed this hour with my American Allies," responded Voissard graciously.

He offered his hand to Schnitzel, then in turn to each of the other four Brothers, all of whom expressed their warm pleasure of the meeting.

Jimmy came last. As the two men clasped hands their eyes again met and again exchanged that silent message of friendliness. A general hand-shaking with the Twinkle Twins followed, then the Khaki Boys said a last good-bye and left the restaurant.

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"Shall we walk or hail a taxi?" asked Bob, as they stepped out into the street. "The full moon is on the job to-night. We can see our way along even though this burg is shy on street lights."

Since the beginning of the war Paris had shown few street lights after nightfall. Due to the fiendish Boche practice of making nocturnal air raids for the purpose of dropping bombs, principally upon defenseless women and innocent little children, every possible precaution had been taken to guard this city against the inhuman cruelty of an ignoble foe.

"We'd better ride," decided prudent Roger. "It will be quicker and we'll run no chance of losing our way. Here comes a taxi now. Hail it, Blazes. You know how to *parlez-vous*."

Immediately complying, Jimmy signaled the driver of the machine. A moment's shrewd bargaining with the latter regarding the fare to the station, and Jimmy motioned his bunkies to step into the motor car.

None of the five observed, as they entered the vehicle, that a man had emerged from the shadows of a neighboring building and signaled another taxicab just driving up to the curb. In consequence, they were not aware that the second taxicab was sedulously keeping on the trail of their own.

CHAPTER IV

[27]

AN UNSEEN FOE

It was not a long journey to the station for which the Khaki Boys were bound. During the ride they had plenty to say in regard to the interesting trio they had left behind them. What had been rather a dull afternoon had suddenly turned into a red-letter evening. Not only were they jubilant at having again encountered the Twinkle Twins. They had also met one of the great heroes of France, and they could not readily get over it.

Arrived at the station, they were obliged to spend half an hour there before getting a train back to camp. Still absorbed in enthusiastic talk concerning their absent friends, they were not impatient over this little wait.

With the train on time, the five Brothers calculated reaching camp in good season. Once there a few moments' brisk walking would see them safely back in quarters.

All now being non-commissioned officers they had found it comparatively easy to make arrangements to be together. They were now well aware, however, that when they reached a village back of the firing line this state of affairs could not continue. Each would probably be quartered in a separate residence with a number of privates in his charge. [28]

"We've barrels of time," announced Bob, as the train stopped in front of the camp station. "Where's our jailer? It's time he came and let us out of the jug."

By "jug" Bob humorously referred to the compartment which the guard had locked at the beginning of the journey. As it happened, the guard was at that moment engaged in unlocking another compartment from which issued a solitary man, heavily bearded, his hat pulled over his eyes.

Almost coincidental with Bob's inquiry the "jailer" appeared and opened the door for his temporary prisoners. The Khaki Boys skipped nimbly out of the compartment and started off at a leisurely pace across the station platform.

"A fine evening for a hike," pronounced Roger presently, drawing in a long breath of the crisp night air. "Just enough cold to make a fellow feel brisk and snappy."

"Don't you get 'snappy' with me," warned Bob jokingly. "I'm in a real good humor and I'd hate to have to snap back."

Now well away from the station, the hikers were tramping along five abreast in the middle of a street of a little French village, which they had to traverse in order to reach their camp. [29]

"It's almost as light as day," Jimmy squinted up at the round moon. "This would be a fine night for a Boche air raid on Paris."

"Too light," disagreed Schnitzel. "A Zep would be spotted in a hurry and the Archies would get busy and smash it."

By "Archies" Schnitzel referred to the anti-aircraft guns, a part of the defenses of Paris against air raids.

"Did you hear what Voissard was telling me about the megaphones posted outside the city?" asked Roger.

Ignace, Schnitzel and Bob answered in the affirmative.

"I only caught part of it. I was talking to Jack," replied Jimmy. "What was it he said?"

"Well, they call these megaphones 'the ears of Paris.' They are recording reversed machines with microphone attachments. They're set up in clusters of four at different points just outside the city. Through them the sound of an airship's engine and propellers can be heard five miles away. There's a look-out for every bunch of 'em. The minute they begin to hum he sends warning. Then, bing! The searchlights blaze up in the sky and a flock of aeroplanes get busy and attack the Boche raiders." [30]

"Good work!" approved Jimmy. "I wonder if it's the same in London? There seem to be more raids there than any place else. Almost every big raid you read about's on London."

"I suppose the fog gives the brutes more of a show to drop bombs," reflected Schnitzel.

"It's a horrible business," growled Bob. "I'm glad the Allies are beginning to give the dogs some of their own dope. I wish they'd wipe Germany off the map."

"She'll do that for herself if she keeps on trying a little longer. I'd hate to be deutschy Deutschland when our Allies get through with her. She'll sure be out in the cold," predicted Roger.

"Let her freeze. She deserves it," was Jimmy's vengeful opinion.

"So think I," echoed Ignace, who had been plodding tranquilly along with his Brothers in his usual silent fashion.

"Poland at last heard from!" exclaimed Bob. "I thought it had been struck dumb by Cousin Emile."

"No yet," flung back Ignace. "So much I hear I feel to keep the shut up. So mebbe I learn som'thin'."

"Oh, my conversation is always highly instructive," Bob patronizingly assured. "You can learn something from Bobby every time he opens his mouth. He's a walking compendium of knowledge and a spouting fount of useful information." [31]

"We'll let *Bobby* tell it," jeered Jimmy. "I wouldn't be caught dead——"

Walking next to Bob, something suddenly cut the narrow space between the two with the peculiar whistling whine which belongs only to a speeding bullet.

"Drop!" yelled Jimmy, suiting the action to the word. "Some Boche has it in for us!"

CHAPTER V

[32]

A WILD GOOSE CHASE

Like a flash, five uniformed figures flattened themselves to the ground as several more bullets whistled above them. Though they heard no report, a peculiar sound as of an almost silent concussion accompanied the whine of each winging bullet.

For a moment or two the Khaki Boys pressed close to the cold earth, too greatly flabbergasted for speech.

It was Jimmy who first cautiously raised himself a little from the frozen ground. A bullet promptly sang past his head causing him to quickly duck and resume his former position.

"Where are they coming from?" breathed Bob.

"On the left. That gateway," muttered Roger.

The Khaki Boys had been in the act of passing an apparently deserted house on the outskirts of the village. It was surrounded by a high stone wall, but the gate was missing, leaving a wide aperture. [33]

Roger's alert eyes had noted it just as they came abreast of it. On the other side of the road a little above it stood another house, dark like the first.

"Then charge it," came impatiently from Jimmy.

Up in a flash, the quintet made a bold dash toward the danger spot. Strangely enough not a single bullet more was directed at them by their unknown foe.

Reaching the gateway, no one was to be seen. The clear moonlight shone whitely down upon it, bathing the darkly outlined wall with radiant light.

"Whoever ambushed us has cut and run along close to the wall and down among those trees and outbuildings," surmised Bob.

"Come on, let's after 'em," proposed Jimmy sharply. "We're losing time. We'll never nab 'em at this rate. Hug the wall, though. It's safer."

Led by impetuous Jimmy the party traversed on the run a long stretch of bare ground that sloped gradually down to a small orchard at the end of the grounds. Their eyes were sharply trained ahead to catch a first glimpse of their quarry, hidden perhaps behind the trunk of a tree.

Against the moon's silver rays the trees stood out sharply, their bare branches affording little shadow in which the fugitive enemy might seek concealment. [34]

First impulse toward self-protection under fire had been completely routed by the desire to give chase. The hunters now darted recklessly in and out among the trees, oblivious to the possibility of a fresh attack from a new quarter.

None came. Neither did they glimpse any human beings other than themselves. The enemy evidently had abandoned his or their murderous project, and fled from the premises. Continued search led to the discovery of a gap in the lower end of the wall.

"Here's where they beat it!" Bob pointed triumphantly to the gap.

"Looks like it. We've gone over every foot of this orchard."

Roger frowningly eyed the break in the wall.

"I don't believe it was *they*," Jimmy shook a decided head. "It was *he*. A one-man game. He had a gun with a Maxim silencer, too. That's why we heard only a queer muffled sound instead of distinct reports."

"That's so," agreed Schnitzel. "Anyhow, if there'd been two or three of 'em the whole bunch couldn't have skiddooed without our seeing at least one of 'em."

"So think I mebbe scare som' Boche pretty bad, we run after," offered Ignace.

"Somebody was sure plugging for the Fatherland," asserted Bob. "Nearly plugged us, too. The first shot zipped between Blazes' head and mine." [35]

"If we'd jumped up and started on we'd have got another peppering. The sharpshooter who couldn't shoot sharp didn't figure on our rushing the gate. It gave him such a jolt that he beat it."

"Where did he go?" demanded Jimmy.

"In an opposite direction to us, I suppose," surmised Schnitzel. "While we were hiking for that orchard he was hot-footing it along the other way. Two of us should have gone one way and three the other."

"Then he certainly didn't go through this gap. We're a nice bunch of rookies," jeered Bob. "All run in one direction like a flock of sheep."

"Well, we were excited," excused Jimmy with a sickly grin.

"You mean rattled," laughed Roger.

"It was all Bob's fault," accused Jimmy jocularly. "If he hadn't gone and said that our gunman had beat it along the wall and into that orchard we wouldn't have been in such a rush to beat it after him."

"Yes, and what did you say?" retorted Bob in the same joking spirit. "You were first man to yell, 'Come on, let's after him.' Then away you went and took us along."

"Well, you didn't have to go, did you?" countered Jimmy.

[36]

"Sure we did, else why are we Blazes' bunkies?"

There was an earnest note back of this lightly uttered reply. Jimmy caught it. Slapping Bob on the shoulder he said: "Good old Bob. You're not so worse. I kind of like you."

"So glad, I'm sure," simpered Bob, returning the slap with interest.

"It's just as well that we kept together, I guess," commented Roger soberly. "There's safety in numbers, you know. I don't see that there's any use in hanging around here. Our man has given us the slip. It must have been some stray Boche out on his own. Not a soldier, but some secret sympathizer with the Fatherland, perhaps. Else why would he be slipping around behind gates to plug passing soldiers? It's unusual for a party from camp to be shot at like that so far back from the fighting district."

"This yellow sneak might have been hanging around the station when we got off the train."

As usual, Bob was full of theories. "He knew it was a straight road to camp and that he couldn't miss us. Very likely he knows this part of the country like a book, so he just took a cross-cut and waited at the gate for us. It was a fine chance to get a whack at the 'American dogs.' Long live Bunco Bill—not! I hope he chokes!" anathematized Bob.

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"Some healthy little hate," snickered Jimmy.

"Oh, Bobby's a fine hearty hater," was the light assurance. "Well, let's be on our way. We'd better be traveling along to camp. Double quick, fellows, when we hit the road. We'll stand less chance of getting potted as we go."

Out on the road again an excited discussion arose as they hurried campward. It pertained to the motive for the unexpected attack. Undoubtedly a prowling Boche had fired on them. They believed it was not usual for soldiers to be thus attacked so far back of the fighting district. Certainly they had not anticipated such an ending to their peaceful pleasure jaunt.

Camp limits reached, they were challenged by a sentry and allowed to go on to quarters after making satisfactory response and being advanced to be recognized.

After he had turned in that night a swift, unbidden thought popped into Sergeant Jimmy Blaise's brain just as he was dropping off to sleep. It left him wide awake and staring reflectively into the darkness. He wondered if, by any possible chance, the "tiger man" had succeeded in picking up his trail.

CHAPTER VI

[38]

THE UNFORESEEN

"I've got fine news here for you guys!" Jimmy Blaise bolted into the midst of his bunkies, who were grouped together in their own corner of barracks waiting for supper call to blow. In his hand was an open letter which he waved triumphantly at them.

"From Voissard," he jubilantly informed them. "He's coming down to see us on Saturday, along with the Twinkle Twins. Glad it's a half-holiday. We'll have more chance to show 'em around. Wait a minute and I'll read it to you."

Surrounded by an interested audience, Jimmy spread open the letter and read:

"Dear Sergeant Blaise:

"With much pleasure I write to inform you that my cousins and myself expect to pay

you and your friends the visit on Saturday afternoon. I have something of importance to impart to you regarding the matter we discussed in Paris. With best wishes I remain,

[39]

"Sincerely,

"EMILE VOISSARD."

"Three whoops for Cousin Emile!" caroled Bob. "We certainly are the original white-haired boys. Think of a visit from the 'Flying Terror of France'! This place won't hold us, we'll be so puffed up with pride and vanity!"

"He's not a bit particular about his company," grinned Roger. "The humble non-com and the president of France are all one to Cousin Emile. That's the way it looks."

"That's the way it *is*," emphasized Jimmy. "Voissard has earned the right to do as he pleases. He knows it and that explains everything. Anyway, he has business to talk over with Blazes. Ahem!"

"See him puff out his chest." Bob wagged a derisive head at Jimmy. "He throws that old bluff, 'I'm not so much,' but he means, 'I'm it!'"

"Spotted at last," was Jimmy's grinning admission. "I knew you'd get wise to me some day."

"We hated to tell you," teased Schnitzel, joining in the banter. "Now you know it, don't feel too bad about it."

"My heart's bruised but not broken," retaliated Jimmy. "I can stand a few more such shocks and still keep on going. What's the matter with you, Iggy? Haven't you a gentle little knock to hand me? Now's the time. I'm in a real good humor."

[40]

"Never I hand you him that knock," responded Ignace with deep solemnity.

"He keeps 'em for Bobby, don't you Iggins?"

"Ye-a." Ignace snickered at Bob's accusation. "I like make the fon to you, 'cause always you make the fon to me."

Supper call broke in upon this good-humored exchange of raillery. Loyal to the death the five Brothers rarely took one another seriously. Even solemn Ignace had learned the art of "joshing" which is second nature to the American youth.

Several days had passed since the Khaki Boys had made the eventful trip to Paris which had ended in an attempt on their lives by an unknown foe. They had reported the affair to headquarters the next morning. Jimmy Blaise had said nothing, however, to anyone, of his own private suspicion concerning the "tiger man." It was merely a vague supposition on his part, and he was quite willing to "let sleeping tigers lie."

Inquiry in camp among men who had been there longer than themselves revealed to the Khaki Boys the knowledge that occasionally similar night attacks had been made upon soldiers going or coming from the village. In one instance a Sammy had been wounded in the leg and had lain groaning by the roadside until picked up by a party of his comrades returning to camp from the village.

[41]

This rather put a crimp in Jimmy's theory that his old enemy had trailed him from Paris. He decided inwardly that he was an idiot to allow such "crazy" ideas brain room and promptly banished them from his mind.

It was on Thursday that Jimmy received the letter from Voissard announcing his intention of visiting the Khaki Boys' camp on Saturday. The visit was destined not to be paid, however, for on Friday morning the detachment of the 509th Infantry, to which the five Brothers belonged, received the longed-for order to move on.

The selected men of the 509th Infantry were to accompany part of another American regiment, longer in training than themselves, on this new move toward the front. None knew whether the order meant a brief interval of rest in a village near the fighting lines or if their journey would lead them straight to the trenches. The men of the 509th were hopeful that this last would be their lot. They were intensely eager to "get a whack" at the Boches. As Bob soulfully remarked: "There aren't any cold feet in the little old 509th."

There was only one drawback to the five Brothers' satisfaction. How were they to send quick word to Voissard and the Twinkle Twins of this new turn in their affairs?

[42]

In desperation Jimmy finally sought Major Steadman, his commanding officer, and laid the matter before him. Fortunately for all concerned the major chanced to be well acquainted with the aviator. Not only did he show evident interest in Jimmy's story of how he and his bunkies happened to be acquainted with Cousin Emile. He very kindly volunteered to take the responsibility on himself of sending the aviator a personal dispatch. Thus it was arranged, but five Sammies were deeply disappointed over the sudden collapse of the "Flying Terror's" proposed visit.

Friday afternoon saw the selected detachments marching to the station to entrain, looking not unlike a herd of overloaded young camels. Hiking about Camp Marvin under "full pack" was easy compared to the amount of equipment with which the Khaki Boys were now loaded down. Each

Sammy fairly bristled with the paraphernalia of war.

Everything needful for trench life was attached to some part of his person. All the worldly goods bestowed upon him by the Army, he now carried with him, together with as many of his own personal possessions as he could make room for and bear the weight of. Undoubtedly few of these last treasured gifts would go with him to the trenches. They would have to be reluctantly cast aside or given away, leaving him with only the absolutely necessary articles and equipment provided by the Government. [43]

Burdened as they were, it was a thrilling moment for the Khaki Boys when late on Friday afternoon the bugles called them to Assembly in front of barracks. All day they had been impatiently waiting for the order. Every young face glowed with patriotic fire as they obeyed the call, "Fall in," and were marched, company after company to the station, there to entrain for the front.

All along the way they were cheered by the inhabitants of the village who had come out to catch a farewell view of the gallant Sammies and send them into the fight with warm-hearted expressions of their good will. Many a French mother breathed a prayer and made the sign of the cross as she saw these sturdy youngsters taking the same stretch of the Glory Road over which had passed a beloved son or sons of her own, never to return.

Arrived at the station our Khaki Boys were marshaled with the rest into the waiting "48 Men, Eight horses," which had been used to convey so many Allied soldiers to the fighting district. Entering these cheerless and highly uncomfortable box-cars, they were leaving behind them the comparative ease and safety they had enjoyed since landing in France. From now on the Glory Road would mean a succession of trials and hardships, with death always lurking in the foreground. [44]

Every mile the train ran meant a nearer approach to the goal for which they had so long striven. At last they were on the way to strike their first definite blow in the big war.

CHAPTER VII

[45]

"AT HOME"

"This is certainly some ride," grumbled Corporal Bob Dalton to Sergeant Jimmy Blaise. "I've had enough of old Eight Horses and goodness knows how many men to last me for a while. There are supposedly forty-eight Sammies in this band-box. I should say there were nearer ten thousand. I'd have sure croaked standing up, if you hadn't been along to take the curse off."

"I'm glad we got in the same car, shoe-box I mean."

Sergeant Jimmy's voice sounded decidedly weary. Luckily for himself and Bob, they had been assigned to the same car, Bob being corporal of a squad in Jimmy's platoon. Roger, Schnitzel and Ignace were scattered somewhere through the train, though neither Bob nor Jimmy knew which car their bunkies were in.

"Well, it'll soon be over." Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief. "We've been two days and two nights on the road. It's now five o'clock, we ought to be out of this dump soon. I never believed I could sleep standing up, but I know it now." [46]

"Here, too. I hope we get a night's rest stretched out before we hit the trenches," was Bob's wistful reply.

"Oh, we won't go straight to the trenches in this train. We'll probably be in rest billets several days before we're called to take our turn."

"Wonder how the fellows like it," mused Bob. "I'll bet Iggy's slept most of the way. Nothing fazes him when he wants to sleep. He could pound his ear standing on his head."

Both Khaki Boys snickered a little as they imagined Ignace turned upside down and sleeping peacefully, nevertheless.

"It seems a long while since we left Sterling, doesn't it?"

Jimmy broke the silence that had fallen upon both, succeeding Bob's humorous remark concerning his Polish Brother.

"It certainly does. I had a funny standing-up nightmare about old Sterling last night." Bob grinned reminiscently. "I'd braced my back against the wall of this box and was taking forty winks. I'd been thinking about that Bixton affair and old Schnitz, and I dreamed that good old Major Stearns was a Boche spy, and that he was trying to finish me with a bayonet. He'd just given me an awful punch in the chest and I was yelling: 'What's eating you, you rough neck!'" [47]

"The sound of my own voice woke me up, and I found that a man next to me had hauled off and binged me one in his sleep. It was a joke, and we both laughed after we got wise to ourselves. Wonder you didn't hear me yowl."

"I've heard so many different kinds of yowls since I landed in this jug that I'm used to 'em. Well, it's a great life if you don't weaken."

Jimmy yawned and, reaching for his water bottle, took a long drink.

"Hope we stop somewhere soon," he observed. "I've emptied this bottle, and I'm still thirsty."

Shortly afterward his wish for a speedy detrainment was granted. A series of jolts, which caused the imprisoned Sammies to behave like nine-pins, except that they had not sufficient space to topple over, and the famous "Eight Horses" came at last to a full stop.

Freed at last, the Khaki Boys gladly hustled from the ungracious box-cars to the platform of a village station, dotted as usual with the friendly French folk, whom the Khaki Boys had noticed were always in evidence wherever they went.

The two detachments of Uncle Sam's boys had hardly left the train, however, before they discovered that for once they were not the center of attraction. Waiting on the platform to enter the train they had just left was a company of slightly wounded French soldiers returning from active service on the firing line. [48]

Though these men were still able to walk, they presented a pitiful sight. With arms or heads bound up in blood-stained bandages, their faces wan and racked by pain, they brought home to the full the grim horror of the trenches. Yet nearly every face wore an attempt at a smile. Bandaged heads made gay attempts at nodding to the villagers who were worshipping at their shrine in true French fashion.

One man whose arms were both bound up, blood trickling from his face, bent painfully down to speak to a little boy who was shouting lustily, "*Vive la France*," and waving a little French flag at the wrecked heroes.

Watching the little scene in fascinated horror, it occurred briefly to Jimmy that for fighters these men were a curious-looking lot. Accustomed to the olive drab uniform and the usually clean-shaven face of the Sammy, these whiskered *poilus* with their red trousers and long blue coats pinned back from the front seemed strangely unlike soldiers. Their bandaged heads and arms, and scratched, bleeding faces told quite a different story, however. They had known what it was to be under fire. They had done their bit for France.

Ardent as was the admiration shown for these wounded soldiers, the Khaki Boys were not slighted. As they formed into platoons and marched away from the station, they were wildly applauded by the gathered throng, part of which followed along after them. [49]

As they tramped along through the narrow streets to headquarters, their progress was accompanied by a new sound—a steady, heavy rumble that went on ceaselessly. They had now come within the thunder of the big guns. Off to the east of the village the fight against an unworthy foe was raging. With every heavy detonation, war was taking its toll of lives.

Under his breath, Jimmy found himself repeating:

"At the front brave men are falling,
Now's your time to do and dare!"

He wondered if the man who, far back in peaceful America, had composed the words of the "Glory Road" song could possibly realize the meaning of his own song.

A march of a little over a mile through the village, and the long lines of soldier boys had reached headquarters. Here began the work of assigning them to temporary quarters. With night approaching it was necessary to put the men in lodgings with all possible despatch.

"Lodgings" for fighting men nearing the front consist of anything from the odd, not over-clean French farmhouses to stables and barns. The best horses naturally fall to the officers; with the enlisted men it is a case of Hobson's choice. [50]

Just as the first stars of evening began to appear in the clear, wintry sky, Jimmy Blaise marched his command into a stable. Ten minutes later he had begged the back cover of a note-book from Corporal Bob Dalton, and printed on it in large black letters:

AT HOME
SERGEANT BLAISE
AND
THIRTY-TWO MEN

Sergeant Jimmy Blazes was "at home" to all comers.

CHAPTER VIII

A BOCHE TESTIMONIAL

It was after eight o'clock that night when Jimmy's detachment finished a supper of the inevitable

bully beef and biscuit, washed down with coffee furnished them by the kindly French woman to whom the stable belonged, and whose farmhouse was situated only a short distance from it.

Worn out by two-days' sojourn in the narrow confines of "Eight Horses," both Bob and Jimmy were only too glad to resign themselves to the doubtful comfort of the straw-strewn stable floor.

It proved to be a restless night for all concerned. "Sergeant Blaise and Thirty-Two Men" had their first unpleasant experience with the "cooties," a baleful gray vermin that has been the perpetual bane of the soldier in France since the beginning of the war.

Later, when trench life had taught the Khaki Boys to accustom themselves to "most any old thing," the ever-present "cootie" became insignificant when compared to other trials they were called upon to endure. That first night, however, was one of such itching horror as they were not likely to forget in a hurry. [52]

In spite of this new trial they managed to snatch a little sleep, though Jimmy stoutly declared his intention of rolling up in his poncho and sleeping outdoors thereafter.

Obligated to depend upon the rations previously issued them for breakfast the next morning, Jimmy rebelled and made a quick hike up to the farmhouse, returning with the glowing information that "Madame" was quite willing to furnish breakfast to such as desired to partake of her hospitality. Her charges for the same were low, and the majority of the men were very willing to pay them. In consequence, Sergeant Blaise's little flock feasted on bacon, eggs, white bread, and preserves.

Breakfast finished, a hasty going over of equipment ensued, and Jimmy marched his men to a not far distant field for inspection, where they had been ordered to report and parade. Here they found the rest of their own detachment. Inspection over, the entire unit put in the morning in drill, with three ten-minute intermissions for rest, during which the newly arrived Sammies had a chance to compare notes.

The first of these intermissions saw the five Brothers engaged in a zealous hunt for one another. Together, Bob and Jimmy made speedy effort to locate their bunkies, managing to pick them up just as the command came to "Fall in." [53]

"Meet us here, next break," called Bob over his shoulder, as he ran back to his squad.

At the next order of "Fall Out," the five made prompt rush for the spot which Bob had designated.

"Well!" exclaimed Roger, as they grouped themselves eagerly together. "Where did you fellows get off at?"

"In a stable," was Jimmy's disgusted answer. "It's not far from here. Our 'at home' sign's out."

"Come and see us. You'll love the place. I hate to think of leaving it," grimaced Bob.

"I'm in the same boat. I mean the same sweet kind of a billet," grinned Roger. "A nice hard floor, straw, lots of 'cooties,' and all the comforts of a cow barn. Schnitz lives in a house that nobody else but Sammies wanted. The folks moved away before the French Revolution came off and took the furniture along."

"Nothing left but dust and rats," supplemented Schnitzel. "We haven't found any live stock yet. That's something to brag of."

"Iggy is the lucky guy. He's in a real house with real people, real eats, and real beds to sleep in. He and his squad grabbed a cinch."

"I don't like," objected Ignace mournfully. "My Brother sleep in stable, so would I there be." [54]

"Can the sob stuff, Iggy," railed Bob, though his black eyes were very kind. "Never mind about us. Be glad you landed soft."

"I am no the pig," asserted Ignace with lofty dignity.

"Sure you aren't. If you were you couldn't camp in that nice billet. You'd land in a pig sty, and that would be worse than a cow barn."

Bob winked drolly at Roger.

"Where'll we meet after drill?" broke in Jimmy. "We'll have to decide right off the bat. Our time's almost up."

"Right here," suggested Schnitzel. "We'll probably break ranks and be dismissed here on account of being scattered all over the village."

"I wonder if we are going to have regular mess kitchens set up. Don't believe we will, though. I guess it's cook-wagons for ours or buy our own grub if we want variety. I have an idea we're going to move on soon."

"I hope so," Bob said fervently. "These Frenchies are very decent about not soaking a fellow for his grub. They'd give it to you if you'd let 'em. Even so, pay-day's a long way off, and Bobby's no millionaire. I like to pay as I go. These people can't afford to treat after all they've been through. A franc in itself isn't much, but when it's a franc here, and two francs there, it counts up like the mischief." [55]

"Wait till I hear from home and we'll have money to burn," declared generous Jimmy. "I had the nerve to ask Dad for five hundred. I'll bet I get it, too."

"Keep the change," laughed Roger. "Your money's no good with us. We spends our own and goes broke. Blime if we gets so low as to sponge off a pal!"

Roger imitated to perfection the tone of a Tommy. The Khaki Boys had, by this time, come to know and like many of England's sturdy, fighting Tommies.

Command to again "Fall In" broke up the brief reunion. Drill ending at noon, the Sammies were given the rest of the day for their own until Retreat, which was scheduled to take place on the impromptu parade ground at the usual hour.

Left to themselves, the five Brothers gathered briefly together after dismissal. Agreeing to meet again at the same place half an hour later, they set off for their billets to put away their rifles.

Meeting again promptly at the appointed time, they started out to find some place where they might obtain a substantial dinner. This was rather hard to find, as almost every house in the village had its quota of transient Sammies to care for. By dint of inquiry they finally located a quaint little inn, and entered it to find it overflowing with men of their own detachment who had also been seeking a place to eat real food, regardless of expense. [56]

After standing about waiting for a time, they at last managed to grab a table, and were presently served with a savory meal, cooked in true French fashion.

Dinner over, they left the inn and wandered about the village with its quaint gray stone houses and winding streets. Close examination of it showed that it had not escaped the enemy's spite. Here and there the ruins of a house or a deep furrow in the ground showed the effects of Boche gun or bomb work.

The inhabitants were a simple, friendly lot who treated them to smiling looks and bobbing little bows of admiration and respect. The heart of France beats warmly for Uncle Sam's Boys. Her people look upon them as the savior of the Allied cause, come in the hour of need.

Deciding to put off writing letters to the home folks until the next day, the five Khaki Boys spent their entire afternoon in wandering aimlessly about, seeing something of interest, no matter in which direction they walked.

One sight in particular filled them with righteous wrath. Traversing one of the smaller streets, they encountered an apple-cheeked French woman and a boy of about ten years. To their united horror they instantly noticed that the child's arms had been lopped off just below the elbow. [57]

"Great Heavens! Look at that!" muttered Bob, as the two drew nearer. "Speak to her, Blaise. Ask her if that's Boche butchery."

"*Bon jour, Madame.*" Jimmy's hand went to his helmet.

Since coming to the village, the Khaki Boys had been ordered to replace their campaign hats with the bullet-proof helmets, which the soldier must wear constantly as he approaches nearer to the firing lines.

"Is this your son?" he inquired in French. His gray eyes were dark with mingled horror and sympathy, as he indicated the pitiful little figure. "How did this happen to him?"

"But *non, Monsieur,*" the woman replied. "He is a Belgian. *Les Allemands,* this they do. Father and mother, both they kill. This poor child—*Voila,* you see for yourself! He was brought to me thus. Now I have taken him for my own. Three sons I once had. All died at Ypres and for France."

In the face of this tragic recital, the five Khaki Boys stood silent. Instantly every helmet was doffed to this grand figure of womanhood. There were no signs of tears in her bright black eyes as she spoke, only a fleeting expression of intense suffering, which merged instantly into a look of intense pride, as she mentioned the loss of her sons.

"Ask her, Blazes, if she'll allow us to make the poor kiddie a present," ordered Roger, a trifle unsteadily. [58]

The woman flushed, then smiled, showing two rows of strong, white teeth.

"It is not necessary, Monsieur," she returned. "Still, if *les Americains* of the great heart please—I am very poor."

"Cough up a dollar or two apiece, quick," ordered Bob, who had understood the reply. His recent complaint regarding far-off pay-day was now forgotten.

Each Sammy's hand went instantly to his money belt.

"This is your donation party, Rodge." Jimmy handed a two-dollar note to Roger. Ignace, Schnitzel and Bob handed him a like amount.

Adding his own offering, Roger tendered it to the woman, who thanked them with a pretty courtesy that quite won their hearts.

"Can such things be?" was Bob's savage question as they strolled on. "It's bad enough to read

CHAPTER IX

[59]

ON THE MARCH

Jimmy's prediction that they were likely to move on soon was speedily verified. The very next morning at Assembly the men were ordered to report on the parade ground at noon under full pack. An hour's drill and they were dismissed in order to allow them to make final preparations before starting on their march to the front.

Though they had had hardly time to explore the little village or make the acquaintance of its inhabitants, the entire population turned out to see them off. French matrons and pretty young girls fluttered their handkerchiefs at the marching columns of Sammies, just as the American mothers, wives and sisters did when the trains pulled out of the home towns bearing Uncle Sam's Boys away to the training camps.

With the backbone of winter broken, the day was clear and fair. The sun shone brightly down in inspiring fashion. There was but one drawback—the ever-present mud. A recent spell of wet weather had made of the roads an unending succession of small pools of water, interspersed with little stretches of sticky, clinging mire, into which the soldiers' feet sank, ankle deep.

[60]

Long before the afternoon merged into sunset, the Khaki Boys had begun to feel the effects of that strenuous march. Their heavy, hob-nailed trench shoes, made heavier by constant contact with the mud, blistered their feet and caused them acute suffering. Yet they sang home songs, and joked with one another as they plodded along, unmindful of their discomfort. Not a man hung back or gave up. Neither did the fact trouble them that every step they took was bringing them nearer to the big guns, the booming of which was ever in their ears.

For each hour on the road they were allowed a ten-minutes' halt, in which to nurse their swollen feet, and rest their weary backs, aching from the heavy packs. Though the majority did not know of how long duration the hike would be, a few knew that their difficult march would end in a partially ruined village, just out of range of the German guns. There they would be billeted until the order came to take their first turn in the trenches.

It was after eight o'clock in the evening when a foot-sore, mud-spattered company of young defenders tramped wearily along the principal thoroughfare of the French hamlet. That thoroughfare was nothing more than a very muddy road. On each side of it stood the shattered remnants of what had once been the homes of the unfortunate inhabitants whose quaint little cottages had been demolished by the enemy's guns. Less than half the houses in the village still remained intact. So near to the firing lines, they had not been able to avert the dire misfortunes of war.

[61]

Continuing on through the village, they were finally halted in a large meadow on its outskirts. Here the work of erecting shelter or "pup" tents began, in which they would sleep that night. The cook wagons, too, immediately went into action, and the way-worn travelers were presently given the comfort of a hot supper before turning in for a night's sleep.

Rolled up in their ponchos, the Khaki Boys slept as soundly that night as though back in the home barracks they had so long ago left behind them. A hot breakfast the next morning and they were again in good trim for the eventful hike that would bring them to the firing line.

Save for an hour's limbering-up drill, the day was theirs to roam at will about their new environment. Not until the dusk of evening had settled down upon the landscape would they start again on the last lap of their journey.

Immediately after drill, the five Brothers got together and went on a roving tour about the partially wrecked village. By daylight they found it teeming with life. It seemed principally peopled, however, with old women and children, although they encountered a goodly number of French soldiers resting in billets from trench duty.

[62]

Here and there they saw small inns, largely patronized by the French *poilus*. Entering one of them out of curiosity, they were rather disappointed to discover that they could obtain little there in the way of refreshment other than brown bread, cheese and French wines, the latter in which none of them ever indulged.

"For a place that's been all shot to pieces by Boche Kultur, I must say it's a mighty prosy old burg," was Bob's opinion.

The quintet had repaired to their impromptu camp for dinner, and afterward started out again in the hope of finding something really exciting. They had been roaming about for over an hour since dinner, and had, thus far, met with no startling adventures.

Bob's remark arose from the fact that they had just passed a schoolhouse, through the opened windows of which came the high, shrill voices of children, placidly reciting their lessons.

"Funny, isn't it, that those kids can settle down to school with the noise of the guns going on all the time?" mused Roger. "You'd think they'd be scared out of their baby wits." [63]

"They're just like all the rest of these good sports of Frenchies. They've grown so used to it they don't blink an eyelash now," declared Schnitzel. "Wish I'd been born a Frenchman instead of a G. A. The A's all right, but not the G."

"Well, you got the G. out of your system when you enlisted," consoled Bob. "You've no kick coming."

"Thank goodness I did," was Schnitzel's fervent response. "I'd hate to feel that I had a single tie that bound me to these cursed, butchering Boches. If some of the Germans in the U. S. could really be made to believe what we've seen with our own eyes, it would give 'em a jolt."

"They don't want to believe," Bob cried out scornfully. "But wait awhile. If some German-American father whose son got in the draft and was sent over here gets word that his boy has been crucified or tortured by a delegation of Fatherland friends, he'll wake up in a hurry."

"Yes," nodded Schnitzel, "when the chickens begin to come home to roost, it's going to make some difference in the way these German fanatics at home feel about this war."

Greeted on every side by evidence of havoc and devastation wrought by the enemy, the talk of the strollers remained centered on the war. In the home camps and on shipboard they had discussed it but little, preferring to keep it in the background. Now they were so near to the great conflict it could no longer be ignored. It had become the one vital topic of conversation. [64]

"Let's go into that wreck and see what it looks like inside," proposed Roger at last.

Proceeding in an opposite direction from their camp, they had walked the breadth of the village, and were well toward the open country. Standing by itself in a field, the broken stone walls of a shelled cottage had attracted Roger's attention.

"I'll go you," was Bob's ready response.

"I'm game," agreed Jimmy.

"So would I it to see," assented Ignace. "Yet think I there is no mooch by it, only the many stone and mooch roobish."

Circling the wrecked cottage for a place by which to enter it with the least effort, the explorers climbed over a heap of debris, which partially blocked a doorless aperture at the rear, and gained the interior.

Once inside they saw nothing more remarkable than ragged heaps of stone, splintered beams, and the broken remnants of household furniture. The only part of the floor still intact was the narrow strip on which they stood.

"Let's go. It's fierce." Jimmy spoke in hoarse, husky tones.

Sight of that ruthless wrecking of a home made him think of his own beautiful, far-away home, where his beloved "folks" dwelt in safety, immune from shot and shell. [65]

"I guess we know why we're here, when we look at this," he continued tensely. "If I had a thousand lives I'd give 'em all to save the home folks from such a thing ever happening to 'em."

"Right-o!" emphasized Bob.

Silence hung over the group for an instant, then, by mutual consent, they turned and left behind them the frightful demonstration of "Kultur."

"Look who's here! He's mine. I saw him first!"

Emerging from the ruin a step in advance of his comrades, Bob suddenly raised his voice in a shout, and set off on the run across the field behind the cottage.

Echoing his yell, his bunkies tore after, laughing as they went. Bob's prize was nothing more than a solemn white goat, meandering aimlessly about the brown field in search of a green bit on which to graze.

"You old fake! I thought you'd lamped something wonderful! Nothing but an old Billy goat. Hello, Bill! How's tricks?"

Jimmy now jocularly addressed his goatship.

"M-a-a-a!" bleated Bill politely.

"Don't call him Bill," objected Bob. "Have some respect for his delicate feelings. You can see for yourself it won't go down with him. He's a werry fine animule, and I'm going to adopt him and call him Gaston. He's a French goat, hence the *Français* handle." [66]

"You'd better let him alone," warned Roger. "He must belong to somebody around here. You know what'll happen to you if you pinch him."

"Pinch him nothing. I'm no goat-robber," was Bob's indignant retort. "I'm going to do the square thing by Gaston. See that house down the road? Well, I'm going to tie him up and lead him to it."

Bobby has a nice piece of string in his pocket. I'll bet the folks down there know his history. If he's a orfin, then Bobby will be his foster-papa and train Gaston to charge on you fellows if you ever get too fresh. Won't you, Gaston?"

Gaston, it appeared, was already about to get busy. His first surprise at the invasion having vanished, he lowered his head and dashed at his admirers with an energy that sent them scattering.

"He's got the true war spirit," yelled Bob. "Now watch me tame him!"

Bob agilely circled the belligerent Gaston. The goat had stopped after making the charge to reflect upon his next course of action. Pouncing upon the surprised animal, Bob grasped it by the horns. To his delight, it meekly stood still, whereupon he relaxed one hand from a horn and promptly fished a piece of tough string from his trousers' pocket. An instant later, Gaston was being led, an acquiescent captive, from the field by his beaming master. Prudence, however, warned Bob's bunkies to walk in Gaston's rear.

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Duly arriving at the house Bob had pointed out, he consigned his new pet to Roger's care, and went boldly up to the door in quest of information.

Watching him, his comrades saw him ushered inside the house by a pretty young French girl.

Ten minutes later he emerged, grinning like a Cheshire cat. At his heels trooped two or three children, the girl and an old man, all of whom made bobbing little bows to *Les Americains*.

"He's mine!" called out Bob jubilantly. "I bought him for two plunks. He's an old-timer, and not very popular with the family. He's going to billet here, though, while I'm in the trenches. I'm going to pay for his keep and be a father to him when I'm not on duty. If I get plugged the first whack, then somebody else can have my goat. But as long as Bobby's in good health, Gaston's going to have a friend. Believe me!"

CHAPTER X

[68]

THE LAST LAP

Though the shadow of the trenches hung over them, Bob's latest acquisition put his bunkies in a decidedly lightsome mood. After bidding a pleasant good-bye to Gaston's keepers, and giving the redoubtable Gaston himself a fairly wide berth, the five Brothers wandered on through the village. It was not yet three o'clock, and they were not due back to camp until four o'clock.

Dusk would see them under full pack again, and ready to take the road to the firing line. The advance guard, composed of military police, were to start at least two hours ahead of the main detachment. They would not march in a body, but would straggle along by ones and twos, lest some lurking enemy along the road might learn from their numbers that a new army was soon to be on its way to the front-line trenches.

"We'd best turn back to camp," Schnitzel at last suggested. "It's twenty after three, and we must be almost a mile from headquarters. I want to fix up my pack before we start."

[69]

The exploring party had left their heavy packs and equipment in charge of a comrade. They carried on their stroll only their haversacks containing their supper and breakfast ration, two thick sandwiches apiece.

Until dugout shelters were reached the next morning, they would have no more hot food. Nothing that required cooking would be given them on this last march except hot coffee. Now, so close to the German lines, the cook wagons would be temporarily closed. Bits of food or sparks dropped in the road might also serve to inform the enemy that Uncle Sam's Boys were nearing the front.

About to retrace their steps, the five Khaki Boys were suddenly brought to a sudden standstill by a loud cry from Ignace.

"Look you!" he exclaimed, pointing upward. "So is it the fight by the air!"

Instantly turning their eyes skyward, the group saw high above them an aeroplane cutting wild circles in the air. Around it little puffs of white smoke were continually bursting. As each puff burst, a peculiar "popping" could be heard, though dully.

The plane itself was up too high for the watchers to tell much about it. Besides, they were not familiar enough with the various types of aeroplanes used by the Allies and the Huns to be able to distinguish to which side it belonged.

[70]

"It must be a French or an English plane, and the Boches are peppering it with anti-aircraft shells," surmised Bob, ever ready to theorize on whatever chanced to meet his gaze.

"You're wrong, old man. It's a Boche plane, and the Allied guns are after it."

Schnitzel's correction was uttered with a quiet positiveness that brought instant questions of, "How do you know?" "Who put you wise?" "What makes you so sure of that?"

"Oh, I've been finding out all I could about anti-aircraft guns, batteries, shells and all that," Schnitzel answered. "I worked in a gun plant, you know, before I enlisted. I've told you that. Machine guns were its specialty, but I learned a lot about other kinds of guns, too. I put in a request for Artillery when I enlisted, but I landed in Infantry instead. I was pretty sore about it at first, but I soon got over it.

"Just the same," he went on, "I've still a hankering after the big guns. I've been asking questions right and left ever since we came over. Back in England at the rest camp I met a Tommy who'd been in artillery since the war began. He'd done his bit, and lost an eye, so he was back to Blighty for good. He told me a lot of interesting stuff about guns. He said the Allied anti-aircraft shells showed white smoke when they exploded, and the Boche anti-shells showed black. So there you are. If what he said was so, and I'm sure it was, that's an Allied battery shelling a Boche plane." [71]

Listening to Schnitzel's explanation, the eyes of the quintet, nevertheless, remained fixed on the swooping, circling black speck overhead. Not for a moment did the concealed Allied battery cease its attack on the enemy plane.

Though their necks began to ache and their eyes to smart, they could not draw their fascinated gaze from that gyrating black dot. Even as they watched, it seemed to grow a trifle larger.

"It's coming down!" yelled Jimmy. "They got it! Hurray! I'll bet this plane was trying to get a line on what was doing down here."

"It's dropping, sure as a gun!" shouted Bob. "Some drop! Oh, glory, I wish it would flop right here!"

"It's coming down, down, down, all right!" sang out Roger. "We won't see it though. It'll probably land miles from here, on the other side of those hills. That aviator didn't have much show as an observer."

In what seemed to them an incredibly short time, the doomed plane had sped earthward, and out of sight behind the distant hills east of them.

"So is it, some Boche get kill pretty quick. He never more do nothin'," commented Ignace with grim satisfaction. [72]

"Not so you can notice it," airily agreed Bob. "If he wasn't croaked by the anti, he'd hit the ground with a bump that would finish him. Well, show's over. We've seen a Boche plane shelled and a Hun aviator downed, now let's be on our way. If we never live to see another Fritzie birdman's wings clipped, we've seen one, anyhow."

"We're going to live to see a whole lot more welcome sights like that," asserted Jimmy sturdily.

"Glad to hear it," grinned Bob. "Only the saints croak young. We have a pretty fair show to keep on going, according to that."

Signally inspirited at witnessing the defeat of an enemy the five bunkies set off for headquarters talking cheerily as they walked. There they found their comrades had already begun to assemble, preparatory to the night march, which would begin as soon as sheltering twilight descended. Group after group of soldiers, who had been resting during the afternoon, or roaming about the village, now reported, and stood awaiting the order to "Fall in."

As time went on, conversation gradually died out among the men. Earlier exchange of good-humored badinage ceased, and comparative silence replaced it, broken only by an occasional low murmur of voices.

With the first signs of twilight the tension began to tighten. A curious hush pervaded the two detachments, as the heavily burdened Sammies stood about and watched the dusk grow and deepen. Strangely enough, no distant rumble of artillery broke the spell. Though the voices of the guns had boomed all day, now they were silent. It was an hour which those who survived the struggle they were about to enter would long remember. [73]

At last it came; the clarion notes of the bugle, blowing the order "Fall in." With calm, resolute faces each Khaki Boy found his place in the long double line.

The order was passed along: "Right dress—right dress!" A shuffling of feet, a straightening of lines, and the Khaki Boys were ready for the next command.

"Front!"

Every pair of boyish eyes looked unswervingly ahead.

"Report!"

Corporal after corporal accounted for his squad. There were no laggards or deserters in that heroic band. The time had come, and the Khaki Boys were ready.

"Squads right—March!"

By rows of fours the soldier boys turned, then in the growing darkness they swung off, rifles on their shoulders, stepping alertly, and with the rhythm that long training had given them. On every face shone the quiet determination to do well. Every man was imbued with the resolve to give good account of himself. The Khaki Boys were out to "do and dare" for the honor of Uncle [74]

CHAPTER XI

IN THE FIRE TRENCH

[75]

Shortly before midnight, the columns of marching Khaki Boys reached a village that lay practically in ruins. Passing through one neglected street after another, the company leading was halted just at the turning of a street by an English major, astride a mettlesome horse.

"Who is in command of this company?" came the sharp query.

"Captain Reynolds, sir."

Saluting, a steel-helmeted officer stepped forward.

"Very good. See that every man in your command adjusts his gas mask at alert. All cigarettes must be thrown away."

A moment and both orders had been carried out.

"Forward march by platoons, fifty feet apart," was the next order. "You will be in range of shrapnel directly you leave here."

Obedying instantly, the first company passed on in the designated order. Turning the corner, it started down a road that led straight to the front. It was followed by a second and so on, each company being briefly halted by the English major to receive similar instructions.

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In silence, broken only by the thud of tramping feet, the two detachments of Khaki Boys hiked steadily toward the trenches. All realized that at any moment the German guns might tune up. If the two detachments reached the front-line trenches without "clicking" any casualties, they would be lucky, indeed.

Perhaps for the time being they bore charmed lives. More probably, however, the foe was not aware of their advent into the trenches. At any rate, not even a shrapnel shell was hurled at them by the German artillery.

Amid a hush so deep that each soldier could hear the beating of his own heart, the Khaki Boys finally entered the zig-zagging communication trench, through which they must pass to reach the front-line trench where they were to receive their first initiation into the hazards of war.

Now they were no longer marching in fours. In single file, six paces apart, they plodded mutely along, their tired feet sinking deep into the mud. In the trenches mud is seldom absent. It scarcely ever dries up sufficiently to make walking easy.

An hour from the time of entering the trenches, the Khaki Boys had reached the front line of their sector, and had taken up their positions. Sadly in need of a little rest, the majority of the men seated themselves on the fire step. In the darkness a long line of American soldiers filed past them, on the way to another communication trench that would lead them away from the firing and back to billets behind the lines. These were the men whom the Khaki Boys had come to relieve.

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In the front-line trench, however, a goodly number of veteran Americans still remained to receive the new men and initiate them into the mysteries of trench warfare.

Trying to catch satisfactory glimpses of the shadowy figures which flitted past him in a long succession, Jimmy Blaise speculated as to how long they had been on duty. He was amazed at the number still alive and apparently unscathed. Remembering that, thus far, all night the guns had been silent, he decided that this was the reason why so many Sammies were left to return briefly to billets. He wondered if as many more were still left in the trench.

His thoughts turning to his bunkies, he wondered what they thought of it all. A corporal in his platoon, he knew that Bob, at least, was not far away. In the dense darkness, however, there was a small chance of locating him.

He wondered, too, what time it was. It had been almost midnight when the marching men had been halted in the ruined village by the English major. It must be after two now. Perhaps the Germans would attack just before dawn. He had heard that with both sides this was a favorite hour for attack. At that hour, a man's faculties were the least alert. He was less likely to give good account of himself.

[78]

Although he was anything but at home in his new environment, Jimmy was relieved in that he felt not in the least afraid. He had always hoped that it would be thus. Yet he had never been quite sure of himself on that point. He had always known that he should never be afraid in the cowardly sense of the word. Still, he had often pondered as to whether he would "have all his nerve with him" when the eventful front-line hour arrived.

He was rather surprised to find himself as "nervy" as ever. He almost wished that something

would happen to break the deadly monotony around him. Most of all he wished for daylight to come, so that he might take stock of his surroundings and perhaps "bump into" his bunkies.

The night wore on and nothing happened. With dawn came the order "stand down," and the two veteran sentries posted at each traverse along the line got down off the fire step. To them had fallen the task of standing there all night, heads above the top of the trench, eyes straining into the darkness of "No Man's Land." [79]

The passing of the word "stand down" was hardly more welcome to the tired sentries than to the newly arrived Sammies huddled along the fire step. It meant to the latter a certain relaxation from duty, and a chance to sleep until the order "stand to" saw them back in their places on the fire step, ready for whatever might come to them.

Attempting to rise from the fire step, Jimmy discovered that every bone in his body ached. Crouching in a cramped position on a muddy ledge was not conducive to great agility. Pulling himself together, Sergeant Jimmy went through a series of limbering-up exercises. Burdened by his equipment, which he had not been allowed to remove, he was not very nimble at first. Soon he felt his muscles growing more flexible under the persistent treatment he gave them.

Very promptly he saw to it that his men went through a similar set of movements, which did them all good. To his delight, he found Bob only a few men away from him. The latter's face looked rather wan, but his black eyes were bright and snapping as ever.

"Some night," cheerily greeted Bob, as Jimmy hurried over to him. "Nothing like a fire step for solid comfort—not. Thought the Fritziees might send over a hot shot or two for a welcome. Nothing doing in Dutchyland, though." [80]

"Don't worry. We'll get ours soon enough. Maybe to-day. Still, we might be here quite a while before anything happened. The Boches aren't quite so ready as they used to be to keep hammering the Allies. They've learned a few lessons since this war began.

"Here comes our coffee!" exclaimed Bob. "I certainly am ready for it."

Glancing up the trench, he had spied two men coming down the line, bearing huge pots of the steaming beverage.

"The Tommies may have their tea for breakfast, but coffee for Blazes every time!"

With this emphatic comment, Jimmy proceeded to extract from his haversack the large metal cup belonging to his mess kit. Along with it he brought out the remaining sandwich of the two issued to him on the day previous. It was to be his breakfast.

Bob made room for him on the fire step, and the two settled themselves to await the coming of the coffee men.

Very soon they were hungrily munching their sandwiches, and enjoying the strong, black coffee, which was, indeed, welcome. It warmed them through and through, and put new life into their chilled bodies.

"I'd give a good deal to see the fellows," sighed Jimmy, as, his breakfast finished, he stood up and stretched himself. He was feeling decidedly better, and very wide awake. "Wonder if we dare go up or down the lines a little way." [81]

"You're a sarge. You can travel around, I guess, with no come-back. I wouldn't want to risk it, though. This front-line business doesn't carry many privileges."

"Even so, we can't stick to the fire step all the time. We have to sleep in the dugouts, and when it's quiet we'll be allowed to hang around in them. It's at night that we'll have to do most of our work, I suppose."

"Yes, I presume so. After we get used to this trench system we'll know better how to manage our affairs," was Bob's sage opinion. "We'll have to ask these fellows who are here to help us all about what to do."

Breakfast over and quiet still continuing, the men were ordered to the dugouts for rest.

Earlier in the great war, the heroes of Ypres, Mons, the Marne, and of other memorable battles, found trench life almost unendurable. Since then trench conditions have changed for the better. To-day there are plenty of dugouts, trench platforms, and many other conveniences which help to make the men on trench duty vastly more comfortable than of old.

After seeing that his men were made as comfortable as possible, Jimmy accompanied Bob to one of the dugouts, and flung themselves wearily down on the narrow canvas cots provided for their rest. Just before entering the dugout, however, both had gone a little way up and down the line in search of their bunkies. Failing to find them, and sadly in need of rest, they had agreed to postpone the search until later. [82]

How long they slept neither knew. Both were awakened by a thunderous roar that threatened to split their eardrums.

Instantly springing from their cots, they made a dash for the dugout's opening, along with the rest of the men it contained. All knew what had happened. The enemy had at last been heard

from.

Among the first to gain the trench, Jimmy saw that a portion of the parapet on his right had been demolished. It had fallen into the trench completely blocking it. His heart stood still as he saw at the edge of that heap of tossed-up earth an olive-drab arm moving feebly.

Others besides himself had now reached the scene, among them a veteran lieutenant who ordered a pick and shovel detail to get busy at once.

"Back to dugouts!" was his sharp order to the Sammies who had run to the scene. "Don't expose yourselves unnecessarily."

Jimmy, however, was one of the digging detail. Seizing a shovel, he began to dig furiously into the soft earth. It yielded easily. Careful lest he strike the body of the buried soldier with the shovel, he soon had enough of the smothering mud cleared away to expose the man's head and shoulders. [83]

First sight of the victim's head, and Jimmy shuddered. The face under the helmet was caved in, an unrecognizable, bloody pulp.

"Poor fellow," Jimmy muttered. "He got it pretty quick." He wondered who the man was. Not one of his men. They had all been in the dugout when the crash came.

While he continued at digging the dead man out of his prison, the rest of the detail were busy clearing the trench of the piled-up earth that formed a blockade.

"It was a 'Minnie,'" one of the veteran diggers informed Jimmy.

"Minnie" means a high-power trench mortar shell, of German invention. It is used particularly by the Germans to demolish the Allied trenches. Its real name is "Minnenwerfer." It is especially deadly, as it makes no noise coming through the air. The English soldier is responsible for giving it the name "Minnie."

"Funny they don't follow it up with some more," Jimmy observed to the man, as the latter stolidly wielded a pick.

Hardly had he spoken when a hail of bullets set in from an enemy machine gun. The Boches had begun to turn their energies to the caved-in parapet. Occasionally a single bullet sped past the [84]

By this time another detail, composed of green and seasoned men, were engaged in filling sandbags with earth and passing them on to still another group who were rebuilding the parapet.

Farther down, a second deafening roar announced that another "Minnie" had burst in the trench. Jimmy wondered how much damage it had done. Already stretcher-bearers had come up on the double quick, and were taking care of the shattered form which Jimmy had now released from the pinioning earth. They would bear it away through the communication trench to the rear. Presently it would be laid to rest in foreign soil, and an identification tag would go speeding across the ocean to tell its own gruesome story to the Sammy's dear ones back home. Though he had not lived to fire even one shot at the Germans, he had, nevertheless, done his bit. He had died for his country.

CHAPTER XII

GETTING USED TO IT

After a third "Minnie" had sped across No Man's Land and into the front-line trench, an advanced American battery opened up on the Boches and returned the compliment with a hot fire that soon put a temporary check on Fritzie's activities so far as the sending over of more Minnies went. German machine guns, however, continued to direct their fire upon the gaps in the trenches made by their mortars.

Four men had been killed and several wounded, as a result of the last two mortar shells.

Immediately the damage had been wrought to the trench parapet, willing hands set to work to rebuild the broken places to their original height. During the operation three more men lost their lives, shot down by the bullets from the Boche machine guns.

After this brief exchange of hostilities quiet again settled down, broken only by the occasional [86] letting loose of a Boche shrapnel shell directed at some point behind the lines.

Their digging detail finished, Jimmy and Bob again repaired to the dugout and slept until noon. Both awoke at dinner time greatly refreshed by their brief sleep. A palatable stew and more hot coffee put them in excellent trim for whatever duty might fall to them later on.

Dinner over, they promptly made a fresh effort to find their bunkies. Roger, Schnitzel, and Ignace, who were fairly near together some distance down the line, had also started out on a hunt for Bob and Jimmy. Both search parties met about halfway respectively from their own

stations. Bob and Jimmy had the good fortune to bump into their bunkies just as the latter were entering a dugout.

"Come on in and let's talk," urged Roger. "Goodness knows we may never have another chance."

"Did either of those last two mortars get any of your men?" was Bob's first question of Roger, as the five sought a corner of the dugout and sat down on the floor in a compact circle.

"No; but Schnitz lost two good boys and Iggy one. My men were in the dugout asleep when it happened."

"It was horrible." Schnitzel's dark face wore an expression of deepest gloom. "Ryan and Harvey, corking fellows, both had their heads blown almost off their shoulders. I'm all broken up over Ryan. He was one of the straightest guys I ever met. Gritty, too. He was dying to get a whack at the Boches. Now he's gone West, and never had a chance to kill off even one of the dirty brutes. He was an only son, too. His folks just worshipped him. I'm going to write to his mother. I promised long ago that I would if it came to the scratch. He gave me her address." [87]

Schnitzel spoke with intense bitterness. Ryan had been the best man in his squad.

"Tough luck!"

Jimmy voiced his most emphatic expression of sympathy.

"When come him that one shail, so have I the dugout jus' leave," burst forth Ignace. "Then hear I som' the loud thoonder an' fall down in trench. So think I mebbe I daid for minute."

"Ha, ha!" jeered Bob. "How could you be dead and keep on thinking, you funny old top?"

"Mebbe I daid, you no laugh," responded Ignace with a tranquillity that showed he was quite used to Bob's raillery.

"You're right I wouldn't." Bob's merry face quickly sobered. "It's because you're not 'daid' that I'm laughing. It's a poor subject to josh about, though. Let's forget it."

"I'll never forget that fellow I dug out of the mud," declared Jimmy tensely. "He was the one croaked by the first 'Minnie.' I was in our dugout with Bob when it hit the trench. All the fellows in there rushed out to see. Lieutenant Jaynes shoved 'em back in a hurry, except a detail to dig and one to repair the parapet. I was detailed to dig and I went at it, too. Hauled the fellow from under all by myself. His face was all smashed in. Don't know yet who he was, except that he wasn't one of my men. One of the greenies, like us, I guess." [88]

"It's a pretty savage business, but I'll bet our guns clicked some Boche casualties, too," asserted Roger.

"I thought we'd all get the order to 'stand to' after that third shell, but not yet. I suppose the Huns thought they'd send over a few 'Minnies' to scare us. Wonder when they'll make a real stab at us?"

"When they get good and ready," shrugged Schnitzel. "Maybe not while we're here. We may be the ones to start the ball rolling. One reason it's been so quiet, I guess, is because the Fritzies haven't any ammunition to waste. I've been told that the Allies are sending over twenty shells to their one these days."

"Some improvement." Jimmy expressed his deep satisfaction at this rumor. "When the war began it was twenty to one in favor of Bill Kaiser. Now the shoe seems to be on the other foot."

"I hope I live to see the day when it'll be fifty to nothing in favor of the Allies," was Roger's heartfelt declaration. [89]

"It'll come, even if we don't live to see it," assured Schnitzel prophetically.

"So think I," nodded Ignace. "Byme by, thes' Boche have no the nothin'. Then get kill pretty quick. I would him myself that ver' bad Bill Kaiser kill."

"Why don't you ask for the detail?" was Bob's mischievous suggestion. "I'll lend you Gaston to help do the dirty work."

"Now again you mak' the fon to me," giggled Ignace. "I say only I would it to do. So is it."

"So is it," repeated Bob. "I can just see our Iggins and dear Gaston hot-footing it to Bill's royal shebang to put him out of his misery. Gaston would be some fine little ally. You could turn him loose on the imperial guard while you went in the back door of the palace and did up William."

Bob's nonsense brought a smile even to Schnitzel's somber face. No one could be serious for long with Bob on the premises. His light-hearted ability to see the funny side of things when in the midst of shadow was always eminently cheering to his bunkies.

"I wish I had Gaston with me," Bob continued regretfully. "I'll bet he'd win a whole string of honor tin cans going Over the Top. He'd probably eat 'em afterward, though, unless Bobby was around to see that he didn't overload his heroic stomach. Just as soon as I get back to a rest billet, I'm going to take Gaston to the K. O. and offer his services. I'll bet they'll be gratefully accepted." [90]

"Unless Gaston takes it into his head to charge on the K. O.," laughingly supplemented Roger.

"Oh, I'll speak to Gaston about that beforehand," airily assured Bob. "I'll put him wise to the difference between a K. O. and a bunch of insignificant non-coms."

"Don't forget to class yourself with that bunch," reminded Jimmy.

The five Brothers continued to talk in this light strain, well content to get away briefly from the grim shadow of war. Already they were unconsciously leaning toward the desire to keep strictly to the surface of things.

In the front-line trenches men soon realize that it is futile to worry over what may happen. They learn to live from hour to hour and make the most of whatever cheer lies at hand.

They gleefully plan for the future, refusing to reflect that a well-directed shell or bullet may send them speeding West immediately afterward. If it were not for this cheery ignoring of grim Death hovering ever near, arrant Fear would soon step in and claim toll on them. Dread of Death courts Fear indeed.

Toward supper time the Khaki Boys witnessed from the trench a spirited bout in the air between Boche and Allied aircraft. From somewhere back of the enemy trenches, half a dozen German aeroplanes suddenly rose against the evening sky and began a flight toward the American sector. [91]

When hardly halfway over No Man's Land they were met by a fleet of French planes which had promptly risen to drive them back. Though they were some distance up the line from the portion of the front line trench occupied by the 509th Infantry men, the Sammies had a fairly good view of the fight. They could hear the constant pop-pop of the aircraft machine guns as the contestants swooped, dived and circled about one another.

Jimmy Blaise centered his attention particularly upon one of the French planes. It had been the first to rally to the scene and was giving good account of itself.

Its aviator appeared to bear a charmed life. Shells from the German Archies, which had immediately gone into action, failed to reach him. He spiraled and sank, sank and spiraled with an elusive dexterity that was dizzying to watch. At times his plane would lurch wildly, dropping a little, as though shell-pierced and about to fall. Instantly it would right itself and soar upward, cleverly maneuvering so as always to attain a position in the air where its gunner could pour a mercilessly effective fire upon the Boche planes. [92]

One of them went down to destruction as a result of the wonderman's marvelous exhibition of skill and daring. A plane of the French fleet also met disaster. Seeing one of their number down, the Frenchies rallied to the onslaught with a zeal that soon put another Boche plane out of business. By this time Allied Archies were sending their shells against the invaders with a demoralizing aim that crippled a third enemy plane and sent the three remaining Boche flyers soaring out of danger and back to their own lines.

In the trenches the Sammies were cheering with wild enthusiasm as they watched the spirited conflict in the air. Here was a spectacle beside which even baseball paled into insignificance as a purely "sports" proposition. They were only sorry that it lasted so short a time.

"Great work," yelled one of the seasoned men who stood beside Jimmy. "That one guy was a sure-enough peach of a birdman."

"You bet," agreed Jimmy fervently.

The clever work of the daring aviator had brought to his mind the "Flying Terror of France." He imagined that only a man like Voissard would be capable of giving such a wonderful exhibition of flying as he had just witnessed. Where was Cousin Emile now, he wondered, and would he ever see Voissard again? Perhaps he would not live long enough to learn the important information concerning the "tiger man" which Voissard had mentioned in his letter to Jimmy. [93]

Until now Jimmy had not once thought of the "tiger man" since the march to the front had begun. The events of that memorial hike had driven the past quite out of his mind. Standing there in the trench his gray eyes grew retrospective as his mind harked back to the time he and his bunkies had boarded the *Columbia*. He had not realized until then how really remarkable had been his adventures since he left the United States. Living them from day to day they had not seemed so very unusual.

The greatest adventure of all yet lay ahead of him. He had still to know what it meant to be actually under fire and take part in a real, bang-up fight. His natural impatience of delay made him wish that it would come soon. Perhaps this latest attempt of the Boches to send observation planes over the American trenches meant that the enemy was getting impatient, too. He hoped so.

He had come to the trenches to fight and he felt it would be a bitter disappointment should his first tour in the trenches end without at least one opportunity to fire a shot for Uncle Sam.

UNDER FIRE

Eating an early supper, the order "stand to" came just at dusk and was passed along from traverse to traverse. With it two veteran sentries in each traverse took up their positions on the fire step to keep ward over No Man's Land.

Until relieved by other sentries, one of the two in each traverse would stand, immovable on the fire step, watching over the parapet for any signs of activity on the part of the enemy. The other man would sit at his feet ready to inform the platoon officer of whatever reports his companion might make in regard to what he saw going on across the narrow stretch of land that divided the two armies.

It was an especially trying post for the observation man. Not for an instant did he dare remove his eyes from the portion of land in front of him. Whether he spoke to make a report or to answer a question put to him by his companion, he was obliged to speak in guarded tones and without turning his head. His motto had to be "Eyes Front." [95]

In the trench, ranged along the fire step, with bayonets fixed, Uncle Sam's young defenders sat ready for duty at the slightest word of command.

Now strictly on the alert, the Khaki Boys dared not speak above a whisper and only when necessary, as, for instance, in passing an order along the lane. Rigid discipline had to be observed in this respect, lest some loudly-uttered word should be heard by a Boche detail out on listening post duty.

In the daytime No Man's Land is never a land of living men. Often it occupies a space hardly larger than a good-sized garden. It is a desolate stretch of ground, indeed. One sees only masses of barbed wire and yawning shell holes, sometimes containing all that remains of what once were fighting men. Perhaps a few ragged stumps dot it here and there, or a pile of debris that originally formed part of a farmhouse, long since leveled to the earth by the barking dogs of war, the big guns.

At night, however, it undergoes a swift transformation. Under cover of the darkness it soon swarms with living men. They crawl stealthily about on their details. Perhaps they are risking their lives on listening duty. Again they may be out to mend broken-down wire. After a battle they steal out to bring in their dead and wounded. [96]

Night expeditions across No Man's Land are of equal importance to both sides. Each sends out its eyes to keep tab on the movements of the other and find out, if possible, his opponent's strength and plans.

Many a silent battle is fought there in the dark when two enemy details chance to meet. Never a shot is fired. Steel meets steel and the victor goes on his way, leaving behind the lifeless form of his antagonist. Out there, kill quickly and mercilessly is the watchword. The ethics of No Man's Land permit of no quarter.

The quiet continuing all evening, toward ten o'clock the new men and a part of their seasoned comrades were allowed to seek the dug-outs for a little sleep.

At three o'clock in the morning the sleepers were routed out with the order "stand to." Though the Khaki Boys could not know it, a patrol had returned half an hour before with the information that they had surprised a Boche wiring party, who were busily engaged in cutting lanes in their own wires, and had killed two of them. This looked decidedly suspicious, to say the least. The patrol was of the belief that an attack on the American trench would soon begin, followed by a raiding party of Boches.

Shortly after the Khaki Boys had taken up their positions on the fire-step, the German guns began a furious bombardment of the American trench, forcing the men to shelter themselves behind the parados. The parados, in this particular trench, were composed of squares of sandbags built up at intervals for a distance of about three feet behind the parapet, leaving a lane in the trench just wide enough for passage back and forth behind them. These parados did much to avert casualties caused from bits of bursting high-explosive shells. [97]

The American batteries lost no time in opening up on the Germans, returning their fire with equal fury. For a while the din was terrific. Shells screamed overhead, causing a pandemonium of racket. Bursting, their fire made No Man's Land almost as light as day. In the trench many Sammies were dropping, wounded or killed by pieces of exploding shell. The Khaki Boys were receiving their baptism of fire in earnest.

It was a battle in which the Sammies themselves took small part, save to crouch in the trench, shielding themselves as best they could from that devastating rain of fire. The noise was too great for them to make themselves heard in passing an order, save by cupping hands to mouth and yelling as loudly as they could.

For an hour each side continued to bombard the other's trenches. All along the parapet of the American trench yawning gaps began to appear. As fast as one was made, men set to work upon it to repair the damage before dawn should appear and expose the Sammies to the rifle and machine-gun fire of the Boches. [98]

The Khaki Boys turned to with a will. Some filled sandbags with mud, others rebuilt the shattered

parados and stopped the gaps in the parapet. Toiling with desperate energy, they could only hope that the American guns were doing much heavier damage to the Fritzies' fire trench. They had faith that their own artillery could register more telling hits than that of the enemy.

Considering the number of shells that the Germans were sending over, many of them had been aimed in the direction of the flare from the American batteries. These passed right over the trenches. The American guns continuing to keep up a constant thundering, it looked as though the Boches had not succeeded in wiping out any of these batteries.

The gray light of dawn showed first glimpse of the enemy trenches. It was a sight that cheered the Sammies immensely. Gap after gap yawned in the parapet of their fire trench, through which could be seen plainly the forms of German soldiers, hurrying back and forth or toiling desperately to re-establish a protecting wall between themselves and the Sammies.

If the Boches had intended to raid it seemed evident that they had given it up as a bad job and devoted themselves strictly to the business of playing safe. [99]

With daylight their guns suddenly became silent. The American batteries went on hammering at them, however, for some time after the Boche artillery had ceased firing.

The dilapidation of the Boche fire trench gave the Sammies the opportunity for which they had been waiting. They now began to pour a hot rifle and machine-gun fire at the enemy, inflicting heavy casualties. The German batteries immediately got busy with smoke shells and soon hung a curtain of heavy smoke in front of their lines, which completely obstructed a view of their trenches.

Through the smoke the Sammies continued to harass the foe, until the order came to cease firing. Though the Americans had suffered a good many casualties, the Germans had clicked a far greater number. Their proposed raid had ended in a sound drubbing for them. When night again fell they would have the pleasure of mending the wires they had been in such a hurry to cut, provided they did not make a second attempt to raid within the next few hours.

Of late these night raids had become a new feature in the war. Beginning with a heavy bombardment, the attacking troops would dash over the top, take the enemy trenches, make thorough search of them, capturing as many prisoners and machine guns as possible. Instead of occupying the trenches taken, these would be destroyed by fire or dynamite, the victors returning to their own lines. [100]

It was such a raid as this that the Germans had been on the point of making. Thanks to the efficient work of the American batteries, they had not been able to carry it out.

When it was all over and comparative quiet had again settled down on both sides, Jimmy Blaise was amazed to find himself not only alive but unhurt. Through those terrible hours he had seen comrades dropping on both sides of him, yet, somehow, he had come through that raging hail of shot and shell unscathed. He marveled that, while it had been going on, he had worked like a tiger at helping rebuild the shattered defenses without a thought that he might be living his last moments of life.

After firing a final shot and getting down from the fire step, he stared about in a half-dazed fashion. To and fro through the fire trench stretcher-bearers moved continually, bearing the shell-shattered soldiers away through the communication trenches to first-aid posts. Many a bloody form lifted gently to the stretchers was beyond human aid.

Jimmy's first coherent thoughts centered on his own men. He must find out what had happened to them. Pulling himself together he began an investigation. He soon discovered that he had lost four of them for good and all. Several others had been seriously wounded. Like himself a few had come out of the fray untouched. For a time he busied himself in doing what he could for the wounded, until relieved by the first-aid men. [101]

The aroma of coffee in the air brought him to a dim realization that it was breakfast time. He was not hungry. Who could be after seeing those broken, bloody shapes being lifted to the stretchers? He felt as though he would not be able to eat for a week afterward.

"Thank God, Blazes, you're not one of 'em!"

A friendly hand clutched his arm.

At the sound of the familiar but rather unsteady tones and the touch of a hand Jimmy whirled to find Bob beside him. The latter's face was grimy, a little stream of blood trickled down one cheek from a shallow gash high up toward his left eye.

"Bob!" Jimmy grabbed his bunkie and fairly hugged him. "You're hurt!" he exclaimed.

"Just a scratch. I can hardly feel it. A Fritzie bullet shinned past me and broke the skin. I just used my first-aid dressing on a fellow in my squad."

"Let me fix you up."

Jimmy hurriedly reached for his first-aid packet, took from it his last bit of antiseptic gauze and applied it to the bleeding gash, careful not to touch it with his fingers. As Bob had declared, it was hardly more than a scratch. [102]

"I'd plaster it up," he said, as he staunched the bleeding, "but you'd better hike down to first-aid post and have it looked after there. You mustn't run chances of infection."

"I started for first-aid when I bumped into you. You're a welcome sight, believe me, Blazes!" Bob spoke with an intensity of affection. "I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw you standing there. Not a scratch on you, you good old scout! How any of us managed to live through that fracas beats me. Under fire, at last! Well, I guess so!"

"Maybe I'm not just as glad to see you!" Jimmy's gray eyes shone. His brief flash of joy changing to anxiety he asked: "Bob, have you seen any of the fellows? We've got to find out—"

"Rodge is all right," Bob quickly responded. "I saw him right after things quieted down. He's looking up Schnitz and Iggy now. As soon as I get this Boche memento plastered up I'm to meet him at the dugout we were in yesterday. He'll have found out about the boys by then."

"Go to it and get plastered, then. I'm going after Rodge. Look out while you're in the communication trench. If you hear a whishing sound, duck for cover. The Boches are likely to send over shrapnel, 'cause they know the stretcher men are using that communication trench now."

[103]

"Duck's the word. See you at the dugout."

With a wave of his hand, Bob hurried away. Jimmy watched him for a second, then started up the trench toward the dugout he and his bunkies had been using since their arrival in the trenches.

All the way he encountered stretcher men, busy with their ghastly work. Three times he stopped to aid them in lifting a wounded Sammy to a stretcher. By the time he reached the dugout he was feeling sick at the stomach. It was the sickness of fear, however. With every bleeding form he had seen, his heart had been in his throat lest in it he recognize Iggy or Schnitz.

Finally reaching the dugout, he was about to enter when he spied Roger coming down the trench toward him. Behind Roger were two disheveled, grim-faced men, whom he nevertheless recognized. Despite the restriction against using a handkerchief to staunch bleeding, one of them was holding that forbidden bit of linen to his cheek.

Uttering a shout, Jimmy ran toward them. "Oh, you fellows!" was his heartfelt cry of relief. "It takes more than a Boche thunderstorm to put the five Brothers out of business!"

CHAPTER XIV

[104]

DETAILED TO SCOUTING DUTY

The joy of that meeting, even under such grim circumstances, can be better imagined than described. To all it seemed unbelievable that they should have been spared to fraternize once more. The tears raced frankly down Ignace's smoke-blackened face as he crooned over Jimmy in Polish. He could find no English in which to express his utter happiness at seeing his best beloved Brother safe and sound. By common consent the quartet sought a dugout for a few minutes' talk. They were wild to compare notes.

"Take that handkerchief from your face," Jimmy commanded of Schnitzel. "Where's your first-aid packet?"

"Gone. Used it on one of my men. It didn't do him much good. He went West in my arms. This beauty spot on my cheek is nothing much."

Schnitzel's joy at seeing his friends vanished from his face, leaving it doubly somber.

"I've only one whole man in my squad," he said. "Curse the Boches!"

[105]

"Amen!" agreed Roger savagely. "They lost me two good men. They certainly soaked it to the fire trench."

"We went 'em one better," exulted Schnitzel. "Their artillery isn't in it with ours. It's a wonder they didn't slam their own fire trench. Some of those shells were aimed by Boche tailors, I guess. They certainly went wild. But, oh, Boy! What our batteries did to their trench was beautiful! Wish we'd gone over the top. We could have taken their first trench easy as wink."

"That's what I thought," put in Roger. "I expected every minute to get the order to go after 'em."

"We're too green yet, I suppose, for that," was Jimmy's opinion. "This stretch in the trenches is really our practice turn. Next time in, maybe, we'll get a chance to leg it across No Man's Land."

"That's what the Boches had up their sleeve," declared Schnitzel. "They've been on pins to find out our strength and all that. They haven't got much of a line on the Sammies yet. They'll know more about us when we get through with 'em, those that are left alive."

"So think I. By my squad have I the one man see get the head shoot off. Now will I soon the five Boche kill. So is it to pay the head this poor man. This remember I when go over top. I will it do, I

[106]

no get the croak firs'," vowed Ignace vengefully.

"A Polish vendetta." Schnitzel smiled faintly. "A five to one proposition like that suits me, though. I'll rid the earth of as many Fritzie's as I can. If ever I get one where I want him, the Kamerad business won't go down with me. They say the dogs whine like anything for mercy in a bayonet charge. Cold steel gives 'em the Willies."

Having won safely through their first trial by fire, the Khaki Boys were full of rancor against the enemy. The horrible slaughter of their comrades had given Hate fresh impetus.

Bob presently returned, his face neatly plastered. Another joyful reunion took place between himself, Ignace and Schnitzel.

"Go and get your face fixed, Schnitz," he advised when the first effusion of greeting was over. "The first-aid fellows have their own hands full, but they'll do you up quick if you can get hold of one."

"I'm going to feed first," replied Schnitzel. "I didn't know I was hungry until I saw you guys. Seeing you all to the good brought back my appetite."

"I'm hungry, too. It's a queer game, isn't it? How a fellow can see his comrades go West by the shell road and then feel like eating is a puzzle to me," mused Roger.

"We're beginning to get used to the trenches," was Schnitzel's grim opinion. "A few more scraps like this and nothing will faze us. If we expect to be any good as fighters we've got to eat, no matter what happens." [107]

A little later the five bunkies found breakfast very palatable, even after the horrors they had recently witnessed. The trench now fairly clear of wounded and dead men, the survivors sat along the fire step and hungrily devoured their stew and hot coffee.

After breakfast, sleep became the order of things, except for those detailed to various trench labors, particularly that of completely restoring the parapet. Men engaged in this task were relieved from time to time by a fresh detail, thus enabling all to get a few hours' rest. Except for occasional Boche shrapnel shells aimed principally at the communication trenches, all remained serene.

A communication trench is not easy to hit, as it makes use of everything available for cover. It is cut through the ruins of barns or houses and seeks in every possible way to conceal itself from enemy observation. As it must run indirectly at right angles to the fire trench and thus toward the German, its zig-zag, tortuous windings are necessary to keep it from being enfiladed by the enemy guns. When it reaches a spot bare of bushes, ruins or similar protection, it makes a quick turn to the right, then to the left, to the left once more, forming a partial square, which prevents the preceding bit of trench from being enfiladed. [108]

It is generally about five feet deep and the earth taken from it is piled up on each side, forming mounds. Stakes are driven into it to a height of about two feet above its open top on each side, and between these stakes expanded metal is stretched to keep the piled-up earth in place.

Along the dirt walls on each side are rows of telephone wires. These belong principally to the artillery batteries. Failing to get a direct whack at a communication trench, the Germans are fond of shelling "at it" nevertheless. In consequence, their shrapnel does much damage to the top and sides of it. After a bombardment it keeps both engineers and sappers (wiring men) busy putting it in order again. Often the wires become so tangled that the various artillery signalers have great difficulty in locating their own.

In going to an advanced first-aid dugout to have their slight wounds dressed, Schnitzel and Bob had traveled back a little way through one of these trenches. By daylight it was teeming with activity. They passed sappers, engineers and various worried-looking persons, all of whom were busy putting the place to rights after the attack of the morning.

Bob, in particular, was so much impressed by what he had seen that, before going to sleep after breakfast, he wrote down a detailed description of the communication trench as it appeared to him. Proudly exhibiting it to Roger, he met with a severe shock. [109]

"You'd better tear that up quick," was Roger's stern advice. "You mustn't carry it around with you. Suppose you got the order to go over the top. You'd go and maybe get killed. Then some Boche might get hold of that paper. It's information, you know."

"Oh, I'd tear it up if I knew I was going over," asserted Bob.

"You might forget to do it. Better be on the safe side and can it."

Grumbling a little, Bob reduced the fateful paper to bits.

"I guess I won't gather much data in this dump," was his regretful opinion. "If I write it in billet and try to send it home to Mrs. Blaise, the censor'll probably can it. I'll have to keep it all in my head. If a shell takes my head off, it'll be a great loss to the literary world and a greater one to Bobby."

"When the war's over and you get back to the U. S. you can scribble all you want to and no one will stop you," consoled Jimmy. "Won't that be nice?"

"Yes, when it is and when I do is something to gamble on," jeered Bob. "Another such shindig as this morning and Bobby may be taking a little trip West. I'm going to sleep and forget this pesky old ditch for a while." [110]

Awakened toward the middle of the afternoon to relieve men who had been on duty, the five Brothers were kept busy by various tasks which they were called upon to perform. Quiet still prevailing, evening drew on with no signs of immediate hostilities on the part of the foe. All day they had prudently kept the smoke curtain across their lines in order to conceal their activities from the Americans.

Shortly before dark Jimmy Blaise was set aquiver with excitement when he received information that he had been chosen to make one of a scouting party who were to go out on a scouting expedition into No Man's Land.

The party was to start out at ten o'clock and creep across to the German lines in order to discover whether the Boches had repaired their wire entanglements or had still left lanes in them, preparatory to making a raid that night. They were also instructed to keep their eyes and ears open for anything else that might fall to their lot to see or hear.

Realizing that this scouting duty might be his last, Jimmy sought out his bunkies for a farewell word. Though it was still light, the order "stand to" had gone forth and half of the occupants of the front-line trench ranged along the fire step with bayonets fixed and ready. The other half were still resting in the dugouts. [111]

"I'm going out as a scout," he informed Bob, who was nearest to him.

"You don't say! Take me along!"

"Wish I could. I don't know who all is in the gang. Lieutenant Redmond's in command," Jimmy replied. "I've got to beat it and see the fellows before dark. Now will be my only chance to get a word with 'em. We're to start out at ten. See you again in a few minutes."

So saying, Jimmy went on down the trench to where Ignace, Roger and Schnitzel were usually stationed. He was not sure whether they were on duty or in a dugout. He soon came upon them. They were seated on the fire step not very far apart.

Jimmy's news brought a shadow of deep gloom to Ignace's solemn face.

"I no like," he said sadly. "I would by you go the care you to take. You no come back, I hope shail hit me then pretty quick."

"Cheer up, Iggins. I'll come back. Now shake hands. Not good-bye. Just for luck. I'll see you again to-night all right."

Ignace looked his deep distress as he mournfully shook his Brother's hand. He would not have minded going out on such a hazardous enterprise, but he hated to see Jimmy go.

Roger accepted the news very quietly. There was a wistful look in his blue eyes, however, as his hand met Jimmy's. [112]

"Do be careful, Blazes," he urged. "Don't jump headfirst into something without looking before you jump. You're too blamed venturesome for your own good, you know."

"I'll be a regular slippery sleuth," Jimmy promised as he left Roger to go on to Schnitzel. "Schnitz," he began, "I'm going out on a scouting party. I——"

"So am I," was the amazing response.

"Under Lieutenant Redmond?" was Jimmy's excited query.

"Yep."

"Good work!" Jimmy brightened visibly. "Then we're in the same detail. It certainly suits Blazes."

"That's fine," glowed Schnitzel. "I was going to wait till a little later and tell you fellows. I intended to ask leave to have a word with you and Bob before I went."

Together the two walked to where Roger and Ignace were stationed. Pausing only to shake hands again with both, Jimmy went on to his station, leaving Schnitzel with his other two bunkies.

Shortly afterward Schnitzel came to bid Bob farewell. The latter did not look as cheerful as usual. Jimmy had already informed him that Schnitzel was also to be one of the party. Two bunkies going on a danger hike into No Man's Land made Bob feel rather downcast. He kept his feelings to himself, however. [113]

The same yearning light that had darkened Roger's blue eyes leaped into Bob's black ones as he shook hands with Schnitz and wished him a safe return. He could not help thinking that it would be a miracle if either Schnitz or Jimmy Blazes got back from the detail alive.

OUT IN NO MAN'S LAND

At exactly ten o'clock a cautious little party of nine men went through an embrasure in their own fire trench and set stealthy feet upon No Man's Land. Besides Lieutenant Redmond and the two non-coms, Jimmy and Schnitzel, there were three veteran infantrymen and three from the 509th Regiment. Lieutenant Redmond was also of the veteran contingent.

Safely on the ground, they passed through a lane purposely cut for exit in their own barbed wire. For a few feet they walked along, the officer in the center. The sending up of a German star shell caused the whole party to drop like a flash and hug the ground.

These star shells are used at night by both sides for the purpose of illuminating No Man's Land. They are fired from a tube somewhat resembling a pistol. When fired, they hang in the air for about twenty seconds, giving forth a radiant, silvery light, highly betraying to a scouting party. [115]

Each member of the scouting party was armed with a bayonet and knife. Lieutenant Redmond was the only one of them to carry a pistol. Should they encounter a German patrol or scouting party they would be obliged to engage in hand-to-hand combat with its members. Battles such as they might have to engage in had to be fought out in the dark with noiseless weapons. The crack of a rifle or a pistol would immediately draw down upon the scouts the machine-gun fire from both sides, with the result that neither Boches nor Sammies would escape.

Following the ascent into the air of the star shell that had flattened the scouts to the ground, they separated, Lieutenant Redmond and two infantrymen crawling away together, the others in pairs. The point in their own sector from which they had made exit was nearest to the German fire trench.

Jimmy found himself creeping slowly along over the rough, uneven ground in company with one of the veteran Americans. On they went, side by side, scarcely breathing. Frequently they had to flatten themselves to the ground on account of star shells. Numerous shell holes also afforded them considerable cover. They had to be specially careful, however, of these same holes. To drop suddenly into one of them, unawares, they were likely to make enough noise to attract the attention of some sharp-eared enemy scout or perhaps a Boche sentry. [116]

Little by little the two wormed their way across No Man's Land until at length they reached the Boche wire entanglements. Here the two separated, to travel in opposite directions along the wire, feeling every inch of it to determine if it were open at any point. The patrol had been divided so that each man had a certain section of enemy wire to account for.

His first feeling of nervousness vanished, Jimmy was beginning rather to enjoy his nocturnal adventure. Strongly imbued with the spirit of daring, this hazardous expedition appealed to him immensely. His right hand grasping his bayonet, his left lightly investigated the wire as he moved slowly along.

Instantly afterward his heart almost skipped a beat. His alert ears had caught the sound of voices, speaking in the guttural Boche tongue. He knew that these voices proceeded from the enemy fire trench. He wished he could understand German.

Pausing briefly to listen, he again started on. Grasping the wire, his hand moved gingerly along it. He stifled a little gasp as the groping hand suddenly dropped into space. Quick investigation revealed to him that he had discovered the very thing he had been sent out to learn. He had come upon a clean severing of the wires for a distance of about two feet. [117]

Jimmy also discovered something else in the same moment. He landed squarely upon a form lying flat on the ground. Involuntarily a whispered "Great Guns!" issued from his lips.

"Blazes!"

Jimmy's incautious utterance alone saved him from bayoneting his own bunkie, Franz Schnitzel. Had Schnitzel not recognized him and whispered his name, Jimmy's bayonet would have done its deadly work.

In the darkness the two clung to each other without speaking. Each was trembling at the narrowly averted tragedy. As they lay there, the sound of voices from the trench could be plainly heard.

A quick pressure of his arm by Schnitzel informed Jimmy that Schnitzel, at least, could understand what was being voiced by the near-by enemy. Still holding to Jimmy's arm, Schnitzel began to edge along. Obediently Jimmy followed him in the direction from which the German-American had come when the two bunkies had fallen over each other. A few feet and Jimmy understood. They were descending into a shell hole directly below the barbed-wire entanglement.

Hardly had they reached it when a star shell went up and hung directly over the spot they had just left. The shell crater was deep enough, however, to convince them that they could not have been seen from the enemy's fire trench. [118]

For half an hour they lay there, scarcely making a movement, while Schnitzel listened to the talk that went on in the trench. One of the voices heard almost continually had a harsh, authoritative ring. It gave Jimmy the impression that it must undoubtedly belong to a German officer. He wished he could understand what the Boche was saying.

At last Jimmy felt Schnitzel's hand press over his body until it reached his head. An instant and Schnitzel's lips against his left ear breathed:

"Back to our lines quickly!"

Immediately the German-American began wriggling along, Jimmy following.

Presently they were out of the shell hole and had turned themselves toward their own lines. Although the scouting party had started out together, the men had been ordered to return singly or in couples to the American lines, using their own discretion as to the length of time they remained out.

Now began the ticklish task of crawling safely back to their own trenches. The nearer they came to the center of No Man's Land the greater grew their danger. Jimmy knew that Schnitzel's desire to reach the American trenches quickly meant that he had learned something of decided importance. [119]

Coming to a shell hole a little over halfway across the danger land, Schnitzel pulled him into it. One side of this crater projected over, forming a little cave underneath it. Into this, as far back as he could go, Schnitzel piloted Jimmy.

"Listen," he breathed. "I've got to tell you this in case anything should happen to me before we get back. The Boches are going to try another raid at four o'clock. They're going to open fire at two o'clock. One of their crack Prussian regiments has just come into the fire trench. No matter what our guns do, they're coming over, several waves of them. They're going to use extra batteries of their biggest guns to smash our defenses. They're after prisoners to torture. I heard 'em brag what they're going to do to the dogs of Americans. Now I'm going to get out of here and beat it for our lines. Wait what you think to be ten minutes, and then follow me. One of us surely will get back with the word. Good-bye, Blazes. If I don't see you again I'd like you to remember what I say now: 'You're the whitest guy I ever knew and I love you!'"

"You're the bravest old sport I ever knew, and I'm all there with the reciprocity stuff," Jimmy whispered tensely.

The two bunkies gripped each other's hands hard in the darkness. Then Schnitzel began to crawl away and out of the crater. [120]

Directly he had gone, Jimmy crouched in the little cave, his ears straining to catch any sound that might proclaim disaster to his bunkie. Save for the occasional hiss of an ascending star shell, he could distinguish not even the faintest noise of a suspicious nature.

Waiting until he judged the ten minutes to have expired, he began his own perilous exit from the shell crater. He knew that the cave itself lay toward the German trenches. Crawling out of it he must continue straight ahead. The open side of the crater was toward the American lines. He could only hope that Schnitzel had also remembered this.

Climbing out of the hole, he decided upon a brave but reckless course of action. Getting to his feet he started for his own trenches, running lightly on his tiptoes. He knew that he was likely to crash headlong into a shell crater, or that a star shell might suddenly outline his upright running form with its silvery light. Still, he took a desperate chance on his fleetness of foot to reach his goal. Not for nothing had he won the hundred-yard dash at prep. school.

Luck was surely with him that night. He reached the American barbed wires without a single mishap, was challenged by a sentry, and passed on safely into the fire trench.

The first man encountered in the dugout, where he had been ordered to report on return, was Lieutenant Redmond, who had just returned, his uniform covered with mud and a gash across one cheek. [121]

"Has Corporal Schnitzel returned, sir?" was Jimmy's anxious question.

"No. You are the first man back besides myself and one of the men who went with me. My other man, Drayton, was killed. We had a fight with two Boches. We killed both, but I lost a good man."

The lieutenant's voice was choked with anger. Drayton had been the best man in his platoon.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm glad you did up the Boches and got back safe. I haven't time to tell you the details of what happened to Schnitzel and me. The Boches are going to attack at two o'clock and come over at four. A crack Prussian regiment is now in their trenches and——"

"Come with me to headquarters!"

With this explosive command the lieutenant dashed out of the dugout, Jimmy at his heels. As he followed the officer's hurrying feet through the trench, Jimmy's mind was not on the coming attack but on Schnitzel. Had their good-bye in the little cave been a final farewell? Had No Man's Land really "got" Schnitz?

FOREWARNED IS FOREARMED

It seemed to Jimmy Blaise that he must have stayed a very long time in No Man's Land. In reality he had been away from his own lines hardly more than two hours. It had been only a little after midnight when he returned with the important communications intrusted to him by the still absent Franz Schnitzel.

The information Schnitzel had gleaned set headquarters in an orderly flurry of industrious preparation to beat Fritz at his own game. The wires of the communication trenches hummed continually with messages to the American batteries behind the lines. By one o'clock every man of the front-line trench units was "standing to" on the fire step ready to give the Boches a warm reception.

In darkness and in discreet silence the work of preparation went on. Every possible precaution was taken to spring upon the Fritzies the surprise they trustingly expected to launch at the Sammies. [123]

With the exception of Schnitzel the remainder of the scouting party had all returned by a little before one o'clock. They reported the finding of lanes cut in the enemy's wire entanglements, but that was all. Stellar honors had fallen to Schnitzel, whose knowledge of the German language had enabled him to obtain such valuable information. Schnitzel, however, did not appear to claim them. His mantle had partially dropped upon Jimmy's shoulders.

Jimmy had been roundly commended at headquarters for his work that night. Ordering him to be brief, the commanding officer had requested him to give an account of his scouting in No Man's Land. In telling his story, Jimmy gave Schnitzel full credit, explaining that he had been merely the German-American's messenger.

He left headquarters with a heavy heart. The fact that Schnitz had not reported there proved him to be still absent. Jimmy was fairly sure that the American batteries would open fire before long, thus stealing a march upon the enemy. The Boches would then get busy. What if Schnitzel were lying wounded upon No Man's Land? He would then be under the fire of both sides. And he had been the one to warn his own side of the purposed bombardment! It was too horrible to contemplate!

Back in his own place in the fire trench, Schnitzel's fate continued to haunt the heart-sick sergeant. Perhaps Schnitz was already dead. Perhaps he had gone down in hand-to-hand conflict directly after he and Jimmy had parted. Again, he might now be a prisoner. That would be even worse than death. As a German-American the Boches would wreak a ghastly vengeance upon Schnitzel. [124]

Shuddering, Jimmy felt that he would prefer his bunkie to be dead rather than the prisoner of such inhuman fiends.

If only he could talk to someone. Bob was not far away. He might just as well be a thousand miles off. In that dark hour of waiting not a word more could be even whispered that was not actually necessary. Jimmy did not know that the rest of the scouting party had returned. He judged it to be at least one o'clock. The German bombardment was to begin at two. He wondered how soon the American batteries would open up.

At precisely half-past one the intense quiet of the night was shattered by the terrific roar of American batteries concentrated on the Boche trenches. A blinding red glare lighted up the sky at the rear of the Sammies' trenches. Over their heads shells screamed their devastating way across No Man's Land. Above the terrible din came the sighing moan of shells from the big guns. The American batteries were at it in earnest. With one accord the Sammies leaped to the fire step and peered over the top of the parapet. It was too glorious a display of fireworks to miss. The Fritzies were getting a real "strafing" and the Khaki Boys proposed to see all that there was to be seen. [125]

Undoubtedly the Fritzies were amazed to discover that their trap had been neatly sprung on them. Very soon, however, their own guns began to send over shells, causing the fire-step audience to get down into the trenches again. Boche shells began to hit the American fire trench, shattering portions of its parapet and dealing out death to the men behind it. The fight was on in earnest.

One shell landed just behind a parados, killing five men and causing the dirt to spout upward like a fountain. Another ripped away a section of parapet, wiping out half a dozen brave fellows.

Yet for every one shell the enemy sent over, the Sammy batteries had five with which to meet it. So heavy and concentrated was the fire of the American guns that it seemed as though the German front-line trench must soon be utterly demolished by it.

In the glaring light made by exploding shells, enemy forms could be plainly seen through the gaps rent in their parapet.

American machine guns, trained on these gaps, sent forth a raking fire of bullets. Though the Sammies were having a hard enough time of it, the Boches were faring far worse. [126]

For two hours the bombardment continued unceasingly on both sides. Toward daylight the German batteries put up a heavy barrage fire, which indicated that they intended to come over

despite the frightful casualties they must have clicked.

The night had seen many Sammies fall to rise no more, and in the American fire trench the stretcher-bearers were constantly traveling up and down, bearing away the wounded.

The dead had to lie in the trench. Not until later would the rushed first-aid men have time to take them away.

Still the fire step was lined with intrepid Khaki Boys, who proposed to sell their lives dearly when at close grip with their hated antagonists.

Just at daybreak the German barrage fire suddenly lifted. Down the American line the order was passed to be ready. It was a never-to-be-forgotten moment for the Khaki Boys when they heard the man at the periscope shout:

"The Boches are coming over!"

Mounted on the fire step, rifles ready, the Khaki Boys saw wave upon wave of grayish-green-clad figures leaving their trenches to charge across No Man's Land, shooting from the hip as they trotted doggedly forward, driven like cattle by their officers. A German officer never leads his men. [127]

Before they had traversed a dozen yards of No Man's Land an advanced American battery opened fire on that moving gray mass. Other American batteries began to speak and Sammy machine guns and rifles mowed them down with a merciless hail of bullets.

Completely demoralized by the wholesale slaughter of their comrades many of the Boches threw down their guns and ran for the American trenches to give themselves up. They could never have lived to get back to their own trenches. They had started across to take prisoners. Now they were glad to become prisoners.

Thus ended the Boche raid which, thanks to Franz Schnitzel, had been so effectively checked. The raid having failed utterly, the German guns suddenly slackened their fire. Gradually the American batteries ceased. Soon quiet settled down upon that scene of carnage; a stillness that was almost uncanny after the terrible racket that had made night hideous.

Details of Sammies herded their prisoners together and marched them off through the American trenches. What might have been a dreadful defeat to Uncle Sam's Boys had turned into a glorious victory. And all because of one man, who, perhaps, was long since beyond knowledge of the great service he had rendered his country.

CHAPTER XVII

[128]

MISSING: A BROTHER

In the bright sunlight of early morning, No Man's Land was a sight to behold. It was fairly covered with grayish-green forms, rifles, tin cups and accoutrements belonging to Fritz. Here and there one of the grayish-green figures was seen to move feebly. The majority, however, lay motionless. Uncle Sam's rifles and machine guns had done their deadly work only too well.

As for the German front-line trench, it was practically ruined. That it was still inhabited was proven by bullets which whined across No Man's Land every time a Sammy chanced to expose his body ever so little. Sammy sharpshooters were also on the job, returning the compliment with interest when the least sign of a Hun was visible.

Looking through the periscope at the wreck across the way, Jimmy Blaise again marveled that he was alive and unhurt. Compared to the bombardment of last night his first experience of being under fire seemed mild. He wondered that so many of his comrades were still left in the fire trench, practically uninjured. [129]

The American fire trench itself was a sickening sight. It was sticky with mud and blood and littered with the shattered bodies of dead Sammies, each in itself a ghastly horror.

Here and there detached arms and legs added to the gruesome spectacle. Not far from where Jimmy stood at the periscope lay the head and trunk of a Khaki Boy cut fairly in two by an exploding shell.

As yet the stretcher-bearers were too busy to remove these dreadful evidences of the night of carnage through which Jimmy had somehow passed unscathed.

Since the cessation of firing on both sides he had been picking his way through the trench, seeking his bunkies. His search, thus far, fruitless, Jimmy had paused briefly to look through the periscope.

He was savagely glad at the slaughtered Boches it revealed, yet his real object in viewing bloody No Man's Land was to see if, among that gray-green assemblage of motionless, distorted shapes, he could catch a flash of olive drab uniform that had once held a living, breathing bunkie, Franz

Schnitzel.

Unable to discover that which his straining eyes eagerly sought, he turned away from the periscope and stumbled on down the trench, blinded by the swift blur of tears. Where was Schnitz, and would he presently come upon Iggy, Bob and Roger, or what had once been his three Brothers? [130]

He had hoped to find Dalton easily, as their stations were so close together, but he had seen no trace of cheery old Bob. His spirits dropped to zero, Jimmy poked a disconsolate head into a dugout. It was filled with wan-faced, disheveled men, nearly all of whom had sustained minor injuries, which they were attending to themselves with the help of first-aid packets.

Uttering a loud cry, Jimmy suddenly bolted into the dugout and straight to a corner where a man was engaged in binding up the injured wrist of another.

"Oh, you two!" he choked.

Dropping down at the feet of the busy pair he buried his face in his hands, sobbing out of sheer nervous relief.

"My ver' bes' Brothar!"

His wounded wrist forgotten, Ignace Pulinski jerked away from Roger Barlow and plumped down beside Jimmy, hugging the latter with his well arm.

"Blazes!" was all Roger could say as he bent and laid a hand on Jimmy's shoulder.

"Gee, but I'm a big baby!" Jimmy raised his head and beamed at his bunkies with wet eyes. "I guess I'm all in. I've seen so many dead ones in the last few minutes that I could hardly believe my own eyes when I lamped you two. [131]

"Let go of me, you old Polish bear!" This affectionately to Ignace, whose good arm still encircled his neck. "Up on your feet and get that wrist fixed. You've pulled the bandage almost off of it."

Getting to his own feet, Jimmy hauled Ignace to a standing position.

"Now stand still, Iggins, and let me do you up," he commanded. "Does it hurt you much?"

"No-a. Never I feel sooch hurt. It is the little one from the piece shail. It is the hurt here." Ignace's well hand touched the region of his heart. "Think I, mebbe so is Jimmy, Bob, Schnitz, daid. Now is my heart better. Still is the ache we don' see the nothin' Bob an' Schnitz. Roger have no get the scratch. For that am I the glad. Now see you are the all to him good. It is the great happiness."

"Rodge and I are a couple of lucky guys." Jimmy's tones vibrated with thankfulness. "I can't find Bob. I think he must have been wounded. His station was near mine. I've hunted all along there among——"

Jimmy paused. The horror of that search robbed him of words to continue.

"We were going to hunt for you as soon as I tied up Iggy's wrist. We've looked for Schnitz." Roger's voice was rather unsteady. "His station was near ours. I'm afraid he never came back ___" [132]

"He's missing." Jimmy shook his head sadly. "But he did his bit all right for the Army." Triumph rang in this tribute to his absent bunkie. "We met last night out there."

Lowering his voice, Jimmy recounted the events of the scouting party. His gray eyes glowed with pride as he told of Schnitzel's splendid achievement.

"And to think that he couldn't be the one to come back with the news he risked his life to get! It makes me sick," Jimmy ended with a groan.

"Splendid old Schnitz," eulogized Roger. "A real Brother from the word go. I thought as much of him as of you and Bob and Iggins, even if I hadn't known him as long."

"No one could help liking him. He was my idea of a thorough-going man. I know we've got to expect this horrible business of losing one another, but it comes hard. Tough luck!"

"Mebbe Schnitz no daid. Mebbe him prisonar," faltered Ignace. "So think I better be daid than go live by Boche."

"Here, too," agreed Jimmy bitterly. "I'd rather think him dead ten times over than at the mercy of those black-hearted fiends. We ought to treat the prisoners we took the same way they've threatened to do to our men. But we won't. We're human and they're inhuman. [133]

"We've got to get busy and find Bob," he reminded. "I'd be as much in the dumps about him as Schnitz, if it wasn't that I know that whatever has happened to him, he's not a prisoner of the Hun dogs. I'm going out now to look again for him. You fellows wait here for me. We'll soon have coffee and grub handed us. I'll take a hike up the trench and come back in time to eat with you. Afterward I'll go at it again unless I get a detail that'll keep me from it. Last night's fracas means hard work all day and lots of it."

Leaving his bunkies in the dugout, Jimmy retraced his steps through that ghastly lane of dead

men. Every few paces he paused to stare darkly at a still form, the face of which was smashed beyond identification.

Frequently he stooped over such an one and examined the identification tag attached to the left wrist. He also kept a sharp look-out for a gold service ring which Bob had worn on the ring finger of his right hand. The four Brothers had service rings exactly alike, save for the initial engraved on each plate. These rings had been given them by the Blaises during that memorable Christmas furlough spent with Jimmy's parents.

This careful scrutiny of the dead, coupled with the constant passing to and fro of stretcher-bearers, made his progress through the trench very slow. The groans of the wounded wrenched his heart. Often he stopped and held his water bottle to the lips of a pain-crazed Sammy, who moaned piteously for water. Again a stretcher-bearer would solicit his help in placing a wounded soldier gently upon a stretcher. [134]

It was during one of these labors of mercy that Jimmy stumbled upon news of Bob. Assisting a couple of first-aid men to place the bleeding wreck of an infantryman upon a stretcher, one of them looked sharply over and said:

"I think we took a friend of yours back quite a while ago. A black-eyed, curly-haired chap. I saw him with you after the bombardment the other morning when we came up here to carry off the casualties. He was at the dugout afterward to get his face fixed up. The plaster was still on it when we took him back this morning."

"That's Bob! What happened to him?" Jimmy fairly shouted his question.

"Knocked out by a piece of shell. It grazed his scalp and put him to sleep. Nothing very serious. Come along with us and you can see him. We'll fix it for you," was the kindly offer.

"You're all to the mustard," Jimmy responded gratefully. "Will I go along? Well, you bet."

Trotting along behind the stretcher, Jimmy was soon in the communication trench. A short walk brought him to a first-aid dugout. It was full of cots, on which lay wounded soldiers, many of whom would soon be on the way to a hospital back of the lines. [135]

"There's your man." Pointing to a cot, the good-natured stretcher-bearer immediately turned to attend to his work.

Jimmy, however, did not need direction. He had already spied Bob.

"Hello, Blazes," greeted a faint but cheerful voice, as Jimmy reached the cot. Very white, his head bandaged, Bob's grin was still in evidence.

Tears again rushed to Jimmy's eyes as he grabbed the hand Bob stretched out to him.

"I've been hunting you ever since the guns quit," he said brokenly. "Are you hurt any place besides your head?"

"Nope. A piece of shell barked my venerable cocoanut. The rainmaker had to put a few stitches in it. It's all right now. I'm going to dig out of here first chance I get. I'll be back in the nice safe fire trench before night. Just watch my speed. Maybe I'm not tickled to see you, you blazing Blazes! What about Roger, Iggy and Schnitz?"

Bob's voice rose in worried alarm.

"Roger is O. K. Iggy got his wrist gashed by a bit of shell. Schnitz——"

Jimmy gulped. [136]

"Gone West?"

The question came almost in a whisper.

"Missing. Never came back from No Man's Land."

Rapidly Jimmy again related all he knew of Schnitzel. When he had finished, a heavy silence descended upon the two.

"Poor Schnitz!" Bob said at last. "Brave, wonderful Schnitz, I mean. He was all A. and no G. Well, Blazes, it's a great life, but it doesn't last long. We do our little bit of a bit and away we go, Westward bound. What we miss to-day we'll get to-morrow, maybe. The Glory Road is a pretty dangerous thoroughfare these days. Just the same, it's the only road any right-minded fellow can travel. I'm not sorry I took to it. Hope I last long enough to run a few Boches into the ditch."

"The 'ditch' is full of 'em this morning," was Jimmy's grim response. "Most of that crack Prussian regiment is taking a long sleep out there in No Man's Land. Their fire trench is all smashed in and the Dutchies don't dare show a head. Our fellows are potting 'em right along. You ought to see it."

"I'm going to."

Bob swung his legs over the side of the cot and stood up, swaying a little. "Hang the rainmakers," he grumbled. "Bobby was a sick Sammy, but he's improving werry fast. Come on, let's beat it out of here. I'm going back to the fire trench and enjoy myself. My pack is kicking around here [137]

somewhere. That shell did for my helmet. You'd better go on ahead. I'll follow soon. Goodness knows what happened to my rifle. I can get another easily enough."

Jimmy could not help smiling. Nothing short of utter disablement would keep restless Bob long in bed.

"You lie down and take it easy," he admonished. "I'm going back to tell the fellows you're still alive and kicking."

"Sure I'm alive," grinned Bob. "Kicking, of course I am. Who wouldn't be? Do you think a little biff on the bean is going to keep Bobby indoors? Nix. You go ahead and break the glad news to Iggins and Rodge. I'll rustle up my lost traps and kiss this place good-bye. They've got their hands full here. They'll never miss me."

Thus urged, Jimmy left the first-aid dugout and hurried back to the front-line trench to apprise his bunkies of the good news. Good old Bob had been spared to them. He thanked God for that. Yet his heart was heavy with sadness, as he thought of Franz Schnitzel.

He could not reconcile himself to believe that he would never see Schnitz again. Within him rose a curious conviction that their good-bye in the shell crater had not been a final farewell. He had a "hunch," as it were, that Schnitz and himself would meet again, and before long. [138]

CHAPTER XVIII

[139]

"IT'S A GREAT LIFE"

Toward noon a German battery woke up and amused itself by sending shrapnel against the very communication trench which was being used principally to carry the wounded back to the first-aid dugout in which Bob had been briefly quartered. As a result, two stretcher men, as well as several wounded Sammies, went West. Presently an American battery got the range of the enemy battery and silenced it.

All day sharpshooters on both sides were busy picking off each other's men as they labored at re-establishing their front-line defenses. As the Sammies were by far the better marksmen, they did considerably more damage. The Boche infantrymen are anything but good rifle shots. It is generally conceded that the Americans have the best gunners and sharpshooters in the world.

American machine guns also did good work through the day. So well did their gunners succeed in harassing the Boches that when night at last fell, they made little effort to go out onto No Man's Land to take in their dead and wounded. Their losses had been too heavy to risk further casualties. The constant sending up of American star shells warned them that the Sammies were keeping a sharp look-out, ready to mow them down at the first opportunity. [140]

The night passed without any attempt by the Huns to renew the conflict. Sammies detailed to listening post duty came back with reports that Fritz was hard at work repairing his badly demolished fire trench. They also reported that many wounded Germans still lay neglected and suffering in No Man's Land. The all-glorious Fatherland was not concerning itself over these helpless, bleeding husks.

For four more days the Khaki Boys continued on duty in the front-line trench. During that time no more heavy bombardments were directed against them by the Boches. Plenty of shrapnel shells continued to come over. Most of them directed against the communication trenches, or against points behind the American lines. A favorite sport of Fritz is the shelling of ambulances, carrying wounded men to hospital.

Those days of blessed peace saw the fire trench completely restored and everything running along again as smoothly as matters ever run in such a danger spot. It was believed that the Germans were getting ready for another big raid. Scouting aircraft reported the daily arrival of fresh troops and large quantities of ammunition and supplies to the German lines. [141]

During this lull in hostilities, Bob, Ignace, Jimmy and Roger were rarely idle long. As non-coms they always found plenty to do. The vacancies in their squads had been filled by men who had lost squad leaders and squad comrades in the recent bombardment.

All four were exceedingly gloomy over the loss of Schnitzel. The uncertainty of his fate weighed heavily upon them. Jimmy continued to maintain his belief that Schnitz was not dead. He had a fixed idea that his bunkie was a prisoner. This in itself was signally depressing. The four Brothers would far rather have believed Schnitzel to be dead.

On the evening of the eighth day came the news that the present contingent of Khaki Boys occupying the front-line trench were to be relieved by a seasoned American regiment under the command of a veteran French general. The retiring troops were to start at eleven o'clock that night for rest billets in a village well behind the lines. Here they would remain for at least three weeks before returning to the trenches.

Just before eleven o'clock the first relief detachment crept stealthily into the fire trench. They [142]

had been hiding all day in a pine woods just out of range of the German guns. Another detachment was concealed in the ruined village through which the Khaki Boys had passed on the way to the trenches. This detachment would not arrive at the front until after midnight.

The departing Sammies were ordered to make an absolutely noiseless retreat to rest billets. It was vitally important that the enemy should not learn of the arrival of fresh troops to replace the men who had completed their first trench detail.

Passing with his comrades through a communication trench on the opposite from the one used on the night of entering the trenches, it seemed to Jimmy Blaise a very long time since then. It was more like eight years than eight days.

What a lot a fellow could stand in eight days and still live, was his somber reflection as he stole along, six paces behind the man in front of him. He had been under heavy fire twice. He had looked upon death in its bloodiest form. He had slept and eaten with the shattered, lifeless bodies of his comrades lying about him. He had waded through blood, so to speak. He had been across No Man's Land and back. Men had died in his arms. He had endured agonies of suspense as he searched among the slain for his bunkies. Worst of all, he had lost a devoted friend and Brother. [143]

"It's a great life if you don't weaken." Jimmy smiled grimly to himself as this expression, so prevalent among the Sammies, popped into his mind. Back in Camp Sterling he, too, had been very prone to use it. He was still of the opinion that, in spite of blood, mud, death, wounds, noise, cooties and the hundred and one other vicissitudes of war, it *was* "a great life."

He hoped that he would be spared to do trench duty over and over again. That was the only way a fellow could feel about it, he thought. He was glad that he hated the Boches so hard. Back in Camp Sterling he had often wondered how it would feel to be actually engaged in killing men. Now he hoped that, for the sake of Franz Schnitzel, every bullet he had sent speeding across No Man's Land had put a Hun out of business for good and all.

CHAPTER XIX

OUT OF THE AIR

[144]

Clear of the trenches at last, it proved a long, tiresome march to billets. The roads over which the Khaki Boys marched were rough and full of shell holes. Long before they reached their destination a fine rain began to fall, which soaked them to the skin. With it, however, came a dense fog, which was a great help in concealing them from enemy eyes.

An hour before dawn, when almost to billets, they heard a reverberating roar, which they guessed to be that of the German guns. It announced to them that Fritz had again begun his "strafeing." Every Sammie's heart beat faster, as the welcome voices of their own big guns boomed forth in answer.

To the thunderous tune played by these noisy orchestras of war, the rain-drenched Khaki Boys at last reached billets. These consisted of several stables, a deserted schoolhouse, and a long, barn-like structure, which had been used by the Allies at the beginning of the war as a supply depot. [145]

To his great satisfaction, Jimmy drew the supply depot as a billet. It was large enough to accommodate two hundred men, and when dawn came he was overjoyed to find all three of his bunkies had been quartered there, too.

"Talk about style," exulted Bob, when a little later the quartette sat cross-legged in a row, devouring a breakfast of bacon, bread and coffee. "This is almost as good as a real barracks. It's about the cleanest billet we've struck since we started out in dear old Eight Horses."

"It's pure luck, our getting together." Roger sighed his satisfaction. "I'll bet we'll have a real cushy time while it lasts. I hope we don't get shelled. Listen to the guns. It must be hail Columbia now in the front-line trench on both sides. Seems funny to be away from it, doesn't it?"

"I guess we've earned a rest," yawned Jimmy, "and a bath along with it, about four times a day. It'll take me three weeks to get clear of mud and these blamed cooties. First chance I get I'm going to hunt for a creek and live in it."

"So will I," vowed Ignace. "I am the mud all over. My mothar now see, no believe I am the son to she."

"I'd hate to have *my* mother see me now," smiled Jimmy. "She wouldn't sleep nights for the next year. Just as soon as we get settled I'm going to write to her. I wrote every day to the folks while I was in the trenches. I hope some of those letters get across." [146]

"I guess they will, that is, if you didn't put anything in 'em that the censors got peeved at," rejoined Bob. "About all a fellow is allowed to write is 'I am well,' and 'good-bye.'"

"Some of us ought to write to Schnitz's folks," said Roger soberly.

"Not yet." Jimmy shook his head. "Wait awhile. Maybe Schnitz'll come back to us."

"I don't believe it, Blazes," disagreed Bob sadly. "He got his out there in the dark, I'm afraid. Schnitz was the kind to fight till he dropped, rather than be taken prisoner."

"I tell you I had a hunch out there in the trench that I'd see him again," Jimmy stubbornly asserted. "It came to me just as plain as anything, 'Schnitz isn't croaked. He'll come back.'"

"You think Schnitz he come back, so think I," nodded Ignace, who was always fond of backing up his best Brother's statements.

"Well, I hope it works out that way," declared Roger kindly.

Privately, his belief in hunches was not strong.

"I wish I'd never let him go that night," Jimmy continued moodily. "If he'd waited ten minutes longer, as I did, the two of us would have got back to the lines together." [147]

"You might not have, at that," was Bob's opinion. "You can't tell how it would have come out. His way was the wisest."

Continuing to talk of Schnitzel, the memory of whom was constantly before them, the four Brothers finished breakfast and went outside their quarters to look around them. As they had been on the march nearly all night, they expected to sleep part of the day. So far as military routine was concerned, they were "on their own" until Taps that night. Next morning, however, they would be subject to the usual military routine they had observed when in the training camps.

Wandering about in the vicinity of their billet, the four Brothers whooped with joy at sight of a good-sized creek, which looked to be not more than a quarter of a mile back of the depot. Hastily repairing to their quarters, they got out soap, towels, and clean underwear. Laden with these, an extra uniform blouse, and a pair of clean leggins apiece, they raced across the fields to the creek, and were soon jubilantly swimming about in its clear, but very cold water.

It was the first real bath that any of them had enjoyed since leaving the village where they had been briefly quartered before going on their long march to the trenches. Cold as the water was, they soon grew used to it, and had a glorious time splashing about in its clear depths. [148]

After their bath, they donned clean clothing, washed out their discarded underwear, hanging it to dry in the sun on some low bushes nearby. They also gave their soiled leggins a much-needed scrubbing.

By the time the leggins had become presentable again, their wash was partially dry.

"We can't wait all day for these duds to get dry." Bob passed a critical hand over his damp wash. "Let's take 'em back to billet and hang 'em up there. Now I've had a bath, I want to go bye-bye. Besides, we ought to tell the other guys about this French swimming pool. They need a bath, too."

"Tell 'em nothing. Listen to that! Look over there!"

Jimmy pointed across the field. A dozen men were charging toward them, yelling and wildly waving clean clothing, towels or whatever they chanced to have in their hands.

"Discovered," grinned Bob. "Welcome to our bath tub!" he shouted, as the running group drew near. "Jump in, the water's fine. It's a sure cure for trench mud and live stock."

After exchanging a few good-natured sallies with the gleeful Sammies, who were discarding their clothing as fast as their hands would let them, the four Khaki Boys left the creek and started back to quarters.

"Pipe the plane!" yelled Jimmy suddenly, pointing upward. "I'll bet it's just come from over the German lines. She's a Frenchie, too. You can see her colors. She's flying pretty low." [149]

"She's coming down fast!" shouted Bob. "Looks as though she'd been nipped."

Pausing to watch the plane, it seemed to the Khaki Boys that it was, indeed, coming down altogether too fast for safety to its pilot.

"He's lost control of it! No, he hasn't, either! He's sure some birdman. Oh, joy! Watch him!"

Jimmy was prancing about, flourishing his wash, as he poured forth this volley of excited exclamation.

"He's going to land right the other side of the depot! Come on! I want to get a look at him!"

Bob had now taken up the cry. With "Come on!" he was off across the field, his three bunkies keeping up with his mad dash. Already a crowd of Sammies had come out of the depot, and were running toward the aviator, who had now made a skilful and easy landing.

"We may get the grand snub," panted Bob, as they neared the quiescent plane.

Its pilot was just stepping out of the seat. He moved very stiffly, and staggered a little, as his feet touched the ground. His face partially toward the plane, he turned smilingly as the noisy delegation of Sammies rushed up to him.

"It's Cousin Emile!" bawled Jimmy at the top of his lungs, and dashed straight toward the smiling man. [150]

"Blaise! This is, indeed, most remarkable!" called out a deep voice.

A ready hand shot forth to meet Jimmy's, and grasped it warmly.

"Gee whiz, but I'm glad to see you, sir!" was Jimmy's fervent greeting. "You'll have to excuse me for calling you 'Cousin Emile.' I was certainly flabbergasted for a minute."

"No apologies," laughed Voissard, showing his white teeth in amusement at Jimmy's confusion. "It is the very pleasant surprise to meet you thus, my dear young comrade. And your friends, too," he added, offering his hand in turn to Ignace, Bob and Roger, who now grouped themselves about him with beaming faces. "Now of a truth it seems you must have just come from the bath."

His quick eyes had taken in the newly cleansed articles of clothing in the boys' hands.

"We certainly have," affirmed Bob. "We landed here just before daylight from our first front-line trench detail. You can guess how much we needed a big clean-up."

"Ah, yes, I can easily understand." Voissard's fine face grew sympathetic. "It is the hard life in those muddy trenches. I marvel that you are still here to tell of it. But where is your comrade of the dark face and quiet, sincere manner? You see my memory is good." [151]

"He's gone, sir," was Jimmy's sad response.

Inquiry for Schnitzel caused the four eager faces to cloud over. Briefly, Jimmy informed Voissard of all he knew pertaining to Schnitzel's disappearance.

"It is the fortune of war," was the aviator's grave comment when Jimmy had finished. "We learn in time to accept all in that spirit. I, too, have lost many valued and loyal friends at the front. I share your sorrow for this brave comrade. Yet I am happy that none other of you has met with misfortune.

"It is purely by chance that I found you," he continued. "I spent the night over the Allemand lines. Naturally, my plane has received rough treatment. It was necessary for me to come down and make the repairs. I have yet some distance to go, and my bird's wings need the attention."

"Can we do anything to help you, sir?" was Jimmy's prompt inquiry.

"*Merci*, but no. My plane needs but a few touches here and there, which only myself can give and hurriedly. I have the important information gleaned, which I must impart quickly to those who wait for it. For how long shall you remain in billet?"

Voissard cast a thoughtful glance at Jimmy as he asked the question.

"Three weeks, unless we get other orders."

"That is well. Watch for me. If all goes as I hope, I shall return here to see you within the next three days. I have much to say to you." [152]

During this conversation, the Sammies who had run out of billets and up to the aeroplane, had drawn back a little distance from it, and the quartette gathered about the aviator. The average American boy hates to "butt in." Nevertheless, many pairs of bright eyes were wistfully watching the trim Nieuport, and the favored four who appeared to be on such intimate terms with its pilot.

Noting this, Jimmy was seized with a kindly inspiration.

"Would you mind speaking a word to the fellows back there, sir?" he inquired deferentially. "They'd like it a lot, especially if they knew who you really were. May I call them over and tell 'em? It will only take a minute and they'll be good. It will be a regular bang-up treat for them."

A half-frown touched Voissard's dark brows, then his boyish smile came into evidence.

"Since you ask it," he consented, "but only for a moment."

At the word of permission, Jimmy hurried back to where his comrades stood.

"Fellows," he greeted. "Come up and meet the Flying Terror of France. I'd like him to see what a rattling fine bunch we've got in the good old 509th."

This last compliment was slyly intended to put every Sammy on his best behavior. It succeeded signally. An awed and admiring delegation, led by Jimmy, filed respectfully up to the aviator. Forming a little line, they came smartly to Attention. On the last word of presentation spoken by Jimmy, every man saluted. [153]

Gracefully returning the salute, Voissard made an earnest little speech to his young admirers, expressing his pleasure at meeting them, and thanking them in the name of France for their loyal response and allegiance to the Allied cause.

As he finished speaking, the Sammies again saluted. Wheeling, they were about to march off when he stopped them, expressing a wish to shake the hand of each. To the delighted Khaki Boys it was a red-letter occasion. Boyish exuberance getting the upper hand, they could not resist giving three cheers for Voissard, as he took the hand of the last man in line. Then it seemed

necessary to give three more for France, and another three for the United States. Finally, they trooped happily off, full of gratitude to Blaise, a "corking Sarge," who "hadn't a stingy bone in his body."

The four Brothers remained with Cousin Emile while he went over the plane, and made the minor repairs which he had referred to as "touches." It took the better part of an hour to make them, during which period the boys hovered admiringly about the clean-cut little lighting craft. [154]

"I'd almost give my eyes to take a trip with you, sir," was Jimmy's wistful assertion, as Voissard was about to say good-bye.

"Your company would be the great pleasure," the aviator courteously replied. "However, we shall at least meet again soon," he added, extending his hand in friendly farewell.

There was a quizzical twinkle in Cousin Emile's dark eyes. Had Jimmy known what was going on behind them he would have been raised to the seventh heaven of bliss. He could not possibly guess that his ardent desire to take a trip with Voissard was in a fair way to be presently realized.

CHAPTER XX

THE RETURN OF COUSIN EMILE

Assured by Voissard that he would return to the village, the four Brothers kept up an anxious lookout for him. Five days went by, but Cousin Emile did not materialize. During this time new platoons and squads were formed from those depleted by trench duty, and the two detachments, though smaller, were soon in good order again.

The Khaki Boys were required to be on hand for roll call at 6:30 every morning. Breakfast was followed by daily inspection and parade. After that they drilled until noon. The rest of the day and evening was theirs, unless on some special detail, Taps sounding at the usual time.

Though the resting detachments were well behind the lines, they were not immune from shrapnel directed against passing ammunition and supply-trains, and even against ambulances, as these last rushed the wounded to hospital. Then there was always the danger of being bombed by enemy aeroplanes. Frequently, these Boche planes would appear sailing high overhead, only to be shelled by Archies, and driven back by Allied aircraft. It was not a particularly safe district in which to rest, but it certainly offered plenty of excitement. [156]

For two days after their arrival, the guns kept up a furious racket night and day. Now and then they gleaned some word of the conflict from ambulance drivers or men who had come from the trenches on special errands. The Americans were grittily holding their own, it seemed. They had gone over the top on the very morning in which the Khaki Boys had arrived in rest billets. There had been a wholesale slaughter of Boches. Many machine guns and prisoners had been taken. The Hun's first-line trench had been blown up.

The Boches had beaten a wild retreat to their second trench, and were now engaged in trying to hold it. Many Sammies had been killed or wounded, but the Germans had suffered more in casualties. All this and other news pertaining to the fight that still raged, the Khaki Boys heard. They gloried in the way "our fellows are putting it all over Fritz."

Bob's first move after settling down was to get a pass and go to the village where Gaston was quartered at his expense. Finding that it was not more than twenty miles from their billet, and that he could reach it and return by train, he cordially invited his bunkies to accompany him. Jimmy and Ignace declined to go on the expedition, but Roger good-naturedly consented. "You need a friend on such a dangerous detail," he slyly remarked. [157]

It took the two a whole afternoon and evening to make the trip. Triumphantly returning with his pet just before Taps, Bob tied Gaston up outside the barrack, trustingly expecting him there in the morning. In the night, however, Gaston basely chewed his rope in two and deserted.

Bob, being of the loyal opinion that Gaston was "no yellow deserter," but had been "pinched," he spent his leisure time the following day going from pillar to post savagely asking, "Who's got my goat?"

Toward night he found the lost one in the backyard of a cottage, calmly feasting upon a linen tablecloth, which had appealed to his peculiar appetite.

Bob and the owner of the tablecloth discovered Gaston at about the same moment. Gaston got a beating and Bob a wiggling in French, both delivered by an irate housewife. It ended by Bob's going down in his pocket for the price of one linen tablecloth. Gaston, nobly resenting this outrage, charged upon the scolding woman, and thereby added to his master's difficulties. Bob finally roped him, and led him back to billets, sadly pondering as he went on the trials of being "foster-papa to a blamed old goat." [158]

In the morning Gaston had again taken French leave. This time he wandered gaily up to the schoolhouse where a platoon of 509th men were billeted. They received him with open arms, and

promptly adopted him as a mascot. In due season Bob appeared, and just as promptly parted Gaston from his new friends. Next day they stole him back again.

Bob's first four days in billet were largely spent in getting his goat, losing it, and getting it again.

On the afternoon of the fifth day he came back to billet from a trip to the schoolhouse looking completely disgusted.

"Those pesky guys have got Gaston again," he announced, as he went over to where his three bunkies sat on the floor, backs propped against the wall, and busily engaged in writing letters. "They can keep him, too. I'm through being a father to an ungrateful brute that tries to butt his foster-parent over on sight."

This nettled confession was received with shouts of unsympathetic laughter.

"Oh, laugh now. It's very funny," jeered Bob. Nevertheless, he laughed, too, as he dropped down beside Jimmy.

"Did he go for you? I'm surprised," teased Roger. "He's such a gentle, friendly beast."

"Did he?" Bob snickered. "Those thieves had him tied to a post out in the school-yard. When he saw his papa, he lowered his head and came on the run. Good thing he was roped. You should have heard those ginks yell. They kidded Bobby to a finish. Said Gaston must have taken me for a Hun, and a lot of stuff like that. [159]"

"They've got a mangy old red ribbon tied around his neck with an identification tag hung on it," continued Bob. "It was a blank tag, all right, but they've cut on it with a knife, 'Gaston, Platoon 4, 509th Infantry.' The robbers! Can you beat that? I certainly was good to that beast. Treated him fine, and spent a lot of time and money on him. That's the way, though. Be kind to your goat and somebody else'll get it. Bobby's all through being a foster-papa. He's going to spend his golden hours and copper coins on himself hereafter. I was bitterly deceived in Gaston."

"Hope it won't wreck your young life," chuckled Jimmy.

"Never I like him, that Gaston. He always the too fraish. I think mebbe him Boche goat an' no Franche. So is it he is the no good," giggled Ignace.

"Well, I'm all done with him," declared Bob. "Hope he bowls over a few of those smarties in Platoon 4. He owes it to me to do it. My, what a busy little bunch you are. Guess I'd better write a few letters myself."

"Go to it, then, and don't bother us," retorted Roger. "We want to get through with our writing before mess. To-night——" [160]

Roger was interrupted by a sudden exclamation from Jimmy. The latter's glance happening to stray to an open door at the far end of the long, barn-like room, he leaped to his feet and hurried to it. A uniformed man stood on its threshold, his dark eyes roving up and down the place, as though in search of someone.

"*Mon cher*, Blaise!" he exclaimed with outstretched hand as Jimmy neared him. "It is for you I have been searching."

"We had given you up, sir." Jimmy was radiant with delighted surprise. "We thought you had been detailed to some special movement against the Boches."

"Not as yet." Voissard smiled mysteriously. "I have been in Paris since last we met. But to-morrow night my work begins."

Before he could say more, Jimmy's bunkies had come up, and were respectfully greeting the Flying Terror of France.

"I have come to invite you to the *petit souper* at the Inn," Voissard presently said. "There we shall be able to talk for a little. I have some things to relate to you of my nephews whom I saw while away. There is also the old matter of the man whom you described to me. Also there is another matter to be discussed."

Cousin Emile's invitation was gladly accepted, and a few minutes later the five men left the barrack for a quaint little inn, to which the aviator conducted them. [161]

Seated together at a rear table, the four Brothers were not concerned as to what they ate. They had found one inn to be about the same as another in regard to "eats." All offered eggs, cheese, brown bread, red wine, and not much else.

In this instance, however, Voissard held a lengthy consultation with the innkeeper himself, which sent him hustling for the kitchen.

"Now while thus we wait I will speak of my nephews first," began the aviator. "Both are now in the Nieuport squad. Each has been out twice, and has a Boche plane to his credit. They send you many good wishes, and are in hopes to see you before long somewhere out here."

He went on to tell them further of the doings of the Twinkle Twins, smilingly answering the countless eager queries put to him by the Khaki Boys.

While they were still discussing the famous Twinkle Twins, their dinner appeared in the shape of two immense, beautifully browned omelets, with other accompanying delicacies, which made them open their eyes. Cousin Emile, it seemed, knew a thing or two about French inns, which they did not. [162]

Directly the meal had been served and the waiter had withdrawn, Voissard reached into a pocket of his sky-blue uniform blouse, and drew from it a small photograph. Handing it across the table to Jimmy, he said simply:

"Look well at this."

Jimmy looked. His gray eyes flashed as he exclaimed: "It's the same old smile! I mean, it's my tiger man! Then your friend, the Prefect of Police, knew him——"

"Very well," finished Voissard. "But not as Charles Black. This man's real name is Adolph von Kreitzen. He is an Austrian, and one of the most villainous creatures of the Central Powers that ever drew breath. Before the war his crimes were many, yet he always eluded capture. During the first two years of the war he did much damage to our cause as a spy.

"Suddenly no more was heard of him. It was thought by my friend the Prefect that he had either entered the German army or been ordered to commit suicide by his master, on account of some failure on his part to carry out a mission intrusted to him. This is often the fate of those whose work as spies displeases their finicky war-lord. He graciously rewards their efforts for the Fatherland with disgrace or death.

"Later, however, it was learned that von Kreitzen had been seen in Belgium. A soldier who had formerly been connected with, the Paris Police Bureau saw and recognized him. He immediately sent word to the Prefect. Men were sent to Belgium to trail him, but again he escaped them. [163]

"That was the last report of him until I went to the Prefect with what you related to me in Paris. My friend immediately recognized von Kreitzen from the description you gave me. I would have gone to your training camp with this photograph had I not received your commander's kind telegram.

"Strange to say, the next day after our meeting in the café, a report came to the Prefect that a man resembling von Kreitzen had been recently seen in Paris. Thus it may well be true that after you saw him in Belfast, he went from there to England, and thence to Paris. Where he is now, who knows?" Voissard shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps back in Germany; perhaps with his kind on the Western front; perhaps dead. Again he has disappeared."

"I'll tell you a queer thing, sir. I never mentioned it before, even to my bunkies here."

Jimmy recounted to Voissard the attack made on them by the hidden gunman on the evening of their return from Paris to the training camp.

"Somehow I always had an idea that this tiger fellow, von Kreitzen, spotted us in Paris, and trailed us to the village. He saw me and wanted to get me. It rather tallies with what you say about his having been seen in Paris." [164]

"When is a clam not a clam? When it's a blazing old tight-mouth Blazes," was Bob's caustic conundrum, self-answered.

"Well, I had a right to be a tight-mouth if I felt like it," defended Jimmy. "If I'd said a word about it, then you fellows would have either told me I was crazy or else you'd have worried about little Jimmy's health. So I just canned it."

"I wouldn't be surprised if it *was* that von Kreitzen who went sniping at us that night," said Roger reflectively. "It's not such a wild idea. He might have caught sight of you in Paris, Blazes, and followed you down on the same train. He might have been in another compartment disguised. I don't remember seeing anyone who got off the train that night except four or five Sammies. They went into an *estaminet* across from the station."

"I saw an old man and a little girl. I remember seeing those doughboys, too," put in Bob.

"So see I him, the solder and 'nother man. He have the much black wheeskar an' the hat over the face. He walk ver' quick no look at nothin'," was Ignace's placid contribution.

"I don't remember noticing anyone in particular," mused Jimmy. "I guess——"

"I guess Iggy saw the most!" interrupted Bob excitedly. "Iggy saw *him*, this von Sweitzer, or whatever his name is. That's about the way he'd fix up to keep shady—false whiskers and his hat over his nose. If you had not been so keen on keeping still, Blazes, we might have figured this thing out long ago." [165]

"It wouldn't have done us any good," demurred Jimmy.

"It would have been some satisfaction, anyhow, to have somebody to lay it to," grumbled Bob.

Thus during the meal the talk continued to center on Jimmy's "tiger man." It was the element of mystery that appealed so strongly to the Khaki Boys. It made them forget for the time the grim reality of war. Long after the meal was finished, they still sat at the table listening to interesting information which Voissard had gathered concerning the intricate spy-system which the Central

Powers have established throughout the civilized world.

"I have still the news for you which must interest Blaise most of all," declared Cousin Emile at last, smiling at Jimmy. "Because of his pleasure, I am sure all will be pleased. You said to me, *mon cher* Blaise, that you would give much to go with me over the lines. *Voila!* Your wish has been granted. It has not been easy to gain the permission. It has been done, however. To-morrow morning your commanding officer will send for you. I have already talked with him. To-morrow afternoon you and I will be leaving here on a little journey of our own for the glory of France and her Allies." [166]

CHAPTER XXI

 [167]

UP ABOVE THE CLOUDS

"Good-bye, fellows. If I shouldn't come back—well, you know what to do about writing the folks. I'll be back all right enough, though. I'm just as sure as anything of that."

Seated beside Voissard in a gray French racer, Jimmy Blaise leaned out for a last word and handclasp with his three bunkies. It was a solemn-faced trio who stood beside the long, low car. Jimmy's Brothers were trying to be glad because Jimmy himself was so excitedly happy. It was hard work. They felt as though they were looking their last at good old Blazes.

The final good-byes said, the racer, driven by Voissard, shot down the road, started on what was to prove a most amazing trip for Jimmy Blaise. It was three o'clock in the afternoon and the two men were bound for a French escadrille, not far behind the American sector of the firing lines. Jimmy Blaise was presently to go out with Voissard over the German lines. This was the extent of his knowledge regarding the expedition. Cousin Emile had offered not a word more than was absolutely necessary in breaking the news to Jimmy and his bunkies. [168]

As the racer left the village behind and struck a country road, Voissard broke the silence which had fallen between them since the start.

"Thus far I have imparted to you nothing of to-night's detail. You must understand that I have been granted a great privilege in being allowed your company to-night, *mon cher ami*. It is the first favor I have ever asked of France. *Voila!* You are here. Some distance behind the Boche lines a long ammunition and supply train is making its way to the German front. I am to lead an air squadron against it. It will be a bombing raid and very dangerous. We shall start at three o'clock to-morrow morning. The supply train, according to our calculations, will be at a certain point to-morrow morning at four o'clock. It is then that we shall attack. The craft that I shall use will be a Voisin. In it will be only you, my bombardier and myself. Unless an unexpected emergency should arise you will have little to do save be my honored guest. It will be for you the interesting experience, *n'est ce pas?*"

"I should rather say so!" Jimmy drew a sharp breath. "It's the bulliest thing that ever happened to me. I can't begin to find words to thank you, sir." [169]

"You need not try. I understand; *tres bien*," Voissard assured, a smile touching his firm mouth.

With this he dropped the subject of the night's work and directed the conversation toward more impersonal topics.

Outside the village, Jimmy was amazed at the activities of the Allied war machine. All along the way they encountered numbers of motor-lorries, trucks and ambulances traveling over the roads in steady streams. Huge tractors puffed and snorted along in advance of strings of farm wagons. Occasionally a racer, carrying staff officers, shot by them. Once they passed a company of French soldiers on the march from one battle section to another. Frequently motorcycles ridden by despatch men chugged by them. In the fields peasant women and children could be seen preparing the ground for spring planting. It was a varied and interesting panorama that Jimmy gazed upon, wide-eyed and curious.

Arrived at the escadrille, a new world of wonder was opened to him. He saw rows and rows of hangars, housing countless Allied fighting birds.

Though Voissard did not belong to this particular escadrille, he was very much at home there. On the way to the headquarters of the escadrille commander, the Flying Terror was greeted with admiring respect by all whom they chanced to encounter. Everyone appeared to know him, though he ruefully confessed to Jimmy that he could not recall the faces of many of the aviators who claimed his acquaintance. [170]

As the guest of Cousin Emile, Jimmy became also the guest of the escadrille commander. It was almost unbelievable, he thought, that an ordinary Sammy like himself should be eating luncheon with two such great men. Luncheon over, he was taken on a tour about the aviation field and saw new sights to marvel at. Standing somewhat in awe of the commander, a very tall Frenchman with a somewhat austere face, he soon became quite at his ease. Despite his severe expression, "*Mon Capitaine*," as Voissard affectionately addressed the commander, was a very human sort of

person and treated him with the benevolent friendliness which an older man often displays toward a youngster.

Enjoying himself hugely, Jimmy longed, nevertheless, for the great moment to arrive when he should take his first trip through the clouds. At eight o'clock Voissard and himself both lay down for a few hours' rest before the start. Jimmy was too thoroughly wide awake even to doze off briefly. Now and then, by the faint rays of the night light burning in the room, he consulted his wrist watch. Would two o'clock never come? [171]

Two o'clock, though slow in coming, finally came. Provided by Voissard with the close-fitting head-gear and heavy fur-lined coat of the aviator, the two made their way across the aviation field to the hangar in which the Voisin reposed that Voissard was to fly that night. They found there the bombardier, a slim, alert Frenchman with piercing black eyes. Jimmy grinned in the dark to hear Cousin Emile address the man as Gaston. The name brought humorous recollection of Bob's goat.

Watching Voissard by the flaring light in the hangar, Jimmy observed the workmanlike manner in which the aviator examined his airplane. He tested every point of it, giving the engine a most minute going over.

Meanwhile Gaston was equally busy attending to his own part of the work. He tested the bomb carrier and counted his stock of percussion caps for the bombs. He went over the machine gun, set the clock in the front of the machine to the exact second, tested the altimeter and saw that the compass was correctly hung.

Eleven other bombing planes besides Voissard's were to take part in the expedition. His was the only plane to carry an extra man. The others each had only a pilot and bombardier. Besides the twelve, five lighter, swifter planes, Nieuports all, were to go along as a guard to warn the bombers of the approach of hostile aircraft and to give battle should the heavier planes be obliged to retreat. [172]

To Jimmy it was indeed thrilling to watch plane after plane line up at the end of the field for the start. In the flaring glow cast by powerful lights set at each corner of the field, he could plainly see the faces of the pilots and the bombardiers. They were laughing and talking among themselves, unconcerned by the danger of the detail ahead of them.

Soon pilots and bombardiers were seated in their planes, awaiting the word from the squadron commander who had come down to see them off.

Voissard's plane was to make the first ascent. Seated behind, in the place usually occupied by the observer, Jimmy held his breath as the commander sang out, "All ready!"

"Turn!" shouted Voissard to the mechanic standing beside the plane.

The man spun the propeller and jumped back out of the way. The engine tuned up and then—Jimmy felt the movement of the plane as it began rolling along the field. It gathered speed, then began to rise. At last he knew what it meant to fly.

Higher and higher the plane rose. Far below Jimmy could see the lights of the aviation field as mere pin points. Soon these became completely obliterated. Looking back, Jimmy could make out the other planes stringing in a long succession behind them. Headed straight for the German lines, the Voisin suddenly plunged into a cloud bank and the flying squadron vanished from Jimmy's view. [173]

At length, emerging from the clouds, he could see none of the squadron. He guessed that they were now going through the same bank that had lately engulfed Voissard's plane. His first sensation of dizziness now past, he began to realize that it was very cold up there in the clouds. He was grateful for the warmth of his fur-lined coat. He calculated that they must be sweeping the skies at the rate of at least eighty miles an hour. He wished he might speak to Voissard or Gaston, but the roar of the engine was too great for that. Shouting his loudest he would not be able to make himself heard. He wondered what had become of the squadron. Had they lost their companions so soon?

Keeping up an anxious watch, he saw at last plane after plane reappear. They had won free of the cloud bank. Presently he saw something else. Fifteen hundred feet below him, he could make out red, twisting lines of fire, accompanied by glaring, crimson flashes. He was over his own lines. Those flaming lines and vivid flashes proceeded from the American guns.

Now the plane was beginning to soar higher. Voissard was getting safely above the up-climbing curve of the American shells. On they went. They were now crossing what looked like a dense black patch. Jimmy knew it to be No Man's Land. He could see it plainly, as, ever and again, a star shell rose and bathed it in a radiant, bluish-white light. It was the deadly, cruel land that had claimed poor Schnitz. [174]

Soon the writhing lines of fire were again visible. They had crossed No Man's Land and were over the German lines. Both sides were furiously at it. It was evident to him, even at that height, that Fritz was getting heavier punishment than he was inflicting. The air shock of the explosion of American shells made the plane rock like a ship at sea.

With the German lines safely passed, the plane flew steadily onward toward its objective point.

Engaged in keeping track of the squadron, Jimmy felt relieved when, one by one, they began to draw closer. They were gathering for the attack. He decided that it must be nearing four o'clock. From then on he kept his eyes trained downward in an effort to pick up a long, dark outline, which would be the supply train. Though it was still dark it was the gloom that precedes dawn's first faint light. A few minutes and he should be able to see the earth below quite plainly.

Presently Voissard began to spiral down. His example was followed by the pilots of the other planes. With motors shut off the squadron volplaned. Jimmy could now distinguish the thin black line. It appeared to be creeping very slowly. In the bomber's seat, Gaston was making ready to drop his bombs. As flight-captain, Voissard would give the signal. In turn each machine would come to an even keel at a point set, drop its bombs and dart away. Voissard's machine would be the last to go. The whole performance would last hardly more than a minute. [175]

As each plane did its work and scudded off, another took its place. Each bomber strove to land his bombs where they would do the most good. Peering downward with strained eyes, Jimmy saw and heard that which filled him with delirious joy. Amid continuous explosions and angry tongues of fire, the long black line appeared suddenly to completely dissolve, and disappear. Few of the bombs had missed their mark. Jimmy could well imagine the devastation attending that raid.

It was over now. Gaston had done his bit and Voissard was flying for home. Directly behind him came the fighting Nieuports, ready to cover the retreat of the bombing planes. They would be needed. Across the rapidly coming dawn half a dozen German Aviatiks were hastening to the fray. From below Boche anti-aircraft guns were now pegging at the returning bombing party. [176]

The speed of the Aviatik being very great, five of them soon drew upon the Nieuports and attacked them viciously. The first Aviatik to the scene swept straight over in pursuit of Voissard, opening fire upon the plane. Very trickily it kept behind and a little lower, thus making it impossible for Gaston to pepper it with machine-gun bullets.

Voissard, however, had no intention of permitting the Aviatik this liberty. By a clever ruse he caused his plane to dive sharply, as though hit and disabled. Allowing it to careen wildly for an instant, he made a lightning drop in front of the German plane, then swept past it like a flash. When he again brought it to an even keel it was under the Boche plane and a little to its rear.

Gaston whooped with joy and turned the machine gun upon it. Incidental with this, one of the Nieuports came to the rescue. Under a heavy fusillade the Aviatik promptly took to her heels and sailed out of danger.

Again Voissard took up the homeward flight. The plane was still behind the Boche lines when a well directed shell from a German Archie grazed it, causing it to pitch violently. The shock of the explosion, coupled with the wild rocking, would have thrown Jimmy out of the plane had he not been securely strapped in. He saw Gaston clap a hand to his breast and crumple. Splinters flew from one of the struts. The plane continued to stagger. It was dropping now. Yes, Voissard was still at the controls, working like a madman to keep the plane under guidance. Still the rushing descent continued. Jimmy felt a queer giddiness sweep over him in long, sickening waves. This was the end. [177]

CHAPTER XXII

THE UNSPEAKABLE CRIME

Within the next two minutes Jimmy reversed his opinion that the end had come. True, they were still dropping, but at the instigation of a master hand on the controls, the Voisin was once more obeying its pilot and volplaning easily earthward.

Now they were not more than two hundred feet from the ground and hanging over a ruined farmhouse. Some distance behind it stood a dilapidated barn. A little below the barn was an orchard of apple trees which sloped gradually down to open meadow land.

At a point in the meadow close to the orchard, the plane finally made harbor. As it touched ground Jimmy peered anxiously about for signs of human beings. German soldiers could not be far away. Behind the German lines, as they were, they could not hope to escape being seen and fired upon.

Strangely enough, no shots were fired as the plane made a landing. Over all hung the mystery of dawn, broken only by the pounding of the guns on the battle lines. Jimmy had fully expected to fight for his life the instant he reached terra firma. It dazed him to find himself behind the German lines, for even a moment, unmolested. [179]

"We are in a most dangerous locality, *mon cher* Blaise." Voissard had already left the machine and was circling it, making a hasty examination as he went. "We must leave here at once!" he continued. "It was either this or perhaps a fall when over the Boche lines. I knew not the extent of damage done by that Archie. It has lost me my good Gaston. That is, indeed, a loss. I am deeply grieved. Yet this is not the occasion for the grief. A moment and I shall know how quickly we may ascend. I knew this spot and determined thus to take the risk of one little moment's landing."

"Is there anything I can do, sir?" Jimmy eagerly offered. "Perhaps I can help—"

"Wait."

Voissard dived into the car, returning with a pair of revolvers and a box of cartridges.

"Take these and stand guard," he ordered, offering one of the revolvers to Jimmy. "Should a Boche soldier appear, shoot him on sight. It is yet early and we are some distance from the enemy trenches. Still there is always the outpost guard or the patrol to reckon with. Again, this is of a truth a fitting spot for an early morning execution." [180]

Obediently mounting guard, Jimmy stood at alert while the aviator busied himself with his machine. For twenty minutes he remained thus, his ears cocked for the slightest hostile sound, his eyes keeping a bright lookout.

"It is well!" the aviator at length exclaimed, raising up from the engine. "The damage to the plane has been, after all, small. We shall regain our lines easily, provided we can escape enemy planes on our way. We cannot fight as we have no Gaston. The enemy guns we may escape by flying high. Come; into the seat, my boy. We must lose no time. Do not fail to strap yourself in."

Motioning him into the observer's seat, Voissard turned sorrowfully to the crumpled form of the bomber. It had slid well down into the seat Gaston had been occupying when killed. Strapping the body securely, so that it could not tumble out, the aviator sighed:

"*Mon pauvre ami*," he mourned. "It is the best I can do for you until we have reached our station."

Very grimly he strode to the propeller. Starting the engine he leaped into the pilot's seat. The engine responding with a deafening roar, the plane began to roll over the soft ground.

His revolver in readiness, Jimmy kept his eyes trained earthward as they left the meadow and took to the air. Again they passed over the orchard and were on the point of spiraling upward when a shout issued from Jimmy's lips that Voissard heard even above the noise of the engine. [181]

Simultaneous with it a revolver spoke. Instantly Cousin Emile looked down and understood. Shutting off the motor, he volplaned and made skilful landing on an open space between the barn and the orchard. Before the plane touched earth, the revolver had spoken again.

"Oh, the brutes! The dirty, yellow brutes! Thank God, I've done for two of 'em!"

Another shot accompanied Jimmy's hoarse exclamation, shouted in a perfect frenzy of loathing. Out there in the stillness of the morning, Jimmy had come upon the thing which will forever brand the Germans as fiends incarnate. Half a dozen Boches were about to crucify an American soldier.

Looking down, his eyes had come to rest on the barn. Grouped about the closed door were half a dozen German soldiers. He caught a glimpse of a hatless, olive-drab figure, spread-eagled against the door. He saw the gleam of bayonets—then he shouted and in the same instant fired his revolver.

Intent on their fiendish work, the crucifiers had paid no attention to the purr of the aeroplane's engine. They were not looking for an enemy plane so far behind their own lines. [182]

At Jimmy's first shot a Boche threw up his arms and dropped. Instantly the other five whirled and left their victim, whose outspread arms were bound to two staples hastily driven into the door. Then another Hun clutched his breast and pitched forward. A third fell, shot through the head.

Always cowardly when cornered, two of the remaining trio took one look at the plane and ran. Only one stood his ground. Bayonet discarded, he pulled an automatic pistol and opened fire on Jimmy.

A shot from Voissard's revolver pierced the Hun's left arm. Jimmy fired again. He thought he had missed his man, and was about to try again when he saw the Boche sway, take a tottering step forward, and collapse forward in a heap on the ground.

The plane having rolled along a few yards and come to a standstill, Jimmy and the aviator leaped out of it and ran to the rescue of the trussed Sammy.

"My poor fellow—"

Sheer amazement checked the expression of sympathy that welled to Cousin Emile's lips. His young friend Blaise was laughing and crying and hugging the man fastened to the door as though quite bereft of his senses.

"Oh, Schnitz! Oh, *Schnitz!*" Jimmy sobbed out wildly. [183]

"Blazes, my—bunkie!" Down Schnitzel's wan cheeks the tears were streaming.

Then Voissard knew and his own eyes blurred. For a moment he stood back, saying nothing. Realization of their peril made not only speech but prompt action necessary. Whipping a clasp knife from a coat pocket he opened it and proceeded to cut Schnitzel loose from the door. This done he offered his hand to the German-American, saying simply: "Thanks to *le bon Dieu*, we arrived in time. Now we must leave here instantly. Two of the beasts have escaped. They will give the alarm and a patrol will be sent out against us. We must make haste or perhaps all suffer the

fate intended for you. The Boches will be much enraged over the loss of these *canaille*."

Voissard scornfully indicated the four dead Boches, sprawling hideously on the ground, the result of Jimmy's ability to shoot to kill.

"I'd forgotten the dogs for the moment." Turning from Schnitzel, Jimmy's face registered the utmost loathing as his eyes took in the ugly but satisfactory sight.

"Just a second and then we'll beat it. Come here, Blazes."

Schnitzel strode over to one of the dead, lying face downward in the mud. Grasping the body by the shoulders, he turned it viciously on its back. It was clothed in the uniform of a Boche captain. [184]

Jimmy peered down at the ghastly, black-bearded face. The dead man's eyes, wide open, stared malignantly up at him.

"The tiger man!" burst from his amazed lips.

At the cry, Voissard sprang to his side. Together the three men stood looking down for an instant at that glassy-eyed, wicked face.

"And *I* got him!"

Jimmy spoke in awed, unbelieving tones.

"Come," Voissard warned sharply. "To the plane. The explanation of this must wait. I doubt not that it must be of a truth amazing."

"It is," Schnitzel grimly assured.

With one accord the three turned and hurried to the spot where the aeroplane stood. Turning his revolver over to Schnitzel, the aviator ordered them into the plane, provided Schnitzel with an extra coat and cap which had belonged to Gaston, and made hurried preparations to rise. The open space between the barn and orchard was large and level enough to permit of an easy get-away.

Hardly had the plane left the ground when the dreaded patrol appeared. It was composed of at least a dozen Boches. They charged through the orchard, shooting as they came. Bullets whistled past the plane, but failed to touch it.

Spiraling on upward, the plane drew away from the orchard and beyond range of Boche rifles. Higher and higher it flew and found protection above a long gray cloud-bank. The morning sky heavily overcast, Cousin Emile looked to the friendly clouds to shield them in their flight over the German lines. [185]

Once well above the clouds, Schnitzel had laid aside his revolver and turned his attention to the machine gun. Finding a fresh belt of cartridges close beside it, he removed the spent belt, which Gaston had used up in the attack on the Aviatik, and loaded the gun for ready use.

Traveling at high speed half an hour's run would see them clear of the German lines. As they continued the flight the clouds began to scatter and the sun came out. Above No Man's Land they broke from the clouds and in the same instant encountered a foe. Not far ahead and above them flew an Aviatik on its way back to the German lines. It had also been taking advantage of the cloud curtain.

Each pilot saw his enemy in the same moment. Without a gunner, Voissard realized that in flight lay the only chance of safety. He must dash straight on under the Aviatik and win clear of it if he could. Its speed being greater than that of his own plane, he already regarded himself as doomed.

As the plane darted on in a swift, level course, Voissard's ears caught a dim rattling sound that briefly startled him. Had Gaston come to life? A flashing glance over his shoulder revealed not Gaston, but Schnitzel, at the machine gun. Schnitzel had acted with lightning swiftness. His carefully gathered knowledge of guns and aircraft now saved the day. [186]

Behind the Aviatik and on an even keel under it, he knew their position to be ideal for hitting the Boche plane. Having made ready for any emergency, he had opened fire at the right moment. A rain of bullets hit the Aviatik squarely. One of them toppled the pilot over. Others must have struck a vital point of the machine, for it began to stagger. Fairly riddled by bullets, the doomed plane lurched wildly, turned half over, and began a last tumultuous, uncontrolled descent to earth. Schnitzel had indeed made good as a gunner.

The Aviatik done to death, the flight was swiftly continued. Now over the American lines the danger momentarily lessened. In the distance they saw three French planes chasing a Boche Albatross that was making a desperate effort to get away from its pursuers.

They came at last to the aviation station and were received jubilantly by a group of shouting aviators who had run out to meet them. It had been feared by those who had taken part in the bombing expedition that Voissard had made his last flight. [187]

Clambering out of the aeroplane, it seemed to Jimmy Blaise as though he was returning to reality from a strange dream. Only the living, breathing presence of Schnitzel, his bunkie, standing beside him, assured him that he had not dreamed. His "hunch" that Schnitzel and he would meet again

CHAPTER XXIII

[188]

LOYAL UNTO DEATH

What happened next, Jimmy Blaise never forgot. The instant Voissard was out of the plane he strode over to Schnitzel. Laying a hand affectionately on the German-American's shoulder, he addressed in French the group of aviators crowded about him.

"My comrades," he said, "here is indeed a gunner!" Then he went on to relate to his fellow flyers the details of the fight with the Aviatik, speaking rapidly and gesticulating in true French fashion. Going back further, he next cited Jimmy up for honors. When he had concluded his account, Jimmy and Schnitzel underwent the embarrassment of each being saluted on both cheeks by Cousin Emile. Nor did it stop there. The enthusiastic French flyers proceeded to do them honor in the same way. Afterward both solemnly swore to each other in private never to do anything again in France that would put them in line for another "kissing bee."

[189]

Outwardly they behaved very well, considering the ingrained prejudice a sturdy American lad has to being thus saluted by his own sex. When it was all over, they accompanied Voissard to headquarters. Both were immeasurably relieved to find that the squadron commander made no attempt to kiss them. He shook hands with them, however, and said some highly complimentary things to each.

Both Schnitzel and Jimmy were longing with all their hearts for a chance to talk things out. While in the plane the noise of the engine had made exchange of speech quite impossible.

Of his own accord, however, Jimmy could have cheerfully hugged Cousin Emile when the aviator tactfully cut short the interview with the squadron commander and marshalled his heroic charges to the quarters of a friend, a *Communiqué* of that particular escadrille.

"Here we shall have the hot bath. Afterward the breakfast at L'escadrille mess. My friend, Pierre, is not within. Always his quarters are mine, when I chance to visit here," Voissard explained as they entered the *Communiqué's* snug little quarters.

"I guess you knew, sir, that we were dying to talk," burst forth Jimmy gratefully.

"I had the suspicion." Voissard smiled at impetuous Blazes. "Soon the opportunity will be ours. May I suggest that you have the patience until after the bath? At breakfast there will be no one to interrupt."

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The luxury of a hot bath was greatly appreciated by the three adventurers. Schnitzel, however, deplored the dilapidated condition of his uniform.

"It's been dragged all through Boche land," he mourned. "Guess I'll keep my rags covered with this big coat. I'll have to go on borrowing this cap, too, until I get back to Sammy headquarters."

Seeking the escadrille mess, they were glad to find it practically deserted of occupants. The members of the escadrille had already breakfasted and were either out in the field or on various details.

"Now, Schnitz, for Heaven's sake tell us what happened to you out there in No Man's Land," sighed Jimmy, when the trio had taken seats at a table and ordered breakfast.

"It seems about a hundred years since then." Schnitzel paused. For an instant he was silent.

"I hadn't gone six yards from that shell crater when I ran full tilt into a Boche patrol," he began. "I put up a fight and croaked two of 'em. They were too many for me. One of the brutes hit me over the head and I went to sleep. When I came to I thought for a minute I was back in our own trenches and that I'd been dreaming. My head hurt like sixty. I put my hand up to the back of it and when I looked at it it was covered with blood. Then I saw a couple of Sammies a little way down the trench. They looked all banged up, too. I started to yell at 'em and a Boche sentry came up and kicked me and spit on me and ordered me to shut up. I felt for my identification tag and it was gone. Then I knew where I was all right enough."

[191]

"That sentry was dying for me to say something so he could kick me some more, but I fooled him. I shut up like a clam. I stayed there all day without so much as a drink of water. The sentry, the fellow that kicked me, was on the job every minute till he was relieved. His relief was worse. He kept walking by the three of us and every time he passed us he'd either strike or kick us. Our hands were tied behind our backs and our feet were tied together, so we couldn't do a thing to him. Whenever we tried to talk to one another we got a clip from him."

"After dark a couple of Boches came and untied my feet. They walked me to a dugout. There were half a dozen Hun officers there. One of 'em, a Boche captain, began talking to me in German. I pretended I didn't understand. He got raving mad and said he knew I was a German by my identification tag. I didn't fall for him, though."

"Then he turned to an Unteroffizier and ordered: 'Question him in English.' The fellow saluted. Then he asked me in English if my name was Franz Schnitzel. I said it was and he asked me if I could understand German. I said I was ashamed to say that I could. He told the captain and the brute got up and hit me across the mouth. [192]

"He hit me a good one. It made me dizzy, but I pulled myself together and laughed in his face. Then I turned on the Unterdog and let him have it. I told him I hated the Boches like poison and that I was all American and not a bit Hun and a lot of other things that weren't exactly complimentary to the Kaiser and his brood.

"I wondered why they didn't all jump on me at once and finish me. They wanted to, I guess, but they didn't. They had other plans for me. The Unterdog told me I was a traitor to the Fatherland and that they were going to make an example of me. I said for them to go as far as they liked, and that ended the seance. The two Boche watchdogs took me back to the trench and the one behind me kicked me all the way there.

"I didn't get anything to eat that night but next morning I got a bit of black bread and a tin cup full of barley coffee. I was crazy for water, but nothing doing. I got a little in the afternoon and a piece of bread and some sausage at night. That's a sample of what happened every day for the next three days. I used to take a trip to the captain's dugout once a day and he'd try to make me talk to him in German. The third time I went I slammed the Boches so hard to the interpreter that when he told the captain what I said the brute got crazy and flew at me like a wild beast. He gave me a terrible walloping with a gun-barrel. I went to sleep and had to be dragged back to the trench. It was one of the reserve trenches I was in. I had to make a long hike through a com. trench every time I went to visit the captain. [193]

"It went on like that until last night. Early in the evening I took my usual trip to the dugout. When I got there I saw a new face in the officer crowd. It belonged to that beast you croaked, Blazes. He had the wickedest pair of eyes I ever saw in a man's head. I didn't know him from Adam, but he thought he knew me, it seemed. He kept staring at me for a while, then he started to talk a blue streak to the captain. I caught most of it. Maybe I wasn't dazed to hear him telling all about the bridge racket back at Marvin and the *Columbia*, and that I was one of the friends of the American swine—that was you, Blazes—who had done for him on the *Columbia*."

"How did he know that you were?" Jimmy cried out in excitement.

"He'd been hanging around the French training camp for a week, shadowing you. He knew every one of the five Brothers by sight. He followed us to Paris and back and tried to shoot us up that night." [194]

"I knew it was he!" exploded Jimmy. "What did I tell you?" He turned triumphantly to Voissard.

"You were indeed correct." With this smiling assurance, Cousin Emile motioned to Schnitzel to continue.

"He went on about you, Blazes, to beat the band. He certainly called you some names. That wireless fellow on the *Columbia* was his son. That came out in the talk. The fellow told about signaling a U-Boat the night you got him. He had it all planned to jump overboard and be picked up by a Boche boat. Then you queered his game. He didn't know a thing about the real smash. His son put that over by himself, I guess. The father was picked up by a trawler and landed in L—. You saw him on the station platform. He told about that, too.

"That's about all of his history, except that he asked the captain to turn me over to him to deal with. You ought to have seen his eyes when he said it. Some healthy little hate they registered. I was turned over to him next morning. Before daylight he headed a gang that came for me and marched me off to that barn. It was a long walk. You know the rest. Your coming was a miracle. I'd made up my mind not to peep when they bayoneted me to that door. I was going to die game for the U. S." [195]

"Oh, Glory, but I'm glad I croaked him!" Jimmy's exclamation rang with an intensity of hatred. "He was some spy, Schnitz. *Mon Capitaine*," he glanced mischievously at Cousin Emile, "found out all about him. His name was von Kreitzen. He was an Austrian spy; one of the biggest villains going."

"I never heard his name," returned Schnitzel. "They never called him anything but captain. Guess he must have been lying low in the army. The other officers fairly groveled to him. You ought to be decorated for croaking him, Blazes."

"Oh, I'm not so much." Jimmy grinned cheerfully. "You've got something coming to you, Schnitz, when you get back to headquarters. You stopped the raid that night, only you never knew it."

"France will also wish to honor you," declared Voissard. "You did the great work this morning with the machine gun. My poor, good Gaston could not have done better. I would that you were my gunner."

"I thank you, *mon Capitaine*." Schnitzel smilingly borrowed Jimmy's familiar appellation in addressing Voissard. "I should like to be your gunner. I'd accept the detail in a minute except for one thing. I can't resign my job with Uncle Sammy." [196]

Schnitzel's dark face was illuminated by a radiant flash of patriotism that sprang from the depths

of his soul.

"Never mind. If you cannot be my gunner, you can always be my honored comrade and friend." Across the table Voissard's hand went out to Schnitzel. "It is all one. We are linked by all that we hold highest to rid the world of the curse of militarism."

"It's all the same old Glory Road, and it leads to Berlin and victory for the Allies," supplemented Jimmy. "Whether we're Sammies, Frenchies, Tommies or Wops, we're all doing our bit for the same old cause."

CHAPTER XXIV

[197]

WAITING FOR ZERO HOUR

"Him is done," announced Ignace Pulinski solemnly, as he slipped the letter he had just finished writing into an envelope. "So I never come back, will poor my mothar this have an' keep always, remember me."

"Oh, can the croak, Iggy," ordered Jimmy Blaise, looking up from his writing. "We're coming back, every last one of us. I've got a hunch that this won't be our last stab at the Boches."

"That's as good as a safe conduct pass through the shindig," declared Bob emphatically. "I've a lot of respect for those hunches of yours since Schnitz came back."

Gathered in a corner of a front-line dugout, the five Brothers were conducting a writing-bee which, in spite of Jimmy's "hunch," might be the last for part, if not all, of them. Four o'clock the next morning was to be zero hour for them. The long-expected ordeal was at hand. The 509th men were soon to know how it felt to go Over the Top. [198]

It was now a few minutes past ten o'clock in the evening. Just after dark the order had come. Two days had elapsed since their return from rest billets to the trenches. They had returned to front-line duty on the morning following a furious bombardment of the Boche trenches by American batteries, which had ended in a Sammy raiding party Over the Top. The raid had been a great success so far as the capture of guns and prisoners was concerned. Many Sammies had been sacrificed, however. As a result the resting detachments had come back to replace their lost comrades.

During those two days, Fritz had been having his own troubles. Night and day the Americans had kept up a harrying rifle and machine-gun fire. Hordes of Allied aeroplanes had sailed boldly over the German lines, dropping bombs on the reinforcements and supplies which the Boches were engaged in bringing up to their own lines. Fierce indeed had been the aerial fights. Many an intrepid pilot on both sides had gone crashing down to death. Undaunted, the Allies continued to send fresh relays of airmen out to carry on this most hazardous work.

Now, while the iron was hot, it had been determined to strike another blow. Thus it was that Jimmy Blaise and his bunkies were writing their home letters, preparatory to taking part in the raid to be made just before dawn. For almost two weeks they had been jogging along a smooth, peaceful stretch of the famous Glory Road. Now they would soon strike rough hiking. [199]

On the evening following the rescue of Franz Schnitzel by Jimmy Blaise and Voissard, the two bunkies had returned to billets. Voissard had accompanied them and taken part in the joyful little celebration that marked the restoration of Schnitzel to his Brothers.

Headquarters was also glad to see Schnitzel. He received flattering commendation for his splendid services. He now wore on his left sleeve the insignia of a sergeant. There came for him, too, a wonderful day when France acknowledged him as a hero and placed her seal of approval upon his breast. Jimmy Blaise, also, came in for his share of glory. France was only too ready to decorate one who had rid the world of a spy such as Adolph von Kreitzen. What amazed Jimmy most of all was the receipt of a large sum of money, the price set by the French government on von Kreitzen's head.

For the five Brothers the past two weeks had been one perpetual holiday. It was over now and again they were facing War in all its grimness.

They had returned from their eventful sojourn behind the lines inspired with renewed loyalty and inspiration. This time on entering the trenches they had felt little of the heavy oppression which had hung over them on their first journey to the fire trench. [200]

"Of course, we're not veterans yet by a long shot," Bob had confided to Jimmy Blaise at the beginning of their second trench detail. "There are quite a few little friendly acts that Fritz hasn't got around to do for us yet. For one thing, we haven't been gassed. Isn't that a sweet prospect to look forward to? Betcha! I only hope we'll be all dressed up in our gas masks when the party begins."

Thus far, however, Fritz had kept gas donations at home. Given a day when the wind favored him he would undoubtedly display great generosity in this respect.

"Twenty after ten." Jimmy Blaise rose and consulted his wrist watch. "I'll have to be getting back to my station. I promised the lieutenant I'd be back at ten-thirty sharp. It was mighty kind in him to let me off to write my letters and have a chin-chin with you fellows."

"We all owe our officers a lot for the same privilege," Roger declared gratefully. "If we don't do 'em proud when the grand slam comes, then we deserve to get licked."

"We're *going* to do 'em proud," emphasized Bob. "Every last Sammy is aching to try cold steel on the Boches. I used to think going Over the Top would be the limit. But I'm not afraid of zero hour any more." [201]

"So once think I," confessed Ignace, "but no now. Only am I the sad we no go over top side by each. I would by my Brother be then, the care take."

"You'll have all you can do to take care of yourself, Iggins," asserted Schnitzel. "It is too bad, though, that we can't be shoulder to shoulder in the big dash."

"We've got to stay where we're put," sighed Jimmy. "Never mind. What's the odds where we fight, so long as we're fighting for the same good old scout, Uncle Sam? Well, time's up. I've got to beat it. Give me your letters. The lieutenant's going to turn 'em over to a man who's going back of the lines to-night."

Now on their feet, his bunkies turned over their letters to Jimmy. In silence the five left the dugout. Outside it, by mutual consent, they halted for a last affectionate hand grip all around.

"We're not going to say good-bye, 'cause I'm just as sure as anything that it's going to be all O. K. for the five Brothers," prophesied Jimmy. "When the scrap's over and the Boches are canned, meet me in this dugout. That's a date. See that you keep it."

"So is it." Ignace nodded, bound to agree with his Best Brother.

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"So is it," repeated Bob. "Never say die. The right dope is, 'I'll see you later!'"

And this was the hopeful watchword the five Brothers took with them as they separated, each to find his station and there await the fateful coming of Zero Hour.

Just how truly Jimmy's prophecy was verified remains yet to be told in "THE KHAKI BOYS OVER THE TOP; OR, DOING AND DARING FOR UNCLE SAM."

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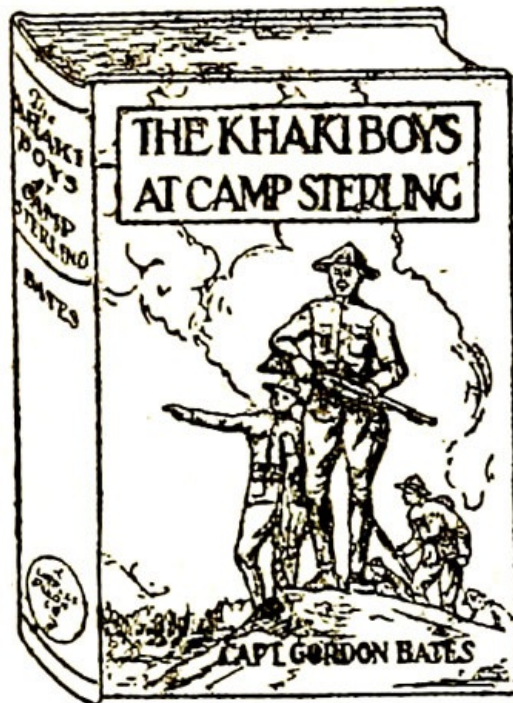
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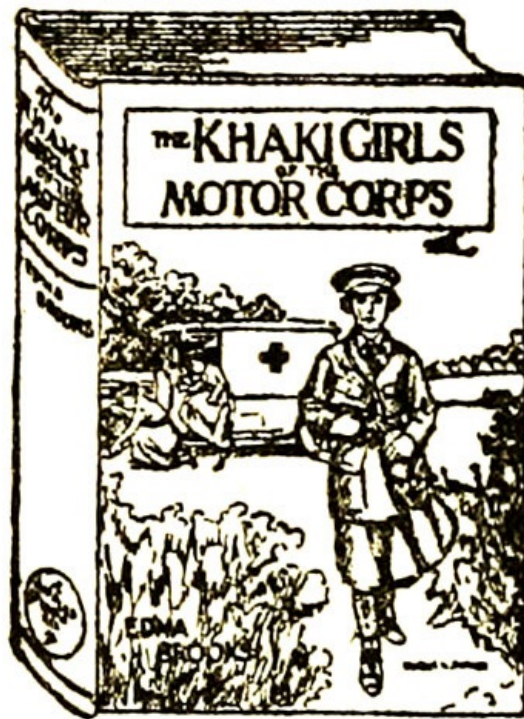
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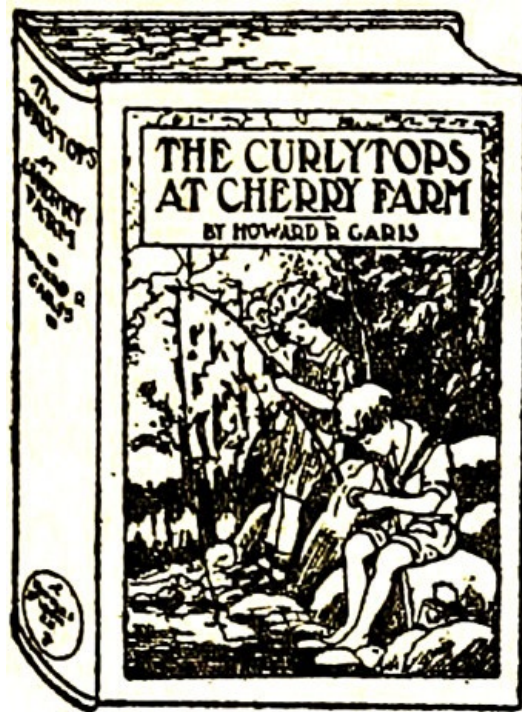
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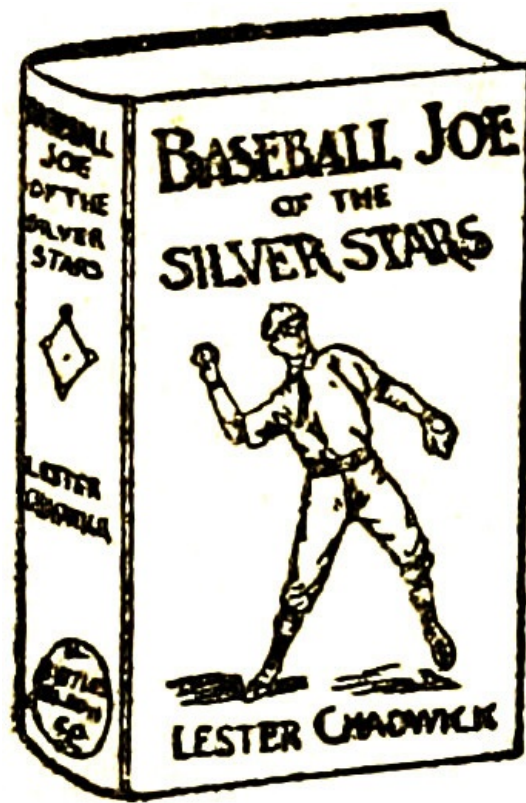
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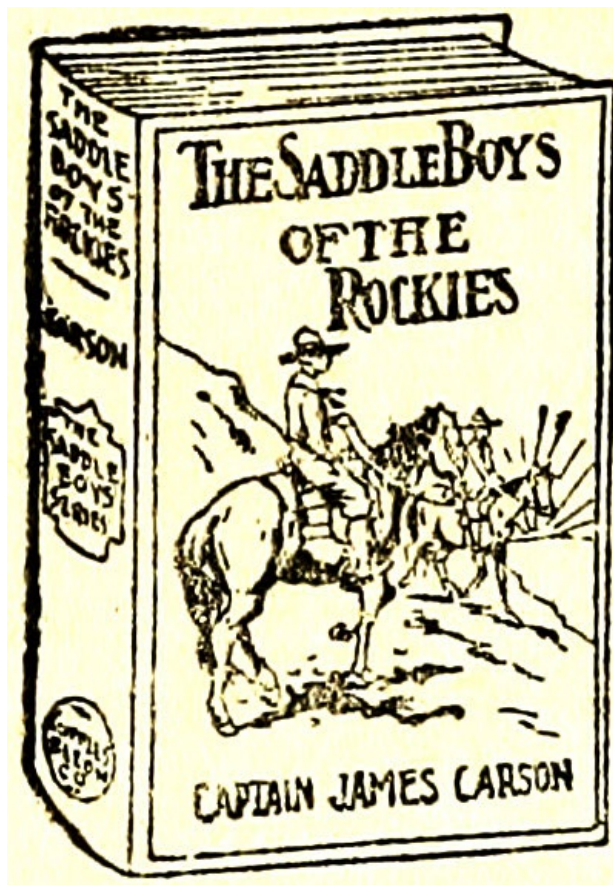
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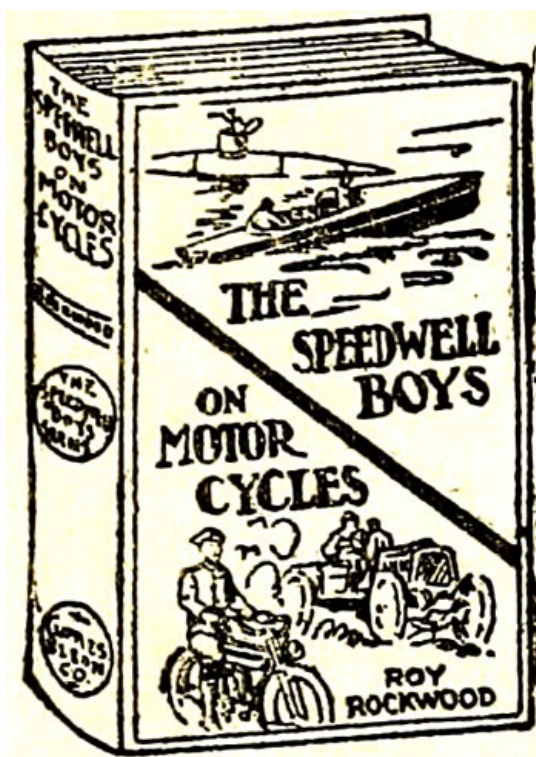
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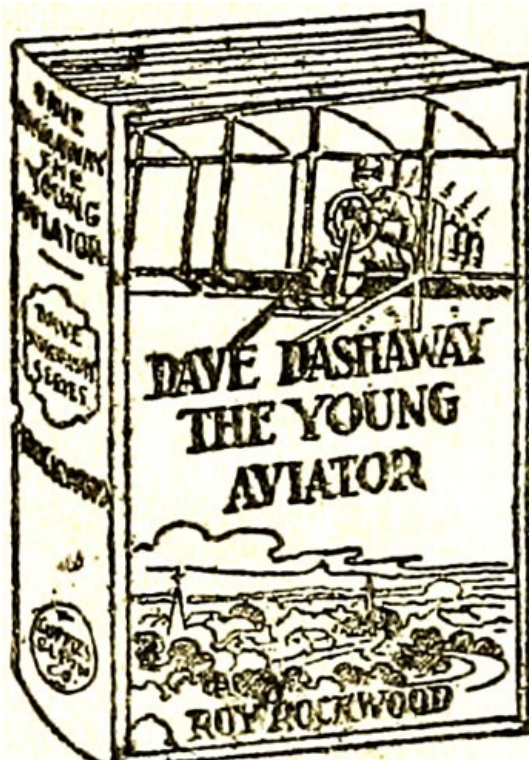
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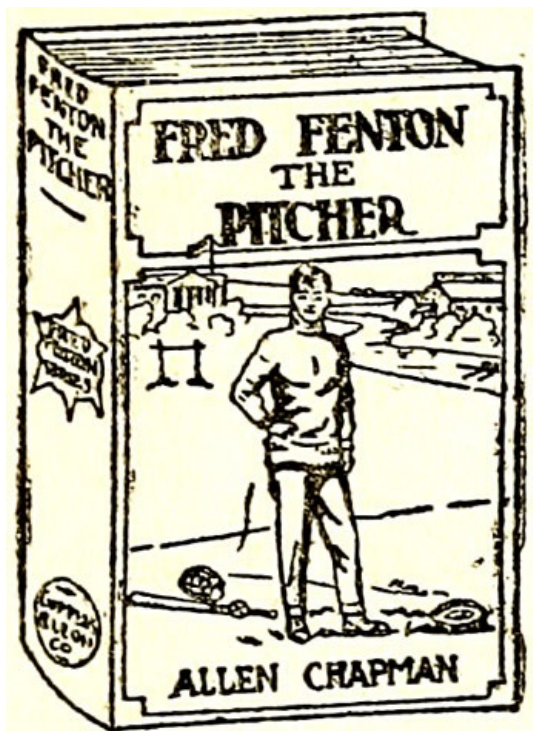
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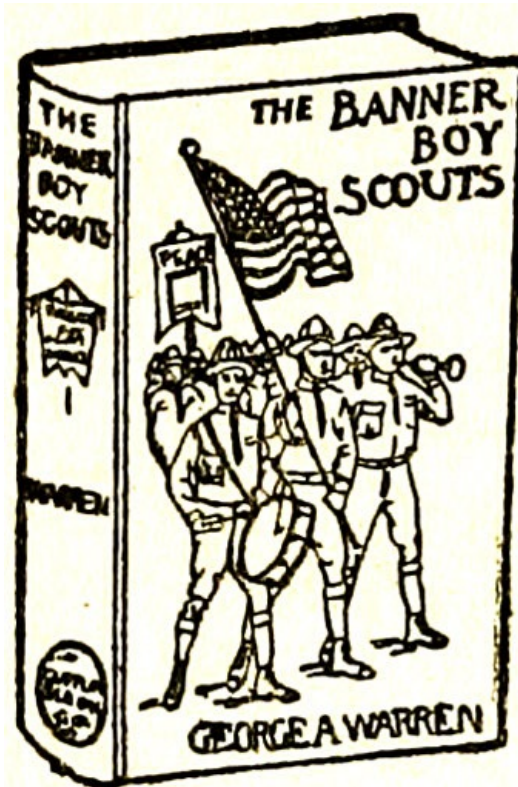
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