

FIGHTING WITH FRENCH

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A Tale of the New Army

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FIGHTING WITH FRENCH

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A FOUL BLOW (See p. 52.)

FIGHTING
WITH FRENCH
A TALE OF THE NEW ARMY

BY
HERBERT STRANG

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOUR BY CYRUS CUNEO
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PREFACE

In these days one would rather fight than write; and those of us whom inexorable Time has superannuated can but envy and admire.

Seven years ago the father of two boys at Rugby asked me to write a story on the German peril, and the necessity of closing our ranks against a possible invasion. After some hesitation I decided to decline the suggestion, anxious not to insinuate in young minds a suspicion of Germany which might prove to be ill-founded. Two years later, when the subject was again pressed upon me, I felt bound to attempt some little service in the cause of national defence; but again I avoided any direct implication of Germany, imagining an invasion of Australia by an aggressive China. In two or three books I had poked a little fun at German foibles, how harmlessly and inoffensively may be known by the fact that one of these books was translated into German. The course of events, the horrors of the

present war, show how needless were my scruples. Germany has come out in her true colours, and the mildest of pacifists feels a stirring of the blood.

In *A Hero of Liège* I wove a little romance upon the early events of the war, when we were still under the shock of surprise and information was scanty. The present story has been written under more favourable conditions. A good deal of it springs from personal knowledge of the training of the New Army. The "Rutland Light Infantry" exists, under another name, and one or two of the characters may perhaps be recognised by their friends. But I should point out that a story is not a history. The history of this great struggle must be sought elsewhere. The romancer is satisfied if he is reasonably true to facts and probabilities, and more than happy if his fictions, while amusing an idle hour, have also anything of stimulus and encouragement.

HERBERT STRANG.

CONTENTS

CHAP.

- I A CHANCE MEETING
- II SHARE AND SHARE ALIKE
- III STONEMAN ENLISTS
- IV THREE ROUNDS
- V THE BACK OF THE FRONT
- VI BAGGING A SNIPER
- VII IN THE ENEMY'S LINES
- VIII SKY HIGH
- IX D.C.M.
- X HOT WORK
- XI THE DISAPPEARANCE OF GINGER
- XII DOGGED
- XIII THE FIGHT FOR THE VILLAGE
- XIV THE HIKIOTOSHI
- XV THE OBSERVATION POST
- XVI EXCHANGE NO ROBBERY
- XVII STRATEGY

XVIII USES OF A TRANSPORT LORRY
 XIX SUSPICIONS
 XX MONSIEUR OBERNAI'S ATTIC
 XXI MARKED DOWN
 XXII 'RECOMMENDED'

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

A FOUL BLOW *Frontispiece (see page 52)*

"HANDS UP!"

A LONG WAY BACK

THE INTRUDER IN KHAKI

CHAPTER I A CHANCE MEETING

Mr. Kishimaru smiled, and rubbed his long lean hands gently the one over the other.

"Yes, Mr. Amory, you make great progress," he said, in low smooth tones, and with the careful enunciation of one speaking a foreign tongue. "You will be an artist. Yes, I assure you: jujutsu is a fine art; more than that, it is an application of pure science. I say that, and I know. Compare it with boxing, that which your grandfathers called the noble art. Rapidity of movement, yes; quickness of eye and judgment, yes; but delicacy of touch—ah! jujutsu has it, boxing no. There is nothing brutal about jujutsu."

Kenneth Amory smiled back at the enthusiastic little Japanese, and rubbed his left shoulder.

"Nothing brutal, I agree," he said. "But it has been a dry summer, Mr. Kishimaru."

"A dry summer?" the Japanese repeated, still smiling, but with an air of puzzlement.

"Yes; the turf's uncommonly hard, and I came down a pretty good whack that last time."

"I am sorry. You have not quite recovered your strength yet, or you would not have fallen so heavily. But you do well; it is good exercise, for body and mind too. A little rest, and we will try another throw."

Kenneth Amory was seated on a bench on the lawn where, in summer, Mr. Kishimaru instructed his pupils in the fine art of jujutsu. He wore a loose white belted tunic and shorts: head and legs were bare. Mr. Kishimaru, a wiry little Japanese of about thirty-five, similarly clad, walked up and down, expounding the principles of his art.

A bell rang in the house. The garden door opened, and a tall young fellow of some twenty years came with quick step on to the lawn.

"Hullo, Kishimaru!" he cried. "How do? Have you got a minute?" He glanced towards the figure on the bench, but did not wait for an answer. "Just back from Canada—to enlist. Got to smash the Germans, you know. But look here; just spare a minute to show me the Koshinage, will you? I was in a lumber camp, you know, out west; lumbering's hard work; no cricket or anything else; had to do something; taught 'em jujutsu, odd times, you know. But the Koshinage—I fairly came to grief over that: tried it on a big chap, and came a regular cropper. Made me look pretty small; I'd been explaining that I'd throw any fellow, no matter how big. Somehow it didn't come off: must have forgotten something, I suppose. I've only got a few minutes; have to catch the 4.30 at St. Pancras; just put me through it once or twice, there's a good chap."

Mr. Kishimaru rubbed his hands all through this impetuous address. He was always pleased to see an old pupil, and Harry Randall, voluble, always in a hurry, had been one of his best pupils a year or two before.

"I am delighted to see you, Mr. Randall," he said. "If you will change--"

"No time for that. I'll strip to my shirt, be ready in a winking."

He threw off coat and waistcoat, wrenched off his collar, with some peril to the stud, and knotting his braces about his waist, stood ready. Meanwhile Mr. Kishimaru had stepped to the bench.

"The Koshinage is the exercise we have been practising, Mr. Amory," he said. "Perhaps you will be good enough to go through it with Mr. Randall, an old pupil. I will watch, and criticise if necessary."

Amory sprang up. In the newcomer he had at once recognised a schoolfellow—Randy, they used to call him; a fellow everybody liked; impulsive, generous, easy-going, always in scrapes, always ready to argue with boys or masters. They had left school at the same time, and had not seen each other since.

Mr. Kishimaru explained to Randall that his pupil would practise the exercise with him, and was about to introduce the two formally. But Randall anticipated him.

"Hullo, Amory!" he cried. "It's you. Didn't recognise you. Come on; no time to spare."

Without more ado they took up position for the exercise, holding each other as though they were going to waltz. Then they made one or two rapid steps, Mr. Kishimaru skipping round them, intently watching their movements. With a sudden turning on his toes and bending of the knees, Amory dragged Randall from behind on to his right hip. A jerk of the left arm and the straightening of the knees lifted Randall's feet from the ground, and in another moment he was hoisted over Amory's hip to his left front and deposited on his back.

"Excellent! Excellent!" cried Mr. Kishimaru.

"Just what I tried to do with big Heneky, and came bash to the ground with him on top of me," said Randall. "But it's knack, not strength. I'm heavier than Amory. Show me the trick."

Mr. Kishimaru placed them again in position, showed Randall how to get advantage in the preliminary grip, and left them. In a few seconds Amory was thrown.

"You have it, Mr. Randall," said the Japanese, rubbing his hands with pleasure. "It is like a problem in chess: white to play and mate in three moves. It is inevitable, given the position; it is mathematics, mechanics, applied to the muscular human frame..."

"That's all right, old chap," interrupted Randall. "Knack, I call it. Once more, Amory, then I must be off."

But at the third attempt he failed, and he would not be satisfied until he had performed the feat three times in succession. Then, looking at his watch, he found that he was too late for his train.

"Can't be helped," he said. "I'll go down to-morrow. Come along to my hotel, Amory: haven't said how-de-do yet. We'll have some grub and a talk. But you've got to change. Can't wait. I'll do some shopping and wire home to the governor; you'll find me at the Arundel. Dinner seven sharp: don't be late."

"The same old Randy!" thought Amory, smiling as he went into the house to change.

At seven o'clock he found Randall walking restlessly up and down in front of the hotel.

"Here you are. I've bagged a table. It's jolly to see you again after—how long is it? Remember Shovel? He's got a commission in the Fusiliers. Give me your hat. Want a wash? I landed yesterday; come 6000 miles, by Jove!"

And so, darting from one subject to another, he led the way to the coffee-

room. Before the soup arrived he started again.

"Heard the news right away in the backwoods. Lot of Germans and Austrians in the camp. They began to crow. I slipped away; had to tramp ten days to the rail. Gave a hint to the police, and hope all those aliens are now in gaol. Extraordinary enthusiasm in Canada, old chap. They wanted me to join their contingent, but I'd already applied for a commission at home. People here seem to take things very coolly. It'll be a bigger thing than they realise. And this rot in the papers about the Germans' funk—running away, crying their eyes out! Stupid nonsense, believe me. Had a letter in New York from my governor. Jolly exciting voyage, I can tell you. All lights out; wireless going constantly; alarm one night: German cruiser fifty miles away. We all crowded on deck. By and by lookout signalled a vessel. We held our breath: turned out to be a British cruiser. Captain gave our skipper instructions for the course. We took ten days instead of five. What'll you drink?"

Amory having intimated his modest choice Randall went on:

"Things'll have to wake up here. My governor's men are a lot of rotters. Wrote me that out of five hundred or so only about a dozen had 'listed. Disgraceful, I call it. I'd sack 'em, but I know the governor won't; he's against compulsion. I'm going down to-morrow to stir 'em up. Haven't come 6000 miles for nothing. By the way, what are you doing? You were a sergeant in the O.T.C. Of course you'd get a commission right away. I shall never forget your cheek. Nearly died of laughing when you went up to the O.C. and asked him to make you a corporal. 'What for?' says he. 'I've been a private long enough, sir,' says you, as cool as you please. But I say, what are you doing?"

"I've been rather seedy," said Amory, amused at his friend's chatter, but not yet disposed to tell him that he had already seen service in Belgium.

"But you're fit now, eh? You'll apply?"

"Yes, I suppose I shall."

"Why, hang it all, man, why suppose? They're awfully slow at the War Office. I applied at once; passed the doctor and all that. I shan't wait much longer. There's a Public School Corps forming; I shall join that. I daresay they'll give me a platoon. I say, why not join too? We're sure to find a lot of our old fellows in it; we might make up a company. I hate waiting about. What do you say?"

"I'll think it over."

"Oh, I say, man, what rot! I tell you I've come 6000 miles to join. You used to be keen enough." A cloud of disappointment, almost of affront, hovered upon his face. Then suddenly he flashed a look of mingled horror and disgust at his friend. "You don't tell me you're a professional footballer?" he muttered.

"No, no," replied Amory with a laugh. "Don't be alarmed, Randy; I shan't

sit at home and read the papers.”

”That’s all right, then. But do make up your mind, there’s a good chap. I tell you what, what’s your address? I’ll wire you to-morrow when I’ve had a go at the governor’s men. Twelve out of five hundred!—no wonder the poor old governor is biffy. It’s a disgrace. Well, I’ll wire you; let you know how I get on as a recruiting officer. Then we’ll meet somewhere. Find out the headquarters of the Public School Corps, will you? and make up your mind to join that with me. It won’t spoil your chance of a commission—perhaps hurry it up. Anyway, it will be jolly to be together.... Waiter, bring me some more of that soufflé. You don’t get things like that in the backwoods, Amory.”

CHAPTER II

SHARE AND SHARE ALIKE

Kenneth on his way home looked in at the doctor’s. An attack of influenza after his return from Belgium had pulled him down, and he had put off joining the army until assured of his complete recovery. As he put it to the doctor: ”A crock would be no use to K. of K.”

”You’ll do,” said the doctor after thoroughly overhauling him. ”All you want is a little hardening up. I’ll give you a prescription. The open-air life of the army will do you good. And I wish you luck.”

Thus fortified, as soon as he got home he posted an application for a commission in the Flying Corps.

Next day, soon after lunch, he received a telegram from Randall.

”No go. Slackers. Mules. Governor mad. Come and lend a hand.”

He handed the telegram to his mother.

”What does it mean?” she asked. ”Your friend must be rather a curious person.”

”Oh, it’s just Randy,” said Kenneth, who had told his mother of his meeting with Randall on the previous day. ”At school he always wanted to lug everybody with him. I don’t see what I can do. I’ll wire him.”

He wrote on the reply-paid form:

"Sorry. Not my line."

Within a couple of hours came a second telegram.

"Rotter. Writing."

Next morning's post brought the letter.

"You simply must come. What do you mean, not your line? How do you know till you try? Here I've come 6000 miles—but I told you that before. This is the situation. The governor is raving: never saw him so biffy. He got a spouter down from London, who lectured the men in the dinner-hour, waved a flag and all that. The men only jeered. Governor says I'll only make them worse if I try; calls me a scatter-brain; I assure you he's in a deuce of a wax. Used to be as meek as Moses; wouldn't hear of compulsion; he's turned completely over, talks of sacking the men, closing the works, conscription, and so on and so forth. Something must be done. You were always a cool hand; come and let's talk things over, at any rate: smooth the governor down; he won't listen to a word from me, and in my opinion goes the wrong way to work. I told him I was inviting you; best pal at school, cock of the House, going to join with me: so on and so forth. He'll be glad to see you."

"A very strange person," remarked Mrs. Amory when she had read the letter.

"Perhaps I had better go," said Kenneth. "Of course I can't do any good with the men, but it will please Randy, and my being on the spot may prevent him and his father from coming to loggerheads. They're both peppery, evidently."

Accordingly, Kenneth travelled by the 10.30 from St. Pancras, and reached the small midland town in time for lunch. He saw at once that Mr. Randall himself was at any rate partly responsible for this trouble. A prosperous manufacturer, he was inclined to be dictatorial and was certainly no diplomatist. Full of patriotic zeal himself, deploring the fact that he was too old for active service, a special constable, an energetic member of the local home defence corps, he had expected all his able-bodied men to rush to the colours, promised to keep their places for them, and to make up their pay for the sake of their dependents. The paltry response filled him with fury. Without taking the trouble to discover the cause of the general reluctance he poured scorn upon the skulkers, talked of the white feather, tried to dragoon them into volunteering, threatened to sack them or close the works, with the result that the men stiffened their backs and defied him. Clearly he did not know how to handle men in an emergency like the present.

At lunch Kenneth tactfully listened to his host's outpourings, without offering any criticism or suggestion.

"Good man!" said Randall, when he and Kenneth were alone. "Let him blow off! That's the way."

"What have you done?" asked Kenneth.

"Not much. I wanted to make a speech to the men, but the governor wouldn't let me. Now, am I a scatter-brain? D'you think that's fair? Anyway, I'm his son! But I spoke to old Griggs, our foreman; asked him why the men won't enlist. 'Cos they're Englishmen,' says he. 'What's the meaning of that?' says I. 'Won't be druv,' says he. 'Rather be led by the nose,' says he."

"What did he mean?"

"Well, it appears that the fellows take their cue from two ringleaders. One of them's a man named Stoneway, only been here about six months: I don't know him. But I know the other chap—a carrot-headed fellow named Murgatroyd; Yorkshire, I suppose: the men call him Ginger. He's been with us years: came as a boy. A rough customer, I can tell you: a jolly good workman, but a regular demon for mischief. All the same, you can't help liking him. He's a sportsman, too: good at boxing, a first-class forward, just the fellow you'd expect to be the first to go. Griggs told me he didn't expect to see him back after his week's holiday in August: but he turned up a day or two late, and backed up Stoneway against the governor. He'll be sacked at the end of the week, sure as a gun."

"Those two are the men you must tackle, then," said Kenneth. "Bring them round, and the rest will follow like sheep—or donkeys, 'led by the nose,' as your Griggs says."

"By the way, he told me the men are having a meeting in the yard at tea-time to discuss the governor's threats. Shall we slip down and hear what they have to say?"

"Our appearance might shut them up."

"Not if I know our men—free and independent, don't care a rap for anyone: you know the sort. They'd take a huge delight in letting us hear a few things about ourselves—idle rich, bloated capitalists and so on: which reminds me that I've got about twopence halfpenny. We'll hear them spout, and tackle Stoneway and Ginger quietly afterwards."

Shortly after four o'clock the two friends strolled into the works yard. Several hundreds of hands were there assembled, from engine boys and apprentices to grey seasoned veterans. The most of them had tea cans, some were smoking. At one end of the yard, standing on a tub, a stoutly built man of about thirty, with close cropped hair and thick brown beard and moustache, was haranguing the mob.

Randall was recognised by some of the men, whose grins of greeting he acknowledged with nods. A whisper ran round: "The young governor!" It caught the ears of the man on the tub, who broke off his speech for a moment and glanced sharply at the two tall figures on the outskirts of the crowd. Then he resumed what was evidently a studied peroration.

"Is this a free country, or is it not, mates?" he cried, with a sweeping arm. "If a man wants to fight, let him; I won't say a word against it. But when it comes to forcing him, then I say he's a slave, and all the talk about Britons never will be slaves is blankety rot, and I say that when an employer threatens to sack us or close the works because we don't feel called on to turn ourselves into gun-fodder, I say he's a nigger-driver and a tyrant. And what's it for? Are we invaded? I'd defend my own home with any man. But what do we pay the navy for? That's their job. What I say is, let the French and the Russians do their own fighting. It's no business of ours."

"What about Belgium?" cried one of the boys.

"What about Belgium?" says the nipper. What has Belgium done for us? Perhaps the nipper will tell us. Speak up.... Not a word, and why? Because Belgium has done nothing for us. Then I ask you in the name of common sense why on earth we should do anything for Belgium? Belgium has only herself to thank. The Germans have promised to leave Belgium as soon as they have settled with the French, and even if they don't--"

"Way there!" shouted Randall, elbowing his way through the crowd. Cries of "Way for the young governor!" drowned the speaker's voice. "Time's up, Stoneway!" sang out the boy who had questioned him. Kenneth followed his friend, hoping that he would be discreet.

Stoneway descended from the tub, Randall mounted in his place.

"Look here, men," he cried, "I came to listen, to get at your ideas, not to speak, but I can't keep quiet when I hear such stuff. We're free men: that's all right; but we're men of our word. An Englishman's word: you know what people say about that. We've given our word to Belgium: if we break it we're mean skunks, we're disgraced for ever. Besides, every decent chap loathes a bully, and Germany's just a great hulking bully. If you see a big chap hurting a little 'un, you want to knock him down. My father tells me that only about a dozen of you have enlisted. What's the reason of it? You'd feel jolly well insulted if I called you cowards. Are all you hundreds going to skulk at home while your mates do the fighting for you? What'll you feel like in ten years' time? You won't be able to look 'em in the face. Here I've come 6000 miles to do my bit; buck up and show what you're made of."

Randall's words tumbled out in a boiling flood. There was some cheering, mingled with cries of "Ginger!" which grew in volume until the din was deafening. Presently there edged his way through the crowd a thin lank fellow with lean clean-shaven cheeks, deeply furrowed, and a touzled mop of reddish hair. A red scarf was knotted about his neck. He slouched forward, hands in pockets, murmured "Afternoon, Mr. Harry," as he passed Randall, mounted the tub, hitched up his breeches, drew the back of his hand across his mouth, and looked

round, with a grin, upon his shouting fellow-workmen. The noise subsided, and the crowd gazed expectantly up into their favourite's face.

"We're all glad to see the young governor, mates," he said, in the broad accents of a north-countryman. There was a volley of cheers. "But we don't hold with him—and no offence. I hold with Stoneway—every word of it." He thumped the air. "Who made this war? Not us: we wasn't consulted. No: it was the nobs done it. Are we going to let 'em force us into it?" (Shouts of "No!") "We won't be druv. It's all very well for the officers: they get a comfortable billet and good pay. Tommy gets the kicks and Percy gets the ha'pence." ("Go it, Ginger!") "Now, Mr. Harry, you've come 6000 miles—what for, sir? an officer's job, I take my oath."

"That's true," said Randall. "I've applied. But—"

"Hold on, sir. There you are! Just what I thought. Well, I ain't got no personal objection to having a smack at the Germans; never seen a German yet but what I'd give him one on the boko, and if Lord Kitchener'd make me a lieutenant or a capt in the Coldstream Guards, with a sword and eppylets and ten bob a day—well, I don't say I wouldn't consider it." ("Bravo, Ginger!") "But as it is, to be a private on one bob a day, and dock threepence or more, they tell me, for the missus and kids—I'm not having any."

When the cheers that hailed his assertion had fallen away, Kenneth said quietly:

"You forget that thousands of men have thrown up good jobs and sacrificed big incomes to join the ranks."

"Not in these parts, governor. Down here they give their subscriptions to this, that, and the other, and reduce their men's wages, if they don't sack 'em. And if it comes to that, what have *you* done?"

A breathless silence settled upon the crowd. All eyes were fixed on the young governor's friend, awaiting his reply to this poser. Kenneth had an inspiration.

"It doesn't matter what I've done," he said, quietly, but in a tone that carried his words to the corners of the yard. "But I'll tell you what I'll do, and if I know my friend Mr. Randall, he'll do the same. If you men will enlist, we'll enlist with you, and share and share alike."

The man was taken aback. He looked from Kenneth to Randall: his mates watched him curiously. "One for you, Ginger!" cried the irrepressible boy.

"D'you mean that, sir?" asked the man.

"Certainly," said Kenneth.

"It's a firm offer, Ginger," added Randall.

"Privates—no kid?"

"A bob a day," said Kenneth.

For a half-minute or so Ginger had the air of one who is caught out. He

looked round among his mates, grinning awkwardly, avoiding their eyes. They were silent, watching him. All at once he burst into a guffaw, wiped his mouth, and with frank good-humour cried:

"Well, hanged if you ain't good sports. Come on, mates. Who's for Kitchener's army and a smack at the Germans? I'm number one."

The crowd was captured by the sporting spirit. Striking while the iron was hot, Randall and Kenneth headed a procession to the recruiting office. Mr. Randall, called to his window by the tramp of many feet and the strains of "It's a long long way to Tipperary," was amazed to see hundreds of his young workmen marching with linked arms behind the two young fellows. He rang for Griggs.

"What does this mean, Griggs?" he asked.

"Gone to enlist, sir. We shall be very short-handed."

CHAPTER III

STONEWAY ENLISTS

Mr. Randall pulled a wry face when he heard of Kenneth's impulsive action. At the dinner-table he spoke his mind.

"This won't do, you know. You are both certain to obtain commissions. I don't object to your serving as Tommies for a week or two, for the sake of example, you know; but I'm not going to allow you to let yourself down permanently, Harry. Your friend, of course, can do as he pleases."

"I've promised, Father," said Harry.

"Promised what, may I ask?"

"To share and share alike with the men."

"Fiddlesticks! It won't do. Good gracious, what are we coming to? The whole social order will be destroyed. You'll succeed me at the head of this business, when you've settled down and are a trifle less scatter-brained than you are now. How in the world do you expect to maintain the proper relation between employer and employed if you put yourself on a level with the hands? Look at it logically. Take it that I myself had been idiot enough to do as you've done, and put myself in the position to be ordered about by some factory hand who happened to be a sergeant, or some young whipper-snapper fresh from school who happened to have got a commission: what would become of my authority, I should like to know? How could I maintain control over my workmen? Do look

at it reasonably. It's preposterous."

The idea of portly Mr. Randall as a Tommy was almost too much for the boys' gravity. But Harry answered meekly:

"Well, we've enlisted over a hundred men, and there'll be more to-morrow. That's what you wanted, Dad, isn't it? You won't have to close down now."

"But I didn't want my son to consort with a lot of roughs—socialists, too, to a man, by gad! You can't associate with such fellows without getting coarsened, and besides, as I said before, it's the principle of the thing—the principle of social order, caste, call it what you like. Destroy caste, and you ruin old England. Come now, I'll see the colonel, and he'll arrange to get you gazetted to the regiment. You'll then be in a natural position of authority over my men, and I'll be proud to think that my works has furnished a contingent to the New Army, with my own son as one of the officers."

"You ought to have lived in the middle ages, Dad," said Harry, admiringly. "What a jolly old feudal chief you'd have been! But it can't be done. Amory and I have thrown in our lot with the men, and we'll stick it: we can't go back on our word."

"I'll see that you have proper under-clothing, my dear," said Mrs. Randall. "I'm told that some of the poor men have only one shirt."

"Shirts!" cried Mr. Randall. "Oh, I'm out of all patience with you. Do as you please, do as you please. I wash my hands of it. Don't expect any sympathy from me if you are disgusted, horrified, in a week."

As Harry had said, more than a hundred of the men had already given in their names. Next day a still larger number volunteered, and when the medical tests had been applied, it was found that the recruits from the Randall works were enough to form a company. This accordingly was scheduled as No. 3 Company in the 17th Service Battalion of a regiment which, for reasons which will appear in the course of this narrative, we shall know as the Rutland Light Infantry.

Colonel Appleton, the officer commanding, sent for Harry and Kenneth in the course of the day.

"Look here, young fellows," he said, "you're both O.T.C. men, aren't you?" They confessed that they were.

"Well, I'm short of officers. They've sent me several boys without any experience at all, who'll want a thundering lot of licking into shape. I'll put you both down, glad to have somebody who knows something about company drill."

"Thank you, sir," said Harry, "but we only got the men to enlist by promising to go in with them."

"That's all very well, but nobody can object to promotion. The men will think it the most natural thing in the world for you to officer them."

The boys, however, persisted in their refusal.

"Nonsense," said the colonel. "I'll give you twenty-four hours' leave to think it over. There'll be nothing doing for a day or two. It's chaos at present: no uniforms, no boots, no earthly thing. Come and see me this time to-morrow, and tell me you've changed your mind."

As they left, they saw Ginger and two or three other men on the opposite side of the street, evidently on the watch for them. Ginger took his hands out of his pockets, wiped his mouth, and came across the road.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said to Harry, "but we only want to know where we are. The question is, have we got to salute you, or ain't we?"

"Of course not. That's a silly question. We're all Tommies together."

"There you are, now, what did I say?" Ginger called to his mates. "Unbelieving Jews they are," he added, addressing Harry. "Said it was all kid, and you'd come out majors or lootenants or something. I knowed better."

"Make your minds easy on that score, Ginger. We've given our word."

"That's a bob lost to Stoneway."

"By the way, Stoneway hasn't enlisted, of course."

"Not him! He bet you'd get yourselves turned into officers as soon as you'd raked us in. That's a day's pay extra for me."

"That fellow Stoneway is a bit of a riddle," said Kenneth as they passed on. "Judging by his speech the other day, he's better educated than most—a Scot perhaps; there's a sort of burr in his accent."

"I daresay," replied his friend. "A fellow who likes the sound of his own voice, I fancy. Cantankerous: always agin the Government; you know the sort."

"Well, old chap, as we've got twenty-four hours' leave I'll run up to town and explain things to the mater, make a few business arrangements and so on. I'll be back to lunch to-morrow."

"All right. I suppose they'll put us in billets for the present, so I'll arrange to have you billeted on the governor. He'll get seven bob a day for the two of us; rather a rag, eh?"

Kenneth was early at the station on his return journey next morning. The platform was crowded, a good sprinkling of men in khaki mingling with the civilian passengers always to be seen before the departure of a north-going express.

Standing at the bookstall, deliberating on a choice of something to read, Kenneth heard behind him the accents of a voice which he had heard so recently as to recognise it at once, though the few words he caught were French. He glanced over his shoulder and was not surprised to see Stoneway, the orator of Mr. Randall's yard. The man was walking up the platform beside a companion somewhat older than himself, upon whose arm he rested his hand as he spoke earnestly to him.

"A French Socialist, I suppose," thought Kenneth. "One of the anti-war

people. Well, war is horrible, and I don't know I wouldn't agree with them if they had the power to put a stop to it altogether. But they haven't, and that French fellow had better realise that we've got to lick the Germans first. I was evidently right about Stoneway: he's better educated than most working men."

He bought a magazine, and thought no more of the matter, seeing nothing further of the two men. As he stepped into a first-class compartment he smiled at the thought that it was probably the last time for many a long day. Henceforth he was to be a "Tommy."

Harry met him at the station.

"Billets no go, old chap," was his greeting. "We're quartered in an old factory—beastly hole. But I've told the colonel we're going to stick it. Come along. They're going to serve out uniforms this afternoon; no fitting required! You'll be rather difficult: average chest but extra long arms. I suppose we might buy our own, but we'd better make shift with the rest. And I say, who do you think we've got for one of our officers?"

"Who?"

"You remember that squirt, Dick Kennedy?"

"You don't say so!"

"That's just what I do say. I was loafing about the barracks when he came up to me, fresh as paint in his new uniform. 'What O, Randall!' says he. 'You here, too? Ordered your kit, I suppose?' 'I believe it's on order,' said I, and I saluted, just for the fun of the thing. 'Oh, I say, we don't do that to each other,' says he; 'we don't salute anyone under a major, do we?' 'I don't want a dose of clink—already,' said I. 'What on earth do you mean?' says he. Then I told him, and you should have seen his face! He wouldn't believe me at first, and went as red as a turkey-cock when I said I wouldn't mind earning half-a-crown extra a week as his servant."

"I always thought him a bit of an ass at school," said Kenneth, "but a genial ass, you know. He wasn't in the O.T.C., and I expect we shall have some sport with him."

They went on to the large disused factory which had been turned into barracks for the occasion. The quartermaster was superintending the allocation of uniforms, and they were in due course fitted more or less with khaki and boots. As yet there were no belts, bandoliers or rifles.

The basement of the factory consisted of two large halls with bare brick walls and concrete floors. One of them, to be used as a drill hall, was empty. The other was fitted up with wooden frames to serve as sleeping bunks. At one end was a platform on which stood a piano, and one of the recruits was laboriously thumping out a rag-time. Another was playing a different tune on a penny whistle. At one corner four men were absorbed in halfpenny nap; elsewhere groups

were amusing themselves in various ways.

Kenneth and his friend joined one of these. There was a little stiffness at first. The workmen, ranging in years from nineteen to thirty-five or so, were a little shy and subdued in the company of the "young governor." But the ice was broken when Ginger came up, his square mouth broadened in a grin. He was about to touch his cap to Harry, but altered his mind when he remembered the situation, and wiped his lips instead.

"Bet you don't never guess," he said.

"What's up, Ginger?" asked his mates in chorus.

"Why, Stoneway—he's been and gone and done it."

"What's he been and gone and done? Not done himself?"

"Course not! Think he's broke his heart 'cause of losing us, then? No fear! He's 'listed, that's what he's done."

"Garn!"

"True as I'm standing here. He's 'listed right enough. He's got a chest on him too; forty inches, doctor said. He's been and got shaved; he'll be along here presently. His beard, that is. We can let our moustaches grow now, if we like." He rubbed his upper lip. "Hair-brush, that's what it is. Bet a penny it's as good as Stoneway's under six weeks."

"But what's he 'listed for, after all his jaw?" asked one of the men.

"Converted, that's what he is," Ginger replied. "Seen the error of his ways, or else he's so sweet on me he couldn't bear the parting. 'You made me love you, I didn't want to do it,'" he hummed. "This here khaki looks all right, mates, don't it? Matches my hair. Here, old cockalorum," he shouted to the man at the piano, "we've had enough of that there funeral march. Play more cheerful, or we'll all be swimming in our tears."

Ginger's high spirits were infectious, and the group of which Kenneth and Harry formed a part chatted and laughed away the afternoon.

Just before ten o'clock they were arranging their simple beds on the frames when a chorus of yells, cat-calls, whistles, and other discordant noises caused them to look around the hall. Stoneway had just made his appearance. It was a different Stoneway. The brown beard was gone, the long and flourishing moustache had been clipped to bristly stiffness, revealing heavy lips and a full round chin. The man bore his uproarious greeting with a defiant glare, and only looked annoyed when Ginger shouted:

"Smart, ain't he? Doesn't look so much like a blinky German, does he?"

The bugle sounded the Last Post, the electric light was switched off, and the five hundred men of the 17th Rutland Light Infantry clambered into their bunks

and sought repose.

CHAPTER IV

THREE ROUNDS

At six o'clock next morning sergeant-majors and corporals went round the hall stirring up the sleepers. There were groans and grumbles, but the men turned out, and there was a general dash for the washing basins—one among twenty men—and a free fight for the razors. Our two friends had brought their own safeties and pocket mirrors, and when they had finished operating upon their downy cheeks there was a competition among their new messmates for the loan of those indispensable articles.

"Your bristles will ruin a blade in no time, Ginger," said Harry, as he handed over the razor, somewhat ruefully.

"Perseverance, that's all you want," replied Ginger, through the lather. "Yours 'll be as hard as mine in time."

At half-past six each man seized a mug and rushed off to the cook-house across the yard for cocoa. They sat about the hall, swilling the morning beverage, grumbling at the blankets, asking one another who'd be a soldier; then they rubbed up their boots and made their beds, and were ready for the seven o'clock parade.

Dressed only in their shirts and slacks they formed up in the drill-hall. There was a good deal of disorder, and the N.C.O.'s, in early-morning temper, roared above the din. It happened that Dick Kennedy was orderly officer for the week. When the men were at last ranged in ranks, dressed, and numbered by the sergeants, he posted himself in front and, with a nervous twitching of the lips, said gently—

"Battalion, 'shun!"

"Louder, louder!" whispered a fellow-officer who had come up behind him. "This isn't a mothers' meeting."

The second lieutenant tried again.

"Battalion, 'shun! Advance in fours from the right. Form fours!"

Some of the men knew what to do, but many of the new recruits looked about them blankly.

"You don't know the movements?" said the lieutenant. "Well, when I say

'form fours,' even numbers take one pace to the left with the left foot and one pace to the right with the right. Now, form fours!"

The result was disorder—jostling in the ranks, cries of "Who're you a-shoving of!"

"Sorry! My mistake!" said Kennedy, with a smile. "We'll try again. I should have said, 'one pace to the rear with the left foot.' Now then, form fours!"

His cheerfulness won the men's sympathy, and the order being now correctly carried out, one or two of them cheered.

"Silence in the ranks!" roared Kennedy. "Right! Quick march!" and the battalion marched off.

The day's work began with a run for three-quarters of an hour, to the bank of a river some two miles away. A "run" so called, for it consisted of slow and quick march and doubling in turn. At eight o'clock they were back in the hall for breakfast: tea, bread and bacon, sausage or cheese. The provisions were good, the men had healthy appetites, and at 9.15, when the battalion orders of the day were read, they were contented and cheerful.

Marching out to the parade ground, a field in the neighbourhood, they spent an hour in physical drill under experienced N.C.O. instructors, and then a couple of hours in company drill. Dismissed at 12.15, they met again for dinner at 1, a plentiful meal of meat pie and vegetables. Then came a route march and extended order drill, tea at 4.30, with jam and tinned fruits, and at 5.30 company lectures.

"It'll be rummy to hear Kennedy lecture," said Harry, sitting beside Kenneth on the form. "I wonder what he'll spout about."

"Poor chap!" said Kenneth. "I'm beginning to think the Tommies haven't the worst of it. Keep a straight face whatever he says."

Somewhat to his surprise, when Kennedy appeared the men were at once silent. The habit of discipline was strong in those who had already served in the Regulars or the Territorials; the recruits were interested in the novel circumstances, and subdued by the indefinable influence of constituted authority.

"Now, men," began Kennedy, unfolding his notes and studiously avoiding the eyes of his old school-fellows, "I'm going to say a few words to you on Feet."

"My poor tootsies!" murmured one of the men.

"We have all got feet," Kennedy went on, "but do we all know how to use them?"

"Give us a ball and we'll show you, sir," cried a voice.

"Well, I hope we'll have some footer by and by, but that's not the present question. We have just done a ten-mile walk. Two or three of you fell out, two or three were limping before we got back. Why was that?"

"Cos we ain't used to it, sir," said one of the unlucky ones.

"Ate too much pie and 'taters, sir," cried another.

"Got a corn inside o' my toe," said a third.

"Well, we'll leave out greediness for the present: that's a moral defect which perhaps one of the senior officers will deal with. We'll confine our attention to the proper care of the feet."

And he went on to give some simple and practical advice as to bathing, greasing, methods of hardening, until six o'clock struck, and the men were dismissed until first post at 9.30.

"Call that a lecture!" scoffed Stoneway, when the officer had gone. "Does he take us for an infant school? Giving us pap like that!"

"You shut your face!" said Ginger. "The young feller spoke downright good common sense, much better 'n you'd expect from a chap as went to one of them there public schools. He said a thing or two I didn't know, nor you either, Stoneway. 'Course he didn't go to the root of it; dursn't cry stinking fish. What's the root? Why, boots. These 'ere things they've gi'en us, they're no good. They're made to raise blisters, they are, and they'll just mash when we get the rain."

"They're only temporary, I believe," said Kenneth, "till the factories can turn out army boots in sufficient quantities."

"That's the English Government all over," said Stoneway, with a sneer. "Nothing ready: no boots, no rifles—"

"Oh, stow it!" cried Ginger. "What did you 'list for if you're going to grouse all the time? The worst of it is, you can't resign: we shall have to put up with you, I s'pose, unless you mutiny, or strike your superior officer, or do something else to get dismissed the army. Come on, boys; let's go and see the pictures. We'll be back in time to draw some soup from the cook-house, 8.30 to 9."

That is a fair sample of the day's work during the next two or three months. It was monotonous, but, during the dry autumn, healthy. When the rainy weather set in, hardship began to be felt. The men often got drenched to the skin; their temporary boots, as Ginger had foretold, became pulp. The factory was bleak and draughty, in spite of its gas stoves. There was a certain amount of sickness, and an increase in the number of offenders to be dealt with every morning by the colonel. But the men were well fed, and cheered by presents of tobacco and cigarettes from kindly townfolk; and many wet, dull evenings were enlivened by concerts and entertainments got up by friends of the officers.

Kenneth and Harry steadfastly declined offers of promotion as N.C.O.'s, but owing to their knowledge of drill they were made right and left guides of their platoon. They bought a football, and got up inter-company matches in which No. 3 Company distinguished itself. Indeed, both in work and play No. 3 Company became the crack company of the battalion. The captain, an old army man who

had been retired some years and was some little time picking up the details of the new drill, was a good sportsman and a hard worker, and by the end of January the company was thoroughly efficient and knit together by that esprit de corps which is the soul of fighting men.

Then came vaccination and inoculation. Stoneway was the ringleader of a little group that declined the doctor's attentions, to the disgust of Ginger and the majority.

"You're a traitor, that's what you are," said Ginger to Stoneway when the latter flatly declined to be poisoned, as he put it. "You'll go and catch some rotten disease or other and give it to us."

"This is a free country," retorted Stoneway. "And as to you, you're a turn-coat. Weren't you always spouting against the war? Didn't I back you up? Who caved in as meek as a lamb?"

"Well, you followed along with the other sheep, didn't you? What you joined for goodness only knows. You're always grousing about something or other. Bacon's too fat, then it's too lean; cheese is dry, then it's damp; you pick out little bits of lead out of the pear gravy, and spread 'em round your plate and put on a face like a holy martyr. You sit at lecture with a snigger on your ugly mug; the pianner's out of tune; nobody can sing for nuts; *you* take jolly good care you don't do nothing to amuse the company. Nothing's right; you always know better 'n anyone else; lummy, I believe you think you ought to be capting, if not commander-in-chief. What did you join for, that's what I want to know. I tell you straight, we've had enough of your grousing. Why don't you take your grumbles to the officers? 'Any complaints?' says they when they come round inspecting; why don't you speak up like a man? No fear; you ain't got a word to say. All you can do is to growl when they ain't by, and try to make yourself big before all the dirty swipes of the regiment. Why, look at the other night, when they gave the alarm, and we was all confined to barracks: what did you do then? When all those nice young ladies came with their fiddles and things and sang and played to us proper, gave us fags all round, too, you must get up in a corner with your dirty lot and make such a deuce of a row we couldn't hear a word of 'Dolly Grey'—my favourite song, too! If I'd been colonel I'd have given you a good dose of clink straight away, and so now you know it."

Ginger had fairly let himself go, and the applause that followed his speech showed that he voiced the opinion of the majority. Stoneway made no reply, but gradually edged away.

This was the culmination of an estrangement which had been developing between the two men ever since the company was formed. Whatever had brought them together previously, their enlistment had sundered them completely. Ginger, whose backing Stoneway had been wont to count on in any

attack on authority, was now the most orderly as well as the cheeriest man in the company. He passed off with a jest every hardship of that trying winter. "Think of those poor chaps in the trenches," he would say, if someone complained of the cold or a wetting. Stoneway clearly resented his change of spirit, though it was a puzzle to the better disposed among the men why he could have expected a display of insubordination from these enthusiastic recruits in the New Army.

It must be admitted that Ginger took no pains to conciliate his old companion. He did not launch out again into invective, but assumed the still more irritating airs of a humorous observer. From time to time he let fall a jesting word that had a sting, and took a delight in chaffing Stoneway in the presence of other men. And since Stoneway himself turned out to be no match for Ginger in these little bouts of wordy war, and Ginger always managed to keep his temper, Stoneway became more and more furious, and fell to meditating reprisals.

One Saturday afternoon, after a more than usually smart exchange of banter on the one hand and abuse on the other, Ginger was sent by the quartermaster to a farm some two miles away to fetch the balance of a quantity of butter which had not been completely delivered.

"Just my luck!" said Ginger, in the hearing of a group that included Kenneth and Harry. "It won't break my back, but I'd rather carry it two yards than two miles. However!"

"I'm off duty presently," said Kenneth, "and I'll come part of the way to meet you and lend you a hand."

"You're a white man," said Ginger. "Well, so long."

Some little while afterwards Kenneth and Harry started together by a foot-path across fields to the farmhouse. They had not gone far when they caught sight of a figure in khaki about half a mile ahead, going in the same direction as themselves. It was soon lost to sight behind a hedge.

The path led over a hill that descended steeply on the farther side. On reaching the top they saw two men in khaki at the foot of the slope below them. One of them was Ginger, who had dropped his wicker basket on the grass and stood with arms akimbo facing the other man, now recognisable by his burly frame as Stoneway. Ginger, slim and wiry, looked insignificant by comparison.

Just as Kenneth and Harry caught sight of the men, Stoneway lifted his fist and with a sudden swift blow that took Ginger unawares sent him head over heels. Ginger was up in an instant, and after skipping about on his short legs for a few moments, made a rush at his opponent. Stoneway staggered, but recovered himself immediately, clinched, and profiting by his superior height and weight threw Ginger heavily, and not being able to disengage himself, fell with him. The two men heaved and twisted in a fierce struggle on the ground. Then Stoneway dragged himself away, rose, and Kenneth, now running down the hill, saw him

deliberately kick the prostrate body of his apparently senseless comrade.

"You cad!" shouted Kenneth, with Harry hard on his heels; "what do you mean by that foul play?"

Stoneway, too much preoccupied to be aware of the approach of observers, growled something under his breath, and was making off sullenly.

"No you don't!" cried Kenneth, seizing him. "Just have a look at Ginger," he added to Harry.

Ginger, pale and shaken, sat up and smiled feebly.

"Time?" he said. "I'll have another round."

"Not a bit of it," said Harry. "He kicked you on the ground. Didn't you know? It was foul play. What was it all about?"

"I didn't kick him," muttered Stoneway.

"That's a lie. I saw you do it," said Kenneth. "What's the row, Ginger?"

"Well, what you may call a bit of a shindy," Ginger replied. "Just between ourselves, like. I'm ready for another go."

"No. Come, out with it, man."

"Well, I was traipsing along with that there basket on my head when up he comes and starts rounding on me for chipping him. 'I'm not having any truck with grousers,' says I. Then we had a few words, and he got me one afore I was ready, that I own. But I can't hardly believe he kicked me when I was down, and a bit dazed like."

"He did. You take a rest and recover: we'll settle with him."

"What are you talking about?" Stoneway blustered.

"Giving you a hiding. Off with your coat," said Kenneth. "You'll see fair play, Harry."

"I say, this is my job," said Harry. "You've been on the sick list."

"I'm all right."

"No, really."

"Well, don't let's waste time. I'll toss you for it."

And while Stoneway looked on in amazement, Kenneth spun a coin, won, stripped off his tunic and rolled up his shirt sleeves.

"Two to one against the big 'un," cried Ginger, with a grin of delight.

Seeing there was no help for it, Stoneway slowly took off his tunic.

"And mind you fight fair," Harry warned him, "or I promise you I'll take a hand myself."

The two men faced each other. They presented a striking contrast. Stoneway was slightly the taller and much the heavier; his big chest bulged under his shirt, and his biceps were thick. But Harry, scanning him keenly, noting his fleshiness, decided that his muscles were rather flabby than hard; and observing Kenneth's slighter but well-knit frame, and remembering his promise as a boxer

at school, felt pretty confident of the result.

After the first few exchanges he was more doubtful. Stoneway had a longer reach, and was clearly accustomed to the use of his fists. At the start he forced the fighting, trying to get a knock-out blow, and Kenneth needed all his skill to meet his bull-like rushes and sledge-hammer strokes. He managed to land one punishing body-blow that would have shaken up a smaller man, but Stoneway recovered himself quickly, and the first round ended with little damage on either side except that Stoneway found himself somewhat winded.

The combatants had now taken each other's measure. In the second round Kenneth in his turn adopted forcing tactics, bewildering his opponent by the whirlwind rapidity of his attack and his elusiveness in defence. Stoneway began to realise that he had met more than his match. He breathed heavily; his fat cheeks took on a yellowish tinge; and the end of the round found him with a bigger nose and a bump over his right eye, and greatly distressed in wind.

"Next round finishes him," whispered Harry, as he wiped Kenneth's face.

The third round was in fact conclusive. Stoneway made a desperate rush, stopped by a neat upper cut, and before he could recover he was hurled to the ground by a blow above the heart that might have finished a professional pugilist.

"Now you'll apologise to Ginger," said Kenneth, as Stoneway slowly picked himself up.

But Stoneway scowled out of his damaged brows, put on his tunic in silence, and walked away without uttering a word.

It was much to Ginger's credit that not a man in the battalion ever discovered how Stoneway had come by his bruises. There was an end alike to his grumbling and to Ginger's rough banter. But there was an end, too, to all show of friendliness between them. They never spoke to each other, and Stoneway was always careful to keep out of Kenneth's way.

CHAPTER V

THE BACK OF THE FRONT

The slow wet winter dragged itself out. The training went on, fair weather or foul. The 17th Rutland Light Infantry got their service boots in due time, but other details of their equipment were slow to arrive. Presently they received enough rifles and entrenching tools for half the battalion, and the ordinary drill

and physical exercises, which Kennedy had privately confided to Amory "bored him stiff," was varied with musketry practice and digging trenches. There were long marches, semaphore practice, sham fights, night operations; day by day the men gained new knowledge of their trade. More rifles came, this time with bayonets; bayonet exercise and practice in attack gave further variety to their work. At last, towards the end of February, the whole battalion was fully equipped, and the men grew excited at the prospect of going to the front.

It was a great moment when the colonel gave them a few hours' notice of entrainment. Lusty cheers broke from a thousand throats; the longed-for day had come at last. Crowds of townsfolk assembled at the station to see them off, but they were quiet, serious crowds, the women's faces tense with anxiety, the children unwontedly subdued. It was no picnic for which these sturdy Englishmen were setting out. Everybody was now aware of the greatness of the struggle, the bravery and tenacity of the enemy, the scientific skill and terrible thoroughness with which the Germans had prepared through many years for this attempt to seize the mastery of the world. Hearts were full as the men stepped blithely into the long train; how many of them would return, and of these, how many would be sound and strong?

Their immediate destination was known to none except the commanding officer. When, after a tiring journey, with much shunting and side-tracking, the men were finally detrained at a small station in the south of England, with no sign of sea or transports, there was a general feeling of surprise and disappointment. They were marched to a wide barren plain, peppered with tents and huts, and here, it became known by and by, they were to spend a month or more in further training.

Even Ginger for once became a grouser.

"I've had about enough of this," he growled. "What's the good of it all?"

"Discipline, Ginger," said Kenneth.

"Discipline! That's obedience, ain't it? Well, I ask you, don't we do as we're told like a lot of school kids? I'm sure I'm as meek as Moses. Never thought I could be so tame. I've quite lost my character, and if ever I get back to the works I'll have to go a regular buster, or else I'll be one of the downtrodden slaves of the capitalist."

"I don't think so badly of you," said Kenneth, with a smile. "But discipline is more than obedience. Between you and me, I think this extra training is as much for the officers' sake as ours. The British officer leads, you see. He knows we'll obey orders; he has to make sure that he gives the right orders. If he didn't there'd be an unholy mess: we should lose confidence in him, and the game would be up. We've got to work together like a football team, every man trusting every other; and that's what all this drilling and training is for."

"I daresay you're in the right," said Ginger. "I wasn't thinking of them young officers! They're a good lot, though, ain't they? I don't know what it is, but there's something about 'em—why, Mr. Kennedy now, he's ten years younger than me, and yet somehow or other he manages me like as if I was a baby. And no bounce about it either; I wouldn't stand bounce from any man, officer or not. But he don't bounce; he speaks as quiet as a district visitor; but somehow—well, you feel you've just *got* to do what he says, and you'd be a skunk if you didn't. I don't understand it, I tell you straight."

Kenneth did not speak the thought that arose in his mind, but he warmed to this testimonial from the British working-man to the British public-school boy.

There came a day, about the middle of March, when the battalion was once more entrained. This time the men took it more quietly: the first disappointment forbade them to set their hopes too high. It was dark when the train reached its destination; the lights on the platform were dim; but one of the men shouted, "A ship, boys!" as he got out of his compartment, and a thrill of excitement ran through the crowd.

They were in fact at the dock station at Southampton, and a big transport vessel lay alongside. Many of the men had never been on the sea before. Ginger looked a little careworn, and confessed to Kenneth that he felt certain he was going to be sick. The night was nearly gone when all the men were aboard. Some lay down in their overcoats; others remained on deck, irked by the impossibility of satisfying their curiosity about the vessel.

At daybreak the ship cast off and steamed slowly through the fairway of Southampton Water towards the open sea. It was a bright calm morning, and the men watched with fascinated eyes the ripples glistening in the sunlight, the various shipping, the shores receding behind them. And presently, when they had rounded the north-east corner of the Isle of Wight, and the course was headed southward across the Channel, they burst into cheers when they caught sight of the low lean shapes of destroyers on either side of them.

"What price submarines to-day!" cried one of the men.

"Ain't got an earthly," remarked another.

"Don't believe there are none," said a third. "Our men in blue have sunk 'em all long ago."

"How are you getting on, Ginger?" asked Kenneth.

Ginger was half lying on his back, gripping a stanchion, and looking straight ahead with nervous anticipation.

"Is it much farther?" he asked.

"Nothing to speak of. The Channel's as calm as a millpond."

"It may be, but the ship ain't. She's very lively. All of a shake, she is. Takes a lurch for'ard, then backs a bit, seemingly, then another lurch. It ain't what I'm

used to. It worries the inside of me. I want to say 'Whoa, steady!' like I do to the donkeys at fair time. And it gives me the needle to see that there Stoneway sticking hisself out as if he was driving the bally ship. It don't seem fair, a big chap like him taking it so easy when he's got twice as much as me to lose."

"Well, you won't lose much if you keep still," said Harry, laughing at the man's woe-begone face. "It's quite certain you couldn't have a calmer crossing."

Ginger's alarms were needless. When the cliffs of France hove in sight he got up and leant over the rail, eagerly watching the advancing coast-line.

"That's France, is it?" he remarked. "I don't see much difference. I can't understand why the folks over there don't speak English, when they live so close. I reckon we'll learn 'em afore we get back."

The red and blue roofs of Boulogne became distinct. Presently the vessel rounded the breakwater and manoeuvred herself alongside the quay. There was scarcely anything to show that the men had actually arrived in France. Khaki predominated on the quay; an English voice hailed the skipper through a megaphone; a blue-grey motor omnibus with the windows boarded up and the words "Kaiser's coffin" chalked on the sides stood on the road.

No time was lost in disembarkation. The men were marched across the railway lines to a train in waiting. Ginger, with Kenneth, Harry, and half a dozen more, got into a compartment labelled "Défense de fumer," and started lighting up at once.

"We'll defend it all right," said Ginger, "but the rest is spelt wrong."

"It means you mustn't smoke," said Kenneth.

"Well, that's a good 'un! What do they take us for? Any gentleman object?"

"No!" yelled in chorus.

"I didn't half think so."

The train rumbled away eastward, and the men scanned the bare country from the windows, remarking on its dreary character, scarcely relieved by the pollard willows that raised their naked boughs against the grey sky. By and by they got out at a small station, and marched along a straight road between rows of trees to a country village. They kept to the right side; the other was busy with empty supply wagons, lorries of familiar appearance, now and then a mud-caked motor car.

Some officers had gone on ahead to arrange billets. Arriving at the village, the majority of the men were accommodated in the barn and outbuildings of a large farm, a few in separate cottages. Kenneth, with Harry and Ginger and other men of their platoon found themselves allotted to a labourer's cottage, where shake-downs of clean straw had been laid on the floors of a couple of rooms. A road divided their billet from the garden of a good-sized house, in which quarters had been found for two or three of the officers.

Apart from the traffic on the road there was as yet no sign of war. No sound of guns broke the stillness of the spring afternoon. But it had become known that the firing line was only a few miles ahead, and the men were all agog with expectation of an early call to the trenches.

It soon appeared, however, that they were not yet to enter upon the real work of war. Rumour had it that Sir John French was waiting for further reinforcements before pursuing the forward movement recently started at Neuve Chapelle. Day after day passed in exercising, marching, practising operations in the field. Word came of other regiments pouring across the Channel and occupying other villages and towns behind the firing line. All day long they heard the distant bark of guns, and saw too frequently the swift passage of motor ambulances conveying their sad burdens to the coast. When off duty they strolled about the village, making friends of the hospitable villagers, romping with the children, playing football, cheerful, light-hearted, scarcely alive to the actualities of the desperate work in which they were so eager to engage.

One day a trifling incident occupied Kenneth's attention for a moment. He happened to have gone into a little shop to buy cakes for the children of the good people upon whom he was billeted. Several of the men were there making purchases, and one of them was vainly trying to explain his wants to the shopkeeper. Stoneway was standing by. Kenneth translated for his baffled comrade; then, suddenly remembering what he had overheard on the platform at St. Pancras station, he said to him:

"Why didn't you ask Stoneway to help you? He speaks French."

Stoneway looked astonished and startled, but said at once:

"Me! I know a word or two, but you can't call it speaking French. I couldn't do it."

Kenneth said no more, though his recollection of the energetic conversation at the station was very clear, and he wondered why the man had denied his accomplishment.

There was only one opinion of the kindness and hospitality of the villagers, and the men were particularly enthusiastic about the owner of the house across the road. Far from limiting himself to the sumptuous entertainment of the officers billeted on him, he went out of his way to lavish attentions on the soldiers, making them presents of cigarettes, and treating them to the wine of the country. The village had not suffered from the ravages of war, though the Germans had occupied it for a few days during their rush towards Calais; but it harboured many refugees from towns and villages farther eastward, and these were supported by the benevolent owner of the large house, who maintained a sort of soup kitchen where the homeless people could obtain free rations.

One evening, when Kenneth and his comrades were at supper in their host's

capacious kitchen, the talk turned on Monsieur Obernai, "the mounseer over the way," as Ginger called him, "one of the best." Jean Bonnard, the cottager, and his wife took their meals with their guests, and chatted freely to Kenneth and Harry, the only men who knew enough French to understand them. Kenneth repeated in French what Ginger had said.

"Ah yes, monsieur," said Bonnard. "Monsieur Obernai is a good man. You see, he is from Alsace, and has reason to hate the Germans."

"All the same, I don't like him," said his wife, pressing her lips together.

"That is a point on which we don't agree," said Bonnard, with a smile. "Just like a woman! She doesn't like him, but she can't say why."

"You hear him!" said madame. "Just like a woman! As if a woman was not always right!"

"But you have a reason, madame?" said Harry.

"Bah! I leave reasons to men; I have my feelings."

Bonnard shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, mon amie," he said, "I can put my reasons into words, see you. Monsieur Obernai came here from Alsace five or six years ago. He could not stand the Germans, so he sold his property and came and settled here, and he has been a good friend to the village, that you cannot deny. A very quiet man, too; he lives all alone with an old housekeeper and a couple of servants, and makes himself very pleasant. When our two boys went off to the war, didn't he give them warm vests and stuff their haversacks with cigarettes?"

"Yes, he was good to our poor boys," admitted the good woman grudgingly, "but I don't like him all the same. I don't like his voice; it makes me shrivel."

"A man speaks with the voice God gave him," said her husband. "As for me, I look at what a man does, and don't trouble myself about his voice. And after all, it is not a bad voice."

"Smooth as butter," rejoined the woman. "But there, we shall never agree, mon ami. Get on with your soup."

After supper, some of the men settled down to write home. The postal regulations annoyed Ginger.

"I'm a poor hand at writing," he said, "and I don't see why I shouldn't send my love to my wife and kids on one of these here postcards. It ain't enough for a letter; yet if I put it on the postcard they'd destroy it, they say. What for, I'd like to know?"

"It does seem hard lines," said Kenneth, "but I suppose it's to ease the censors' work. They've an enormous number of cards to look over, and they'd never get done if they had to read a lot of stuff."

"Love' 's a little word; that wouldn't hurt 'em. Still, rules is rules, no doubt."

He proceeded to cross out several sentences on the official postcard pro-

vided, leaving only "I am quite well" and adding his signature and the date.

Presently the post corporal came to collect the letters and cards.

"Captain wants you, Murgatroyd," he said.

"Going to give you your stripe at last, Ginger," said Harry.

"I shouldn't wonder," said Ginger, grinning as he went out.

When he returned, twenty minutes later, the expression on his face checked the congratulations that rose to his comrades' lips. His features were grimly set, and he went to his place by the fire without uttering a word.

"No luck, Ginger?" said one of the men indiscreetly.

"Shut up!" growled Ginger, lighting his pipe.

Nothing would induce him to explain why he had been sent for, or the reason of his annoyance. He was one of the best-behaved men in the company, and it seemed unlikely that he had got into trouble without the knowledge of the others. Wisely, they did not press him with questions, expecting that he would tell them all in good time.

Ginger's interview with Captain Adams had been a surprising one.

"You know the post regulations, Murgatroyd?" said the captain.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, look at this postcard. Is that your signature?"

"D. Murgatroyd; that's me, sir," said Ginger, after a glance at the pencilled name.

"What do you mean by writing the name of the place in invisible ink?"

"Never did such a thing, sir. Don't know anything about invisible ink."

"Well, how do you explain it, then? This card had the name written in invisible ink. It was discovered by the Post Office in London, and they've returned it for inquiries. What have you to say?"

"What I said before, sir: I didn't do it."

"You write to Henry Smith, 563 Pentonville Road?"

"Never heard of him, sir."

"What's the game, then? Go and fetch the post corporal," he said to his servant.

The man came in with a bundle of recently collected cards in his hand.

"Look at this," said the captain, showing him the card in question. "Did you get that from Murgatroyd?"

"I couldn't say, sir; I get such a lot."

"But you know his signature?"

"I can't say I do, sir; but he has just written a card; perhaps you would like to have a look at it."

He searched his bundle, found the card and handed it to the captain, who compared the two signatures.

"This is very odd," he said. "They are very much alike, but there's a slight difference in the shape of the y. It looks as though some one were imitating your fist, Murgatroyd."

"Yes, sir," said Ginger, stiffly. "I'd like to punch his head, sir," he added, as the baseness of the trick struck him.

"Well, we must find out who it is. Keep this to yourselves, men; he may try it again and give us a chance to catch him. Not a word to anyone, mind."

Ginger saluted and returned to his billet, his indignation growing at every step.

The incident was discussed at the officers' mess that night.

"Murgatroyd is straight enough," said Kennedy. "He's one of the best men in my platoon. It's rather a mean trick."

"And a senseless one," said the captain. "I'm inclined to think one of the men must owe him a grudge, and want to get him into trouble."

"What about the addressee?" asked another officer. "Who is Henry Smith, of 563 Pentonville Road?"

"The London people will keep him under observation, no doubt," said the captain. "I told the post corporal to examine every batch carefully, and see if there are any more addressed to the same person."

Three days passed. No letters or cards addressed to Henry Smith were discovered. On the third day a telegram from London was delivered to the colonel.

"Henry Smith gone, leaving no address. Report result of enquiry."

After consulting Captain Adams the colonel telegraphed in reply that Murgatroyd's signature appeared to have been forged, probably with the intention of getting him into trouble, and that he was keeping a careful watch on the correspondence. Ginger meanwhile had recovered his spirits. He had been made a lance-corporal, and sewed the stripe on his sleeve with ingenuous satisfaction. At the back of his mind was a suspicion that Stoneway might have sought a mean revenge for his thrashing by this use of invisible ink; but since the scheme had failed, he resolved not to trouble his head about it.

CHAPTER VI

BAGGING A SNIPER

The village being within easy range of the German guns, its immunity from bombardment struck the officers of the battalion as rather strange. For a few days, it is true, the enemy might have been unaware that British troops were in occupation; but a German aeroplane, a dove-winged Taube, had been observed to fly over the place, and it could hardly be doubted that information of their presence had been carried to headquarters. All that the soldiers knew of warfare for two or three weeks was the dull boom of distant guns, the passage of ambulances occasionally and of supply wagons frequently, and the passing of railway trains conveying new howitzers and field guns along the line a mile or two away.

The call to action came unexpectedly. One evening, just after supper, the men were ordered to parade in full marching kit. They overflowed from the little market square into the adjacent streets, and there they were inspected by the colonel, who passed up and down the ranks with an orderly carrying a lantern.

When the inspection was finished, the colonel posted himself on a tub in the middle of the square. It was a dark night, and the flickering light of the lantern illuminated only the lower part of the colonel's body, leaving his face in shade.

"Now, men," he said, "we are going to take a spell in the trenches. We have several miles to march; there must be no straggling, or you'll pitch into Jack Johnson holes in the road. No talking, no smoking. I know you'll give a good account of yourselves. We're a new battalion; we've got to make our name; and by George, we'll do it!"

The platoon commanders stifled an incipient cheer, and the battalion marched off into the night.

Along the dark straight road they tramped, between lines of tall poplars that raised their skeleton shapes against the sky. For a mile or two nothing impeded their progress; then the advance guard came upon a deep cavity extending half across the road, and two men were told off to warn the succeeding ranks of the danger. Presently they passed through a hamlet which had been shattered by the German artillery. The sides of the road were heaped with bricks and blackened rafters, behind which were the jagged walls of roofless cottages.

A little beyond this they were met by a staff officer, come to guide them to the trenches. Then they had to ease off to one side to allow the passage of the weary men they were relieving. At length they came to a small clump of woodland, and learnt that the trenches were on the further side of it. Section by section they passed into the shelter of the trees, stepping across trunks felled and split by shells, and slid noiselessly into the narrow zig-zag ditches where they were to eat and sleep and spend weary days and nights.

Kennedy and his platoon, among whom were Kenneth, Harry, Ginger, and their pals, found themselves in a narrow passage about 4 ft. 6 in. deep, with a loopholed parapet facing eastward, and here and there little cabins dug out in

the banks, boarded, strewn with straw, warm and stuffy. In the darkness it was impossible to take complete stock of their surroundings, but learning that in a dug-out it was safe to strike a light, Kenneth lit a candle-end, and was amused to see that his predecessor in the little cabin to which he had come had chalked up "Ritz Hotel" on the boarding.

The men were too much excited to think of sleeping. They had learnt on the way up that the position they were to hold was rather a hot place. The Germans in their front, only a few hundred yards away, were very active and full of tricks. They watched the British trenches with lynx eyes, and so sure as the top of a cap showed above the parapet it became the mark for a dozen rifles. There were night snipers, too, somewhere in the neighbourhood, constantly dropping bullets on their invisible target. The men who had just left the trenches had been much worried by these snipers, whom they had failed to locate; but they had reason to believe that the pestilent marksmen were hidden somewhere behind the lines.

"You're safe enough so long as you keep your heads down," said the officer who directed Kennedy to his position. "Except for the snipers we have had little trouble lately; and I hope you'll have a good time."

Kennedy told off his men to keep watch in turn through the night. While off duty they sat in the dug-outs chatting quietly, listening for sounds from the enemy's trenches, wondering what was in store for them when daylight came. Fortunately the wet weather had ceased; the bottom of the trench was still sticky, but the March winds were rapidly drying the ground. The night was cold, but there was a brazier in each dug-out, and the men, crouching over these in their great-coats, contrived to keep warm and comfortable.

They watched eagerly for daylight. At the first peep of dawn some of the men were told off to the loopholes. About thirty yards in front there stretched a wire entanglement, with small cans dangling from it here and there. Two or three hundred yards beyond this they saw the similar entanglement of the Germans. For about a hundred yards of the line this wire was more remote, and the men learnt afterwards that a pond of that breadth filled a declivity in the ground. Here and there, all round the position at varying distances, stood isolated farmhouses, trees, and patches of woodland. All was peaceful; no sound of war broke the stillness of the fair March morning.

They had their breakfast of cocoa and bread and jam. Towards noon two men from each section were told off to go back to a farm house behind the lines for the day's rations. They hurried along the trench in a crouching posture, struck into a communicating trench leading to the rear, and emerged on the outskirts of the wood. There was instantly the crack of a rifle. A sniper had begun his day's work. The men waited uneasily, clutching their rifles, wondering if any of their comrades had been hit. Kennedy posted his men a yard apart along the

trench, ready to fire at the first sign of movement among the enemy. The zig-zag formation of the trench prevented any man from seeing more than the men of his own section, and there came upon them a feeling of loneliness and almost individual responsibility.

In about an hour's time Kenneth and his comrades were relieved to see their food-carriers returning with steaming pails. These contained a sort of hash mixed with beans and potatoes. The men poured this into their billies, warmed them at the braziers, and acknowledged that their dinner of Irish stew à la Française wasn't half bad. After that food was carried up only at night.

The day passed uneventfully. A rifle-shot was heard now and then; from a distant part of the line came the continual rumble of artillery-fire; once they caught sight of a British aeroplane far away to the north-east, with little patches of white smoke following it, hugging it. There was nothing to do except to keep a continual look-out.

But at dusk the reality of their danger was brought home to them. Cramped with the fatigue of maintaining a bending-posture one of the men got up to stretch himself. "Keep down!" shouted Kennedy, but it was too late. There was a slight whizz; the man fell headlong. Kenneth ran to him, as the crack of the rifle was heard. Nothing could be done. The bullet had pierced the man's brain.

When it was dark Kenneth and Ginger carried their dead comrade through the trenches to the wood, and buried him there among the trees. They returned in silence to their post.

"You'll write to his mother," said Ginger, as they got back. "She'll like to know as how poor Dick has been put away decent."

"Yes, I'll write," said Kenneth. "He felt no pain."

"War's a cursed thing," Ginger broke out. "What call have these Kaisers and people to murder young chaps like Dick, all for their own selfishness?—that's what it comes to. It didn't ought to be, and 'pon my soul, it beats me why us millions of working men don't put a stop to it. We're in it now; I'll do my bit; but seems to me the world would be all the better if they'd just string up a few of the emperors and such, them as thinks war's such a mighty fine thing."

Their first loss threw a cloud upon the spirits of the men. But it did not lessen their resolution. Direct knowledge, slight though it was at present, of the grim realities of war braced their courage. Already they had a comrade's death to avenge. To the more thoughtful of them the dead man represented a blow struck at their country, and they saw more clearly than before that it was their country's service that had called them here.

Their spell in the trenches was to last two days. They were days of inaction, discomfort, tedium. Apart from intermittent sniping the Germans made no movement. The Rutlands kept incessant watch on them, with no relaxation

until the fall of night. Even then they were not at ease. Sniping was kept up fitfully through the night, and they learnt that even in the darkness there was peril is rising to stretch their cramped limbs. At dusk on the first day a man was slightly wounded. These sneaking tactics, as they considered them, on the part of an unseen enemy worried and irritated the men. Whenever a shot was heard, they tried to estimate its direction, but their guesses were so contradictory that no definite opinion could be arrived at. On one occasion Kenneth tried to calculate the distance of the marksman by noting the interval that elapsed between the whistling sound of the bullet and the subsequent report of the rifle; but neither his data nor his watch were sufficiently accurate to give him much satisfaction. The one thing that seemed certain was that the night sniping was done somewhere behind the lines.

When the battalion was relieved, and returned to billets for a couple of days' rest, officers and men talked of little but the sniping. They thought that nothing could be more demoralising, having as yet had no experience of heavy gun-fire. The officers discussed the possibility of getting hold of the snipers, and determined to take serious steps to that end on their next turn of duty at the trenches.

An opportunity seemed to offer itself on their second day back. There had been a good deal of sniping overnight, and in the morning Kenneth happened to notice what appeared to be a bullet-hole on the inner side of the parapet. He at once called Captain Adams' attention to it.

"That's proof positive," said the captain. "The sniper is behind us."

"It seems odd that he should fire on the mere chance of hitting somebody, for of course he can't take aim in the dark," said Kenneth.

"He's got our range, of course, knows we've no rear parapet yet, and guesses that we move about more freely after dark. But we ought to be able to locate him now. Stick your bayonet carefully into the hole, Amory; we'll get a hint of the direction of the bullet's flight."

The bullet had penetrated some little distance into the earth. Kenneth probed the hole with his bayonet, and it seemed pretty certain that the shot had been fired from the left rear, and, judging by the angle of incidence, from a considerable distance, probably not less than a mile.

Captain Adams scanned the ground in that direction through his field glasses. About a mile to the left rear stood a small copse. Slanting a rifle towards it, and comparing the angle with that of the hole made by the bullet, the captain decided that the copse was too far to the right, and swept his glasses towards the left. The only other likely spot was the ruins of a farm, but that seemed too far to the left. Between farm and copse ran a low railway embankment, which appeared almost exactly to meet the conditions.

"The sniper is there or thereabouts," said the captain. "Are you game to do a little scouting to-night, Amory?"

"Anything you like, sir," Kenneth replied.

"Well, creep out to-night and see if you can make anything of it. It would be safer to go alone, perhaps, but on the other hand a little support may be useful, so you had better take another man—Murgatroyd, say: he's an active man, and not too tall. You must have your wits about you."

Ginger was delighted at the chance of doing something. The other men envied him, and Harry looked a trifle sulky.

"Cheer up, old man," said Kenneth. "Your turn will come some day."

At dusk Kenneth and Ginger, the former carrying a revolver supplied by the captain, the latter armed only with his bayonet, made their way through the communication trenches to the second line of entrenchments and thence to the road leading to the village. They waited until complete darkness had fallen before stepping openly on to the road. The Germans had the range of it, and knowing that it was used after dark by British troops moving to and from the trenches, they might start shelling at any moment.

"We'll leave the road as soon as possible," said Kenneth, as they set off, "and bear away to the left."

"The right, you mean," said Ginger.

"No, the left, and work our way round. We'll take a leaf out of the Germans' book; they prefer flank attacks to front. We've plenty of time."

It was very dark. They struck off to the left across fields, and picked their way as well as they could, stumbling now and then into holes and over broken relics of former engagements. They could only guess distance. Kenneth took the time by his luminous watch, and allowing for the detour, when they had walked for twenty minutes he bore to the right, crossed the deserted road, and peered through the darkness for the ruined farm and the railway embankment. No trains had run beyond the village for a considerable time, and it was known that the permanent way had been cut up by German shells.

Moving purely by guesswork they failed to find the farm, but after a time came suddenly upon the embankment, and halted.

"Right or left?" whispered Kenneth.

"The farm?" returned Ginger.

"Yes."

"Right, I should say."

At this moment a shell burst in the air some distance to their right, whether from a British or a German gun they could not tell. It lit up the country momentarily like a flash of lightning, and as the two men instinctively flung themselves down, they caught sight of the ruins some distance on their right hand. The

illumination was over in a second, leaving the sky blacker than before.

They waited a little, wondering whether the shell was herald of a night attack. But the shot was not repeated. The country was silent.

"Just to let us know they ain't gone home yet," Ginger whispered.

"We'll make for the farm," said Kenneth in equally low tones. "The sniper hasn't begun work yet; I haven't heard any rifle shots about here. We'll separate when we get to the place, and approach it from opposite sides."

Very cautiously they groped their way across the open field towards the farm house, and when they caught sight of it, bent down under cover of a hedge, and crept on almost by inches. Then, leaving Ginger near the broken gate of the farmyard, Kenneth stole away to make a complete circuit of the place.

In ten minutes he returned.

"It's a mere shell," he whispered. "The roof is gone, except in one corner; there are heaps of rubble everywhere, rafters lying at all angles, and furniture smashed to splinters."

"Did you go inside?"

"No, but I think we might risk it. Look out you don't get a sprained ankle."

They crept through the yard, over the rubbish, and into what had been the house. Kenneth had an electric torch, but dared not use it. They halted frequently to peer and listen, then went on again, doing their utmost to avoid any disturbance of the broken masonry and woodwork. Before they had completed their examination of the premises, the crack of a rifle at no great distance away caused them to abandon the search and hurry into the open again.

Outside, they waited for a repetition of the shot to give them a clue. It was some time before it came. At length there was a dull rumble of distant artillery, and in the midst of it a sound like a muffled rifle-shot from the direction of the railway.

"He's a clever chap," whispered Kenneth. "I hadn't noticed it before, but I think he waits for the sound of firing elsewhere before he fires himself—a precaution against being spotted. Let us wait for the next."

Presently there was the rattle of musketry from the trenches far to the left. Before it had died away, a single rifle cracked much nearer at hand.

"From the railway, sure enough," said Ginger. "We'll cop him."

They hurried across the field to the embankment, crawled up it, and when their eyes reached the level of the track, they peered up and down the line. They could see only a few yards, so dark was the night. There was no glint even from the rails, which were rusty from disuse. After listening a while, they crept up on to the track, and waited for another shot to guide them.

It was long in coming. To move before knowing the direction would be useless and might be dangerous, so, curbing their impatience, they lay on the

slope of the embankment.

At last they heard the whirr of an aeroplane. Having learnt to expect a shot from the sniper when it was masked by some other sound, they sprang up. The humming drew nearer; then came the single sharp rifle crack.

"Behind us!" whispered Kenneth.

With great caution the two men moved along the track, stepping over sleepers and rails torn up, and skirting deep holes made by shells. Every now and again they stopped to listen. Presently they were brought to a sudden halt by the sound of a rifle-shot apparently almost beneath them. Dropping to the ground, they peeped over the embankment. At this spot there had been a landslip, evidently caused by a heavy shell. At the foot of the embankment lay a pool of water, extending for some twenty yards. Except for these nothing was to be seen.

They felt rather uncomfortable. On this bare embankment, rising from an equally bare plain, there seemed to be no cover of any kind. Yet it was certain that a sniper was within a few yards of them, perhaps within a few feet. They lay perfectly still, watching, waiting for another shot. It did not come. Kenneth began to wonder whether the sniper had seen or heard them, and stolen away. Or perhaps he was stalking them. At this thought Kenneth gripped his revolver.

What was to be done? To prowl about in the darkness on the chance of discovering the marksman would be mere foolhardiness. He hoped on for another shot, not daring even to whisper to Ginger. The minutes lengthened into hours; the two men were cramped with cold; but as if by mutual consent they lay where they were. Neither was willing to go back and report failure. Now and again they caught slight sounds which they were unable to identify or locate. They nibbled some biscuits they had brought with them, determined at least to await the dawn. Conscious of discomfort, they had no sense of fatigue or sleepiness. And when at length the darkness began to yield, they fancied they saw shadowy enemies on the misty plain.

When it was light enough to see clearly, they looked to right and left, to the front and the rear, and discovered no sign of life within a mile of them. The air began to fill with the roll of artillery and the rattle of rifle-shots. Here and there in the distance they saw columns of black smoke. Two aeroplanes passed overhead towards the German lines, and shrapnel shells strewed white puffs around and below them. But on the embankment all was quiet.

"He must have got away in the darkness," Kenneth ventured to whisper at last.

"Can't make it out," murmured Ginger in return.

How the sniper could have escaped unseen was a mystery. Daylight revealed the bareness of the plain. Only a few low hedges divided the fields. One such, bordered by a narrow ditch, ran northward from the railway within a few

yards of them. But this could be of no use to a sniper, for it was on the wrong side of the embankment, towards the north.

After a murmured consultation they rose to examine the embankment more closely, in the hope of finding tracks of the sniper. As they did so, a number of bullets whistled around them; their figures had been seen on the skyline by the Germans. Dropping instantly to the ground, they crawled along, skirting the hole made by the shell, and taking care not to slide down in the loose earth that had been displaced. They covered thus a hundred yards or so in each direction, up and down the line, without discovering anything.

"We must give it up," said Kenneth at last. "I don't like to, but I see nothing else for it."

"Our chaps are in billets to-day," said Ginger. "I'm game to stay till to-night if you are."

"All right. We've got our emergency rations. We may as well lie up in the farm, and take turns to sleep."

They crawled across the track to the British side of the embankment, slid down the slope, and being now safe from German shots began to walk erect along the bottom, following a slight curve in the direction of the farm. The less of open field they had to cross, the better.

They had taken only a few steps along the base of the embankment when Ginger, a little in advance of Kenneth, stopped suddenly, and stooped. Then he turned his head quickly, putting his finger to his lips. Kenneth hurried up. Ginger pointed to a slight track in the grass, leading round the low hedge before mentioned. Without hesitation they began to follow it up, moving with infinite precaution, and bending under cover of the hedge.

Running straight for some distance, the track at last made a sharp bend to the right, then skirting another hedge parallel with the embankment. The two men were on the point of turning with it when Kenneth, in the rear, happening to look behind him over the hedge, caught sight of a man about half a mile away, coming apparently from the direction of the village where the Rutlands were billeted. Ginger came back at a low call from his companion, and they stood together at the hedge, watching the stranger, careful to keep out of sight themselves.

The man drew nearer. He was old and shabbily dressed. A small basket was slung on his back. Every now and again he looked behind as if fearful of being followed. They watched him eagerly, surprised, full of curiosity and suspicion. His path ran along the hedge parallel with the railway, and he was screened by it from the British lines.

He came on until he had almost reached the hedge behind which the two Englishmen were posted. At this point there was a wide gap in the hedge that

covered him, and he turned off sharply at right angles towards the railway. Kenneth instantly guessed that he had done this to avoid observation through the gap, that he would pass round the end of the hedge near the embankment, and follow the track by which Ginger and he had recently come.

As the man turned, Ginger caught Kenneth by the sleeve. His eyes were bright with excitement. He seemed about to speak, but Kenneth hastily clapped a hand over his mouth. Watching the man until he was on the point of turning the corner, Kenneth drew Ginger through a small gap in the hedge parallel with the railway, and they waited there until the stranger came up to it on the track they had just left, and began to walk towards another hedge at right angles to it, which led back to the embankment almost at the spot where they had watched through the night.

They followed him quietly. He was on the inner side of the hedge, they on the outer. They saw that he was wading along the ditch towards the railway. At the end of the hedge they stooped and peeped through a gap, to see what was going on within a few feet of them. They heard a low whistle, and were just in time to catch sight of the man disappearing into a culvert that carried the ditch under the embankment.

Allowing him time to get through, they crawled through the hedge, up the embankment, over the line, and approaching the culvert from above, established themselves on top of the brickwork at the entrance. They heard voices from below, within the culvert. Kenneth held his revolver ready, Ginger gripped his bayonet. And there they waited for one or other of the men inside to come out.

They had not long to wait. The mumble of voices came nearer. Kenneth listened intently, but could not distinguish the words until, just beneath him, he heard "Auf Wiedersehen!" Immediately afterwards the man they had followed waded out through the shallow water at the bottom of the culvert, bending almost double to avoid the arch. His basket was gone. Just as he was about to straighten himself, Kenneth called sternly, "Hands up!" The man swung round, saw a revolver pointed at his head, and instantly threw up his hands, at the same time glancing right and left as if seeking some way of escape.

[image]

"HANDS UP!"

What were they to do with him? Within a few feet of them, in the culvert, was the sniper, a man of courage and daring, or he would not have elected or been chosen for this particular means of serving his country. Luckily Kenneth

was a man of quick decision.

"Collar that fellow while I keep an eye below," he said. "Take care you don't show against the opening."

Ginger sprang down the embankment, and approached the captive, whom Kenneth covered with his revolver, at the same time keeping an eye on the arch below. In a few seconds Ginger had made the man pull off his coat and waistcoat, and unfasten his braces, and with these he tied him hand and foot.

"You'll be safe there for a bit," he said, laying the man at the foot of the embankment. Then he rejoined his companion.

Meanwhile Kenneth had been considering how to get the sniper out. There had been no sound from the culvert, but the German must be well aware of what had happened. That he had not attempted to escape by the other end was probably explained by his ignorance of the number of men he had to do with. Armed with his rifle, he might have thought himself pretty safe in the narrow culvert, where he could take heavy toll of any assailants who should attempt a direct attack.

"We'll have to smoke him out," whispered Kenneth, as Ginger joined him. "There's some straw in the farmhouse; cut back quickly and bring as much as you can carry."

In ten minutes Ginger returned with two large bundles which he had himself trussed. He kindled one of the trusses, and placed it at the rear end of the culvert, the quarter from which a slight breeze was blowing. Kenneth meanwhile kept watch above the brick arch at the other end.

The straw was somewhat damp, and made as much smoke as they could have wished. Carried by the breeze through the culvert, it floated out beneath Kenneth, tickling his throat and causing his eyes to smart. Every moment he expected the sniper to make a rush from his unendurable position. When a minute or two had passed without any sign of the man he was surprised: was insensibility to smoke one of the German superiorities?

"Any more straw, Ginger?" he asked.

"Another bundle," Ginger replied, and returned to the farther end to light it.

He had only just disappeared over the edge of the embankment when Kenneth, who had been straining his ears for sounds of movements below, heard a slight displacement of ballast on the line above him. Glancing up, he found himself looking straight at the barrel of a rifle, behind which was a head surmounted by a German helmet.

For half a second he was paralysed with astonishment. Then a click galvanised him into activity. Realising that the rifle had missed fire, forgetting—like an idiot, as he afterwards confessed—that he had a revolver, he made a spring

and with his left hand seized the muzzle a few feet above him. The German held fast; there was a momentary tug of war; then the German lost his footing on the slippery earth, fell suddenly to a sitting posture, and slid down the embankment helplessly, driving Kenneth under him into the shallow pool of water at the foot.

Kenneth was a thought quicker than the German in recovering his wits. Wriggling sideways, he flung his arm over the man, spluttering out a mouthful of muddy water, and grappled him. For a few seconds they heaved and writhed like grampuses. Then Ginger, drawn by the splash, came running across the line, saw the struggling figures, sprang down the embankment, and dashed his fist in the German's face. In another moment he had dragged the man out of the water and a foot or two up the embankment, and held him down until Kenneth had shaken himself and come to his side.

"This beats cockfighting," he said. "Where did the beggar come from?"

"Don't know," said Kenneth. "We'll see presently. I'm nearly choked with mud. We'll have to use his braces too."

When they had tied the man securely, they got up to investigate. What they discovered was a proof of the ingenuity which the Germans exhibit in all their undertakings. The landslide, a little to the right of the culvert, formed a sort of boss on the embankment. At the farther extremity of this, out of sight from the spot where Kenneth had stood, the German had forced his way up from a small chamber excavated in the base of the embankment, where he had a folding chair, a rug, a tin plate and mug, a supply of ammunition, and the basket which the visitor had carried. It was full of food. There were two or three inconspicuous openings for the admission of air, and, towards the British trenches, a small tube, and an arrangement by which the rifle could be clamped. Evidently the sniper took his sights in the daytime, and set the rifle in such a position in the tube that he could fire directly on the trenches with the certainty of having the correct aim.

"Up to snuff, ain't they, not half," said Ginger, with unwilling admiration. "But how did you come to be wallowing in that there puddle?"

Kenneth explained.

"My word! a lucky missfire," said Ginger.

"Lucky indeed!" replied Kenneth. "And we can't discover the cause of it; the rifle's in the mud."

"Never mind about the cause of it. We've bagged our first prisoners; that's one to us and the Rutlands."

But Kenneth was never satisfied to leave a problem unsolved. Thinking over the matter constantly during the next few days, unwilling to ascribe to luck something that must have a sufficient cause, he came to the conclusion that the breach of the rifle had become clogged with earth as the sniper forced his way up through the landslide.

They marched their prisoners back to headquarters in the village, keeping the embankment between them and the enemy as long as possible.

"I've often seen this old rascal about the village," said Ginger, referring to the civilian. "He's a spy, that's what he is. They'll shoot him, won't they?"

"The colonel will hold an enquiry, no doubt. By George! I shall be glad to get back and dry my things and have a good feed."

They received an enthusiastic welcome from their comrades, and Colonel Appleton commended them for their successful work. The sniper was sent to the rear as a prisoner of war. An investigation was held. It came out that the civilian who supplied him with food was a supposed refugee, and one of the pensioners of Monsieur Obernai. That gentleman was summoned to the court of inquiry, and was overcome with horror on learning that one of the men whom he had assisted was a spy.

"It is heart-breaking," he said. "It is enough to make one hard. Besides, it might throw suspicion on me. Still, it would not be just to abandon my humble efforts to alleviate distress because one man has deceived me. But in future I shall make the most careful inquiries before I assist a stranger."

The spy was shot, and thereafter there was no more trouble from night snipers at that part of the lines.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE ENEMY'S LINES

It was during their next spell in the trenches that the Rutlands had their first taste of artillery fire. They were not systematically bombarded: there was no indication of infantry attack; but at irregular intervals shells from field guns burst over or behind the trenches, doing very little damage, but making the men nervous and irritable. When the ominous tearing sound was heard as a shell flew through the air, the men winced and cowered, and at the explosion they looked fearfully around, sometimes through a shower of earth, wondering to find themselves still alive.

"You'll get used to it by and by," said Captain Adams to the men of his company. "The bark is worse than the bite at present. It's really very kind of the Bosches to let you get accustomed to them gradually."

After a day or two the bombardment became heavier and more persistent.

Two or three batteries were located, either by officers in observation posts or by British airmen, and the British gunners replied to them, not without success. But presently the trenches were shelled at night by heavier guns which it seemed impossible to place. The position of the guns appeared to vary. Sometimes the reports came from the south-east, sometimes from the east, sometimes from the north-east; and in general they were louder than those of the guns which had been definitely located, though this fact, in the opinion of some of the men, was due to the stillness of the night air. They began to suspect that the Germans were bringing up more guns to various parts of their line, with the idea of discouraging any attempt to break through at this point.

All this made the Rutlands eager to come to grips with the enemy, and the prolonged inaction tried them sorely. To amuse them during the long weary evenings in the trenches the colonel sent for a number of mouth organs, and some of the officers read to them in the dug-outs by candle light. One evening the men of Kennedy's platoon pricked up their ears when they heard the plaintive notes of a flute from a short distance on their left.

"Who's playing?" they asked.

Word was passed along the trench that it was Stoneway, who had bought a flute in the village.

"There's a chap for you!" said Ginger. "All the months we were training the beggar never did a thing, playing or singing. Seems to me he can play, too. But he didn't ought to play 'Home, sweet Home.' Gives you a lump in your throat. Pass the word along for 'Dolly Grey,' will you, mates?"

Stoneway's unsuspected musical accomplishments raised him in the estimation of his comrades. Every night there were calls for him. He knew a great number of their favourite tunes, and was always ready to play them. He would usually begin by running up and down the scale, and practising tuneless exercises; and sometimes, when these preliminary flourishes were rather prolonged, the men called to him to "cut it" and come to the real thing.

As time went on, the shelling became more frequent. It soon became clear that the Germans were working from definite knowledge of what was going on behind the British lines. The bombardment often took place when parties were relieving one another in the trenches, though this was always done in darkness. And one day, when the general commanding the division came to the village to inspect the battalion, a particularly brisk shelling caused a stampede of the people, who had come to regard themselves as safe. Several cottages were damaged, several civilians as well as soldiers were killed or wounded, and a heavy shell excavated a deep hole in the garden of Monsieur Obernai's house.

One morning the trenches were subjected for the first time to the fire of a heavy howitzer. A peculiar low drone, rapidly increasing in loudness, was heard.

”Ware Jack Johnson!” cried Captain Adams, and the men crouched in the trenches, holding their breath.

The first shell fell some distance behind the lines. They heard a terrific crash, and saw a column of thick smoke. The second shell, about a minute after the first, fell far too short, plunging into the ground just in front of the German trenches, and bespattering them with earth. The third exploded in the pond between the lines, and sent a wave into the German trench at the side. During the next half hour the ground in front of the pond between the opposing forces was pitted with holes made by the heavy shells.

”There’s something wrong with the range-finding or the charges,” remarked Harry.

”Lucky for us,” said Kenneth, brushing from his coat some dust cast up by one of the shells. ”The smell is bad enough.”

After half an hour the shelling ceased, and the men wondered what purpose the Germans could have had in such an apparently motiveless bombardment. Captain Adams suspected that something was going on in the German lines, and remembering the success of Kenneth and Ginger in discovering the sniper, he decided to send them out that night as a listening patrol. Harry begged to be allowed to go with them.

”Very well,” said the captain. ”If you’re successful we’ll try a whole section another time. It’s a ticklish job, you understand. You’ll crawl over to the German trenches, and listen. You know German, Amory, I believe. You’ll do the listening, then; you others keep on the watch. Don’t lose your way. I’ll take care that the men here don’t fire on you as you come back; but if you stray too far to right or left you may find yourselves in hot water.”

”You’ve no special instructions, sir?” asked Kenneth.

”No: you must work out the details yourselves. You’re not puppets on the end of a string.”

”Nor yet monkeys on a stick,” Ginger murmured when the captain had gone. ”What did Capting mean by that?”

”He meant that we’re not machine made, as the Germans are, by all accounts,” replied Harry. ”I say, I’m jolly glad he let me go too: I’m getting quite fat with doing nothing.”

They talked over their plans together. Obviously the safest direction in which to approach the enemy was towards the large pond. This was an irregular oval in shape, and the Germans had not closely followed its curve in cutting their trenches, for, if they had done so, it would have exposed them to enfilading fire from the British. They had carried their advanced trench close up to the border of the pond on each side, then run communicating trenches at right angles from front to rear, and there dug a straight trench along the breadth of the pond, about

a hundred yards in the rear of their first alignment. The wire entanglements in front of the pond, facing the British, were not so elaborate as on the rest of their line, from which the inference was that the water was too deep to be waded.

Just before midnight the three men crept stealthily out of their trench, armed only with their bayonets, crawled under the barbed wire, and wriggled forward towards the pond. It was slow and tiring work, for the ground was much cut up by shell fire, and littered with fragments of shells, empty tins, and other rubbish. There was a certain advantage in the unevenness, in that it gave cover; but it also contained an element of danger, because there was a risk of their displacing something as they proceeded, and they knew that the slightest noise would provoke a fusillade from the enemy.

The moon was not up, but the sky was spangled with stars, by whose feeble light they were able to distinguish objects on the ground within ten or a dozen paces. They heard the Germans talking and laughing in their trenches, and here and there a slight radiance marked the places where they had candles or lamps. Foot by foot they crawled on, Kenneth leading the way towards the angle of the trenches on the left.

At last he came to a stop within a few feet of the parapet. The three men lay flat on the ground. For some moments Kenneth was not able to distinguish anything from the general murmur, but presently he realised that one man was reading aloud to the rest from a German newspaper. "The blockade of England. Great German success in the North Sea. An English merchantman of 245 tons laden with bricks was torpedoed in the North Sea yesterday, and seriously damaged. The starvation of England proceeds satisfactorily."

"What, do the English eat bricks?" asked one simple soul.

There was a laugh.

"They have good teeth! Look at this picture," said another.

"If the English bricks are harder than our war bread I pity them," said a third. "We needn't cry 'God punish England' any more."

"Is there any news of sinking a grain ship?" asked a voice.

"No," replied the reader. "Grain comes in big vessels; I expect the Americans won't let their ships sail. We shall have America on our side soon."

"Anything to shorten the war," said a man. "I'm tired of it. I want to get home to Anna and the children. The General said it would be all over by Christmas."

"So it will, by next Christmas. I want to get back to the Savoy: I made £10 there the Christmas before last."

"You won't make it again. The English won't have any money after this."

Signing to the others to remain where they were, Kenneth crept still farther forward until he came below the parapet. From the direction of the voices

he guessed that the trench was unoccupied at the angle; the men who should be there were gathered around the man who had the paper. Cautiously raising himself, he peeped first through a loophole, then over the crown of the parapet. Here he was able to look along both the main trench and the communicating trench at right angles to it. In the former, about a dozen yards away, he saw a group of men at the entrance of a dug-out, from which a glow shone forth. It was here, evidently, that the man was reading. He discovered the reason why, apart from the attraction of the newspaper, this part of the trench was empty. The stars were reflected in water that lay along the bottom. There was evidently a considerable leakage from the pond. On the right hand the communication trench was quite dark. Apparently it was not manned at all.

Kenneth dropped down again, and remained for a short time listening. The conversation had changed: instead of discussing the war, the Germans were talking of domestic matters; the ex-waiter of the Savoy Hotel described his little house and garden at Peckham, and told how he had happened to meet in London a girl from his own village in Wurtemberg, who was now his wife. Luckily he had saved enough money to keep her and his children for a year or two.

Finding that he was not likely to gain any important information, Kenneth crawled back to his companions, and they made their wriggling way to their trench without being discovered. Captain Adams was a little disappointed at the meagre result of their reconnaissance. The only valuable piece of news was that the communication trench was empty and the angle flooded.

Shortly after their return the mysterious gun again opened fire. Several men were wounded by splinters of shells, one so seriously that, in spite of the risk, he had to be carried at once to the rear.

Next day Kenneth said to Harry:

"Look here, last night's business has whetted my appetite. Why shouldn't we get behind the German lines and see if we can locate that gun? Every day we lose a man or two without being able to retaliate, and it's quite time to put a stop to it."

"Will the captain let us?"

"Adams wouldn't object, I think; but I'm afraid we should have to get the colonel's leave for this. I'll take the first opportunity of speaking to the captain. It would be a pity not to make some use of the little information we were able to pick up."

Captain Adams, when the proposal was put to him, at once said, as Kenneth had expected, that he must ask the colonel's permission.

"It's a good deal more dangerous than last night's affair, you see. You'll be shot out of hand if you're caught."

"But it's worth trying, sir, if we can find that gun. Apart from our losses,

it's making the men jumpy."

"That's all very well, but I don't want to lose two useful men. Still, I'll see what the colonel says."

Later in the day he sent for them.

"I've seen the colonel," he said. "He was at first dead against it, but I did my best for you. He agrees, provided you come back at once if you find things too unhealthy: that is to say, you are not to go on if you come up against any considerable body of the enemy. And keep the matter to yourselves. You'll be supposed to be going out again as a listening patrol. I shall tell only Mr. Kennedy and your sergeant. No one else is to know what has become of you, and they will be on the look-out for your return."

He gave them a large-scale map of the district behind the German lines, and recommended them to study it carefully during the day. The railway seemed likely to be their best landmark. It ran almost due north-east. About four miles away it passed over a canal running north and south. With these two fixed lines and a pocket luminous compass they should not wander far afield in ignorance of their general position. Much nearer to the British trenches, and almost directly in their front, was a ruined church, the spire of which, used by the Germans as an observation post, had been shot away some time before the Rutlands arrived at the front.

Their diligence in conning the map aroused the curiosity of their comrades, but they laughed off enquiries, and gave the map back to the captain.

They decided to start, carrying revolvers, soon after dark, at the time when the Germans might be supposed to be taking their evening meal. With some difficulty they managed to slip away unnoticed by the other men. Moving with even more caution than on the previous night, they crawled over the ground until they reached the angle of the trenches abutting on the pond. It was quite dark; the moon, in its third quarter, was, as they had learnt from the almanac, not due to rise for some hours.

Peering down into the firing trench, they neither saw nor heard any sign of occupants in the space immediately below them; but they heard voices from a traverse a few yards away. Then Harry caught sight of three or four men coming down the communication trench, and from their gait concluded that they were bringing food. The two dropped down below the parapet and lay motionless: it was clear that they had started a little too early.

They waited until they heard the men pass back along the communication trench; then, after a short interval, rose to carry out the plan previously agreed upon for descending into the trench. The principal danger was a fall of loose earth from the parapet or a splash in the water at the bottom. Kenneth cautiously clambered up the earthwork, lay flat on top of the parapet, then backed until his

legs hung over inside. To avoid slipping he held Harry's hands, and so lowered himself until he stood on the banquette, which was an inch or two under water. Pressing himself close against the earthen wall, he steadied Harry in his descent: both stood in the trench. They were panting with excitement.

From their left came the sounds of conversation; the speakers were invisible. They were just about to start down the communication trench when they heard footsteps approaching from the farther end. Flattening themselves into the angle they waited breathlessly. The corner was so dark that they hoped to escape detection; but their hearts leapt to their mouths when they saw the flash of an electric torch some distance away in the communication trench. Escape was impossible. If the light was shown as the men approached the corner discovery was certain.

"Don't waste the light," Kenneth heard one of the men say. "We are running short of batteries. You can see the turn by looking up. Watch the stars."

The light was switched off. Holding their breath the Englishmen waited. Two Germans drew nearer, splashed through the water, and turned into the firing trench. As soon as they had disappeared, Kenneth and Harry started to go down the communication trench, stepping very slowly through the water, and halting every now and again to listen. Presently they were startled by hearing voices behind them. The Germans apparently were returning. To retreat now was impossible. Whatever danger might lie ahead, they must go on.

By this time they had quitted the water. Seemingly they had passed beyond the pond. But the bottom of the trench was sticky with mud; walking was difficult. And the men behind were gaining on them. Suddenly they came to a trench at right angles—no doubt the trench at the rear of the pond. Scarcely daring to look along it, they went straight on.

"Anything doing?" asked a voice close by.

"All's quiet," replied Kenneth in German.

Another hundred yards brought them to a third trench. It appeared to be unoccupied. After listening intently for a few moments they decided to trust their luck down this trench rather than continue along the communication trench, in which they could still hear the footsteps and voices of the men following them. Others might be coming towards them. Striking to the left, they went along the trench for a few yards; then, coming upon another communication trench at right angles, they stopped to consult in murmurs. They decided that the trenches were more dangerous than the open ground. Retracing their steps for some little distance, they waited a moment or two. All was silent. Cautiously they clambered up and lay, breathing hard, upon the grass.

A little ahead of them was the ruined church standing black and gaunt in the starlight.

"We go past that," whispered Kenneth, "then strike off to the north-east. We'll try that direction first, at any rate. Most of the shots appear to come from there."

"About how far away?"

"Two or three miles, I think."

"I say—"

"Well?"

"Oh nothing!—only I feel sort of empty inside."

CHAPTER VIII

SKY HIGH

Harry's feeling of emptiness simply meant that he was only now beginning to realise the difficulty of the task undertaken so lightheartedly by himself and his friend. They had come only about a fourth of the distance they expected to cover, and it was the easiest portion, for after all there was much less chance of meeting enemies in the quiet communication trenches than behind the lines, where movement was unconstrained, and a German might lurk behind every tree.

They lay for a few minutes, peering into the darkness, listening, thinking out their course. Somewhere to the left they heard the rumble of carts, the clatter of motor cars, the voices of men. Similar sounds, but fainter, came from the right. On either hand there was a road to avoid. No doubt there was a path running from the church to one or other of these roads. Their best plan seemed to be to creep along by the churchyard wall and strike across the fields, taking what cover the hedges, ditches, and isolated trees afforded. There was no definite clue to their direction. The gun they had come to seek had not yet begun its nightly work.

Assuring themselves that there were no sounds in their immediate neighbourhood, they got up and stole towards the tree-lined wall of the churchyard. The wall was broken in many places; trees had been split and felled and tombstones shattered by gunfire. They moved very cautiously along the wall towards the open fields. Suddenly they both halted and crouched. High up in the ruined tower a light had flashed for a moment. From the same place came faint sounds which they soon recognised as the murmur of voices. The light again shone forth, and again disappeared. It came and went at intervals, now long, now short, and

in a few minutes they realised that the men in the tower were signalling.

The light showed in the direction of the trenches. They had never noticed it in their night watches there; presumably the signallers were at work for the first time, or perhaps the direct rays were masked, and the light was visible only at a higher elevation. Beyond doubt the signallers were Germans; no British soldiers, or natives in collusion with them, would have chosen a spot within the German lines, and so near the trenches—a spot where the glow of the lamp could be so clearly distinguished.

But it was puzzling. Why should the Germans signal towards their own trenches? Was it possible that they were communicating with somebody behind the British lines?

The two Englishmen crouched below the wall.

"Shall we take a look-in at the tower?" asked Harry in a whisper.

"It's not our present job," returned Kenneth. "We're out to find the gun. Perhaps afterwards—at any rate we'll report it. The men up there have got a good view over the fields; we shall be lucky to get away without being discovered."

Bent double, they hurried along the wall, and when it came to an end, crept on under cover of a hedge across a field. Descending into a shallow hollow, they sprang across a brook, and made for a small clump of trees on rising ground in front of them. The ground was rough and stubbly; walking was difficult and fatiguing. They passed through the skirt of the wood, crossed more fields, taking to the ditches where the ground rose, and quickening their pace through the depressions. Kenneth frequently consulted his compass and watch, the dials of which were faintly luminous.

At length he announced that they must have come about three miles from the trenches.

"It's no good going farther at present," he said. "All we can do is to wait until we hear the discharge of the gun, perhaps see its flash. And it will be just our luck if they don't fire it to-night."

"How long shall we wait?"

"That's the problem! If we wait too long we shan't get back to-night, and that means hiding up all to-morrow. We can't possibly return in daylight. But it's no good talking. Let's make ourselves as comfortable as we can in the shade of this hedge. And for goodness' sake don't let me fall asleep."

"Not much chance of that if you feel like me. I couldn't sleep a wink, though I'm tired enough."

They sat down, took some chocolate from their tins, and prepared for their vigil. All was silent around them. There were no longer sounds of traffic; the roads had apparently diverged. The whole countryside lay peaceful under the silent stars.

Time went on. The air was cold. Now and then they got up and tramped to and fro to stir their chilled blood. Ten o'clock: eleven: no sound. Kenneth looked at his watch at ever shorter intervals. He was becoming restless. Had they adventured on a vain quest? The moon crept above the horizon, dimly illuminating the landscape, showing here a dark rounded mass that must be a wooded hill, there the white walls of a solitary farmhouse.

"There's no getting back to-night," thought Kenneth, as the light increased.

It was just past midnight. They were sitting side by side, silent, disappointed, depressed.

"Hark!" said Harry suddenly.

There was a low continuous rumble in the distance. It grew louder. They rose to their feet, and looked across the fields eastward. The ground stretched away in undulations, alternate dark and light bands in the moonshine. They could see nothing to explain the sound. It came from their right, increasing in volume as it approached, then diminishing as it passed away to the left, finally ceasing.

"Sounded like a railway truck," said Harry.

"There's no line there," replied Kenneth. "The only line shown on the map is the one running through the village almost due east; it turns to the north-east after cutting the German lines. It must be a good three or four miles from here. That sound went right across our front, from south to north, and couldn't have been more than half a mile away."

"Well, it's stopped now. We needn't bother about it. Quite certainly it wasn't made by the guns, and that's the only riddle we're called on to solve. I'm fed up with this, Ken."

"So am I. The idea of a whole day here is sickening. Still, it can't be helped."

They sat down again, each thinking his own thoughts.

Suddenly there was a momentary flash, instantly followed by a terrific roar.

"The gun!" exclaimed Kenneth, springing up.

"And jolly close, too," said Harry, looking across the fields. "Which side of us?"

"I don't know. We must wait for the next. This is getting exciting."

Within a minute or two they saw the flash again, lighting up the sky behind a low ridge on their left front. The noise of the discharge reverberated and died away.

"Come on!" whispered Kenneth.

They crept along the hedge in the direction of the ridge. A third report rent the air; then, after a minute's silence, they were surprised to hear a renewed rumbling, which passed across their front nearer than they had heard it before, and receded towards the south.

"Pon my word, it seems to have some connection with the gun after all," murmured Kenneth.

They went on, as fast as they could with caution. Crawling up the ridge, they peered over. Nothing was to be seen in either direction. They crawled down the other slope, and came to what appeared to be a sunken grass road. It was shadowed by the ridge. Looking to right and left, and discovering nothing, they got up and began to walk across the road. Suddenly Harry stumbled, and uttered a low exclamation.

"A whack on the toe," he murmured.

"By George!" whispered Kenneth behind him. He had stooped to look at the obstruction.

Harry turned. The obstacle was a rail. There was no glint from it; apparently it was rusty. But it was sticky to the touch. Kenneth held his fingers to his nose. They smelt of tar.

Beside the rail there was a layer of loose grass, twigs, rubbish of all sorts, and beyond this, five feet away, a parallel rail.

"We have come on a single-track railway," said Kenneth. "It's not marked on the map; must have been recently laid. Let us go on a little, and examine it."

In a few minutes their discovery was confirmed. The seeming grass road was a roughly laid track. But the rails had been painted over with tar, and the sleepers and permanent way were hidden under low heaps of litter.

"They're clever beasts," said Kenneth. "D'you see the trick? No airman would ever guess this to be a railway. The rails are quite dark."

"But what's it for?"

At this moment came the report of the gun, some distance to the south.

"That's what we are going to find out," said Kenneth.

They made their way stealthily along the track between the rails in the direction of the sound. Presently, at a gentle curve, they came to a white post with a small square platform in front of it, abutting on the railway. Wondering what it was for, they went on, and in a few moments heard the rumble of an approaching train. They scrambled up the ridge on their right, threw themselves flat on the ground and watched.

In a few minutes an engine and two trucks glided into view, making extraordinarily little noise. They passed slowly below the watchers. There was no smoke from the engine; perhaps it was electric. The first truck carried a heavy gun; the other, containing men, was like an ordinary railway wagon, but apparently better sprung, for it moved with only the low rumble which the watchers had already heard. The effect of the train gliding past, dark, almost without sound, was mysteriously strange.

When the train had passed, they hastened after it, walking just below the

crest of the ridge. They had scarcely started when they heard a low screeching of brakes. Stealing on a few steps, and peering over, they saw that the train had stopped opposite the small platform. The men had got out of their truck, and were moving noiselessly but quickly about the truck containing the gun. Orders were given in a low voice. There was a slight grating of machinery and creaking of timber. The recoil cradle of the gun, which still remained on the truck, was being placed on the platform; the gun itself was being loaded. Its muzzle pointed over the railway line towards the trenches.

Stuffing up their ears, Kenneth and Harry waited. The gun was fired. They heard the heavy projectile whizz over their heads. Three times the gun spoke; then it was swung round on the truck, and the train moved on to the north-east.

Dazed and deafened by the tremendous noise, the watchers followed it along the line. Here was a discovery indeed. It was no wonder that the gun had never been located. But what they had already learnt made them eager to learn more. Where was the gun kept when not in use? Where was the headquarters of the men? If they could find out this, they would have information of real value to carry back with them.

They went cautiously along the line, on the look-out for sentries. But the line was not guarded. Its existence was probably known only to the German staff, and it was evidently used only for the gun train.

About half a mile beyond the platform, the train came to rest at another. Again the gun was fired: then the train rumbled back. The two men hid until it had passed, then continued along the line in the opposite direction. During its absence they would seize the opportunity to survey this part of the line.

Some ten minutes after the train had passed they caught sight of low buildings ahead on the east side of the track, and a dim light. In case there might be Germans on the spot, they left the rails, walked across a field under cover of the hedge, and approached the buildings from the east. These, they found, were three low wooden sheds, near the opening of a large quarry, which Kenneth remembered having seen marked on the map. The sheds were in ill repair: there were many chinks and gaps in their boarded walls. Apparently the quarry and its appurtenances had been for some time disused. The light which they had seen from the railway line proceeded from one of the sheds, from the interior of which they now heard guttural voices. Peeping through a chink in its wall, they saw four Germans smoking, drinking, and playing cards by the light of oil lamps. There were narrow beds ranged along the opposite wall, some of which were occupied. Helmets and tunics hung from pegs. In one corner rifles were piled. In another stood a cooking stove, its iron chimney passing out through the roof. It was evident that the shed was continuously occupied. At the end nearest the line the door was open, and a sentry paced to and fro.

While the Englishmen were taking stock of all this, they heard the drone of an aeroplane approaching. The four men at the table sprang up, turned down the lamps, seized their rifles and ran to the door. Kenneth stole a few yards along the wall until he came within earshot of them. He was on the shaded side of the shed; there was nothing but miscellaneous litter on the ground, so that it seemed unlikely that the Germans would come in this direction.

"Is it one of ours?" asked one of the men, as the drone grew louder.

"I can't see," replied another. "It sounds like an English machine."

"Well, they won't spot us. They haven't done it by daylight, so they won't now."

"They're flying rather low. We could easily hit them."

"But that would be to give ourselves away. They have gone past. It's all right."

The aeroplane disappeared. But the men had no sooner re-entered the shed than its drone was heard again. They hastened out.

"It's coming round in a circle," said a voice. "The cursed Englishmen seem suspicious."

"They're hunting for the gun, of course. But it has been quiet lately. The captain heard the sound in time. And there's nothing bright about the gun. The English are dished."

"They're no good, the stupid English. They've no chance against German brains."

The aeroplane finally vanished, and the men returned to their cards, turning up the lamps again. Some ten minutes later the report of the gun was heard. It was fired at intervals for an hour, at varying distances; then the low rumble of the train approached. The watchers heard the door of the second shed creak. In a few minutes the train glided up, and entered the shed, into which, it being the middle one of the three, the Englishmen could not see from their present position. After a while the door was closed, and the gun crew joined their comrades. They were not accompanied by their officer, who had no doubt gone to more select and comfortable quarters elsewhere. After exchanging a few words with the cardplayers, the newcomers threw off their clothes and got into bed.

"I should like to have a look into the other sheds," whispered Harry. "But the moon lights up the other side; and the--"

"Don't talk here," said Kenneth. "Come round to the back."

Taking care not to displace loose stones, they crept along the wall and some distance into the quarry.

"They can't hear us here," said Kenneth, still, however, speaking in whispers. "I think we've found out enough. The place is marked on the map. Our gunners can shell it by map measurement."

"Yes, but let's have a look at the other sheds before we go. It won't be safe to go into the moonlight, perhaps; but couldn't we take a peep from the rear?"

"The sheds are built right against the quarry wall. But we'll go and see."

They stole across the litter until they came to the back of the sheds. There they found that there was some chance of achieving their purpose. The wall of the quarry was very uneven, just as it had been hewn out. Consequently the back walls of the sheds did not fit flush against it; there was a space of varying width, but at its narrowest part wide enough to admit a man. Into this they crept.

They discovered that this end of the sheds was in worse repair than the side they had already seen. Protected from the weather by the wall of the quarry, the timber had not been renewed. There were many gaps, and when they touched the wood, its crumbling gave signs of dry rot. But the interiors of the second and third sheds were quite dark: it was impossible to distinguish anything within.

Harry broke off several fragments of the dry wood without making any sound.

"We can get in," he whispered.

Kenneth hesitated. They had learnt enough for their purpose; it would be a pity to risk the failure of the whole enterprise. But youth is adventurous and confident. The voices of the men in the first shed would smother any slight sounds they might make; the sentry was at least a hundred and fifty feet away.

"All right," he murmured.

With their clasp knives they cautiously attacked the boards in the wall of the third shed, stopping every now and again to listen. After a while they were able to remove two of the boards, leaving an opening large enough to admit them. Very carefully they climbed in. Dark as the interior had appeared from the outside, they found when they were inside that there was just light enough, filtering through cracks in the wall, to reveal the contents of the shed. The whole interior, except for narrow gangways, was packed with shells and cases of high explosives. Near the door there were shells for field guns and howitzers, and a certain quantity of small arms ammunition. It was clear that the shed was an ammunition depot.

Creeping carefully back, they replaced the boards, and went to the middle shed, which they managed to enter in the same way, after the exercise of greater patience, owing to the more constricted space between the shed and the wall of the quarry. Here they found the gun train, and a number of petrol tins: evidently the engine was petrol driven. While Kenneth examined the engine as well as he could in the still dimmer light, wishing he dared to use his electric torch, Harry stole to the front of the shed, and watched the sentry through a crack in the badly fitting folding doors. Kenneth followed him.

"Let me know when the sentry's back is turned," he whispered. "I'll use my

torch then.”

Harry gave the sign by a scarcely audible hiss. Kenneth made the best use of the few seconds afforded him at intervals. His experience of motor engines had taught him exactly what to look for. And he was prompted, not by mere curiosity, but by a sudden idea which had occurred to him, but which he had not yet mentioned to his companion. The engine was still warm. He knew that it ran very smoothly; it was provided with a very efficient silencer, or he would not have mistaken it for an electric engine. With their customary thoroughness, the Germans had ensured that the movements of their gun train should lack nothing in secrecy.

The mechanism was simple, similar to that of an ordinary touring car, except that there were only two speeds and reverse.

”Well,” he thought, ”why not run off with the train, gun and all?”

The train had backed into the shed trucks first. They were still coupled to the engine. The load was very heavy; the question was whether he could get up speed in time to escape. Some of the Germans were awake: the sentry was at the door; the feat seemed impossible, and Kenneth dismissed the idea, feeling glad that he had not suggested it to Harry. But before leaving the engine he looked into the tank, and saw that it was half full of petrol.

A hiss called him to the door. The sentry was being changed. The new man was grumbling at having had to leave his bed. The voices in the further shed had ceased.

”All gone to bed?” asked the sentry who was being relieved.

”Yes,” replied the other, yawning.

”Schneider won five marks of me this afternoon. He said he’d give me my revenge. Well, I’ll beat him to-morrow.”

He went into the shed: there was a rustling for a few moments: then all was silent, except for the heavy tramp of the sentry as he paced slowly up and down.

The two Englishmen went back to the quarry wall, and were replacing the boards.

”I say!” whispered Harry.

”What is it?”

”It’s mad, perhaps; but I wondered if we couldn’t run off with the train.”

”Absurd!” replied Kenneth.

”But—”

”Hush! we’ll talk presently.”

They returned to their former position across the quarry.

”I daresay you are right,” said Harry, ”but I wish we could collar that gun.”

”It’s impossible,” said Kenneth, arguing against his own inclination. ”We

couldn't open the door without being seen."

"But it's so ramshackle that it would burst at a touch."

"Then we'd make a row starting the engine, and before we had any speed on they'd be at us."

"I don't know. They've got to wake up, and dress--"

"Why waste time dressing?"

"Well, is a German a soldier without his uniform? Anyhow, they would be too sleepy for a few seconds to understand what was going on. It might just give us time to get off."

"I don't mind telling you that the idea occurred to me, but I gave it up."

"Oh, do let us try it. It's a sporting chance. They feel perfectly secure; that's so much in our favour. They'll be struck all of a heap, and you know what confusion there is when fellows are taken by surprise."

"You've the tongue of the old Serpent, Harry. With a little luck--ah! while we're about it, oughtn't we to blow up the ammunition?"

"That means blowing up the men too."

"Well? We can't take 'em prisoners. And when you remember that every shell in the shed may kill or maim a lot more Englishmen or Frenchmen than there are Germans in the shed, you'll see that it's our duty. War's war, more's the pity. There are some fuses near the door."

"Come on, then."

They stole back. Kenneth crept into the ammunition shed, and started a time fuse while Harry removed the boards from the wall of the engine shed. Just as Kenneth, returning, had almost reached the opening, in his haste he displaced a shell that was standing insecurely. It toppled over with a heavy thud. He sprang through the gap.

"Touch and go now!" he panted. "We haven't a second to lose."

There was no time to replace the boards. They slipped into the engine shed, hearing the sentry call to his comrades and run towards the ammunition shed. In a few moments he would discover the gap in the wall, and the Germans would be scouring the place.

The Englishmen ran to the engine.

"Jump in!" gasped Kenneth.

He stooped down to find the starting handle, in the agitation of the moment forgetting that, when examining the engine, he had noticed the push that indicated a self-starter. There was no crank, but only the shaft on which it should fit. For the moment his brain ceased to work; he was conscious only of the noise of shouts and hurrying footsteps dinning in his ears. Then recollection came in a flash. He raised himself, sprang into the cab of the engine, and simultaneously released the brake and pressed the button of the starting mechanism. Beneath

his feet there was a welcome whirr; he threw the engine into gear, and the heavy machine, with the heavier trucks behind, lurched forward.

The folding door was only eight or nine feet away—little enough space to allow for momentum. It was neck or nothing. At the first movement Kenneth threw out the clutch, racing the engine; then he let it in, and the train jerked itself forward in a way that alarmed him for the couplings. The manoeuvre succeeded. The engine crashed into the crazy door; it was shattered and partly wrenched off the hinges; and the train glided out, rounded the curve, and ran with increasing speed into the straight towards the south.

All this had occupied only a few moments. Meanwhile, what of the Germans? At the thud of the falling shell the sentry was at the farther end of his beat. He hastened towards the ammunition shed, calling to his comrades as he passed their door. Some sprang up, others only turned in their beds. The former, as Harry had foretold, began to throw on their uniforms. There was no sound from outside to alarm them. But a second cry from the sentry caused them to seize their rifles and rush out as they were. They followed him into the ammunition shed, where he showed them, by the light of an electric torch, the hole in the wall. They poked their heads through, and seeing nothing, were beginning to ask each other what they had better do when they heard through the shed wall the whirr of the starting engine. Shouting, they hurried back, overturning shells and bruising their toes, heard the crash of the door, and reached the entrance in time to see the train lumbering round the curve to their left.

One or two rifle shots rang out. Kenneth and Harry heard for a minute or two, above the purring of the engine, shouts as if the Germans were pursuing them on foot. And then there was a terrific roar; the sky was lit up by a flash that blinded the pale moon, and fragments of metal fell in a thick shower upon the train, inflicting sharp blows upon the Englishmen, of which their hands and faces bore signs for several days.

"What double asses we were!" gasped Kenneth. "The row will bring the Bosches swarming about us."

"They'll make for the sheds. By George! what a blaze! Lucky we're running in a hollow. Where does the line lead to?"

"Don't know. Be ready to jump. We're going nearly thirty miles an hour now; I'll slow down in a minute or two. We must get away from the line and hide up."

In a few minutes he slackened speed to about five miles.

"Drop off!" he said.

Harry leapt out. Kenneth opened the throttle to the utmost, put the engine into top, and jumped clear as it gathered way. By the time he had picked himself up the train had disappeared. Clambering up the western bank, the two men,

bending low, raced as fast as they could towards a small clump of trees that stood up dark in the moonlight. They were but halfway across the field when there was a tremendous crash somewhere to their left rear, a sound of tearing and rending, then silence.

"It's run off the line or something," Kenneth panted. "Hope the old gun is smashed."

It was weeks before they knew what had happened. Then, passing over the ground in the course of a general advance of the British forces, they saw the debris of the train, engine, gun, and trucks, lying amid shattered masonry in and beside a shallow brook. The engine had failed to take a sharp curve and dashed into and through the parapet of the bridge.

CHAPTER IX

D.C.M.

The two men had almost reached the clump of trees when they heard the thud of horses' hoofs approaching them from the front. They instantly dropped flat into one of the furrows of the stubble field. Two horsemen galloped round the corner of the clump, and rode down towards the railway, passing within twenty yards of the fugitives.

Waiting breathlessly until the horsemen had gone out of hearing, the two got up, and, still bending low, hurried over the few yards between them and the clump and plunged among the trees.

"We shall have to get back to-night, by hook or crook," whispered Kenneth. "They'll track us down as soon as it is light.... Listen!"

From beyond the clump came the steady tramp of a considerable body of men. Was it possible that the Germans were on their track already? For a few moments they were unable to decide in what direction the men were going. The sounds became gradually fainter, receding towards the railway. Apparently a detachment had been dispatched towards the scene of the conflagration.

They stole towards the western side of the clump, and, standing within the shadow of the trees, looked out across the country. The moon was still up, obscured at moments by drifting clouds. Far ahead, a little to their left, they could just distinguish the tower of the ruined church. Still farther to the left the moonbeams revealed the roofs of the small village which the church served, and

in which, no doubt, German soldiers were billeted. Lying on the eastern slope of a low hill, it was invisible from the British lines, but Kenneth remembered having seen its position marked on the map.

"It's past two o'clock," said Kenneth, glancing at his watch. "The moon won't go down for hours, and it will be light by six. We simply must get back before sunrise. All we can do is to creep along the shady side of the hedges and take our chance."

After a good look round, they left the trees and hurried to the shelter of the nearest hedge. Being now on lower ground, they could no longer see the church: but they judged their general direction by the compass, and made their best speed. Once they found themselves in a field completely surrounded by a hedge. Forcing their way through at the cost of many scratches, they fell some five feet into a ditch that the hedge concealed, and sank over their ankles in slimy mud. They scrambled up the other side, the brambles tearing their skin and clothes, and tramped on again.

It was nearly an hour before they came once more in sight of the church, farther to the left than they had expected. Their best course seemed to be to try to find the communication trench by which they had come. Keeping always on the shady side of the hedges, they paused only to glance towards the tower, to see if the light was still showing, then turned their backs on it and hurried on.

They came to a stretch of open ground on which there was no cover of any kind, and knew that they were now near the trenches. The most nerve-racking portion of their journey was before them. They dared not go erect, in the moonlight. If they should stumble unawares upon an occupied trench it was all up with them. Throwing themselves on the ground, they crawled forward by painful inches, stopping every few seconds to listen. Once the scurry of some wild creature across their front tightened their hearts and sent a cold thrill along their spines. Presently they heard the murmur of voices on their right, and instantly edged to the left, only to be brought to a check after a few minutes by voices in that direction also. Had the rearmost trenches been manned during their absence?

Aching in every limb, they crawled still more slowly over the ground. At last they encountered a ridge of broken earth, and stopped, holding their breath. There was no sound near them; faint murmurs came from a distance. Harry cautiously raised his head, crept forward a few inches, and whispered—

"A trench!"

They peered over. The trench was empty. Sliding into it, they ran along to the left, and presently struck a trench at right angles. This too was empty. They halted at the corner to listen, then hurried along until they had almost reached the second trench. A man, by his figure an officer, turned from it into

the communication trench, and walked rapidly towards the firing line. They pressed themselves against the wall.

"Making his rounds," whispered Kenneth. "Our best chance is to follow him."

"We've come right," said Harry. "There's the water."

A bank of cloud veiled the moon. They hoped it would not pass for the few minutes during which darkness would be so precious a boon. They heard the officer splashing through the water at the further end of the trench, and crept after him as rapidly as they dared. He turned into the firing trench. Voices were heard. There was great risk in crossing the trench, and it occurred to Harry that it would be less dangerous to clamber over the embankment on their left and wade through a few yards of the pond, which could not be very deep thereabout. If the moon remained in cloud, they would not be seen from the trench behind the pond. Accordingly, two or three yards from the angle of the trenches, they swarmed up the bank, and began to let themselves down on the other side, clinging to the earth so that they should not drop heavily.

Then fortune deserted them. The earth crumbled in Kenneth's grasp, and he fell into the water with a great splash. Harry at once flung himself face downwards, and the two crawled through several inches of water towards the dry land. The light was increasing as the thinner end of the cloud moved slowly across the moon. Crushing their inclination to jump to their feet and sprint over the ground towards their trench, they scampered along on all fours. And then the unveiled moon flooded the scene with light.

Shouts came from behind them. Shots rang out, and pattered around them. A bullet carried off the heel of Harry's boot. Still they wriggled on. They were conscious of sounds in front. The trench was alive. A hand grenade fell just behind them, bespattering them with earth. Yard by yard they dragged themselves over the ground; here was the wire entanglement. As they drew themselves under it, a bullet struck one of the tin cans suspended from the top. There were only a few yards now. From right and left a hail of bullets flew from the British trench. They reached the parapet.

[image]

A LONG WAY BACK

"Steady!" whispered Kennedy. "Keep flat for a moment."

But the caution was vain. After coming a hundred yards under fire they thought of nothing but the safety of the trench. They crawled on, over into

friendly arms. Bullets sang around them.

"Pipped!" exclaimed Kenneth, as something stung his shoulder.

But next moment they were safe, dropping exhausted on to the banquette. And then the air was rent by a storm of cheers hurled defiantly at the Germans.

"Good men!" said Kennedy, as he helped Kenneth to pull off his coat. "You're a lucky fellow, by George! It's little more than a graze. I didn't expect to see you back. Ah! here's the captain."

Captain Adams came up.

"Amory hurt? A mere scratch, I see. It was a tight moment. You seemed an age crawling up. But come now, have you anything to report?"

"Ammunition depot blown up, sir."

"That was the row we heard, then," the captain interrupted. "We thought it must have been an accident, as no firing was going on at the time."

"And to the best of our knowledge and belief, the gun is done for."

"You don't say so! Talk, man; a round unvarnished tale deliver. Oh, but this is good!"

The captain was evidently excited. Kenneth and Harry between them related the whole sequence of their adventures, to an audience of the captain, two lieutenants, and as many men of the platoon as could come within earshot. When the story was finished, another roar of cheers burst forth, which was taken up along the trench far on both sides, though the most of the shouting men could not have known as yet what they were cheering for.

"A dashed fine piece of work," said the captain, warmly. "It's a feather in the cap of No. 3 Company, and certain promotion for you two men. You'll have to see the colonel to-morrow, when we get back to billets. Go into the Savoy and sleep; you deserve a day's rest, and you shall have it."

When they reappeared among their comrades next day a broad grin welcomed them.

"You do look uncommon pretty," said Ginger. "I never see anyone like you except once, and that was when a chap I knew got drunk at the fair, had a fight with another chap, tumbled into a blackberry bush on the way home, and was found by a copper in the ditch after it had been raining all night. Your best gals would fair scream at the sight of you. 'Oh George, dear, where did you get them scratches? You've been a-fighting, you horrid creature, you!' 'No, Sally, I've had a little bit of misfortune.' 'Rats! You won't get over me. I'd be ashamed to be seen along of you, with a face like that. I'll walk out with Bill next Sunday, so there!' And off she goes, and on Monday morning you get hold of Bill and spoil his beauty for him, and then there's a pair of you."

Everybody laughed, and the two dirty and disfigured objects concerned understood that that was Ginger's way of paying a compliment.

On returning to the village at the close of the day, they had only just washed and got rid of some of the mud from their clothes when the colonel sent for them. They had to repeat their story.

"I don't happen to have any Iron Crosses," said the colonel, "but I'm going to recommend you for commissions. Officers are badly wanted still, and you've got over that nonsense of a few months back?"

"Not at all, sir," said Kenneth. "We're bound by our promise."

"Ridiculous! I don't mean that you are ridiculous to keep your word, but to give such a promise was a piece of confounded stupidity. Why, goodness alive! after what you've done the men would follow you anywhere."

"It's very good of you, sir," Kenneth replied, "but really we must stick to what we said."

"Not that I want to lose you from my regiment. Well, I shall have to get Captain Adams to give you your stripes. You won't object to that?"

"I'm afraid we must, sir. You see, anything that gave us a lift over the other men would be a breach of the understanding."

"Well, you're a couple of young jackasses. I hope I'm a man of my word, but-- Oh well, have it your own way! Virtue shall be its own reward. You've relieved the whole battalion of a great worry and danger, and I'm uncommonly obliged to you."

It was not until some weeks later that the two friends learnt that their names had appeared in the *Gazette* among a list of men recommended for the distinguished conduct medal. Their refusal of promotion had become known to their comrades, and it was observed that Ginger and some of his friends often had their heads together, and appeared to be conducting delicate negotiations with the men of the other platoons.

CHAPTER X

HOT WORK

Kenneth had not omitted to report the signalling from the church tower. The light had not been seen from the trenches of his own battalion, and it was guessed that the receiver of the messages was at some other point behind the long British front. But on the first night of their return to billets it occurred to Harry that the light might possibly be visible from some post of equal height with the tower

in which it shone, and he suggested to Kenneth that they should go up into the belfry of the church in their village. In order to give no excuse for a German bombardment the colonel had refrained from making use of this as an observation post, which some of his officers regarded as an excess of scrupulousness. It would be necessary to get permission now before Harry's suggestion could be acted upon.

Harry put the question to Captain Adams. He saw the colonel, who in view of the fact that the Germans were certainly using a church tower a few miles away gave his consent. Finding, therefore, the sacristan, Harry and Kenneth got him to take them up the belfry at about the same hour as they had seen the Germans' lamp.

Furnished with Captain Adams' field-glasses, they scanned the country in turns. For a long time they had no reward, and they were indeed on the point of quitting the spot when Kenneth caught sight of a twinkle far away to the south-east. It vanished and reappeared at irregular intervals, just as the light from the tower had done.

"We are not getting the full rays here," said Kenneth, after Harry had taken a look. "But it is clear that they are signalling to someone in this direction, more or less."

"Let us go half way down the tower, and see if the light is visible there," suggested Harry.

But they found that only at the foot of the belfry itself could they catch sight of the twinkling light.

"It's very cleverly arranged," Harry remarked. "They are not signalling to this village, that's clear. There's certainly no observer but ourselves here, and no other place is high enough to catch the rays."

"Except Obernai's house," said Kenneth, looking round over the village. Most of the roofs were considerably lower than the spot on which they stood. Only the attics of the Alsatian philanthropist's house rose above that level. That large building in its extensive grounds was about sixty yards to their left. There was a light in one of the lower rooms, where Captain Adams and several other officers were billeted: the rest was dark.

"It's not very likely, after that spy business, that any of Obernai's servants is in German pay," Kenneth continued. "Still I'll tell the captain what we have seen."

He made his report to Captain Adams next morning. Later in the day the captain said to him:

"There's nothing in that matter, Amory. I asked Monsieur Obernai whether his servants were trustworthy, and he assured me that he had had them for years, and could answer for them all. I didn't tell him why I had made the enquiry; it's

best to keep these things as quiet as possible; we don't want to make people uneasy. I've no doubt the signals are directed to some place farther away on our left, and the colonel is sending word along the front, asking them to keep a look-out."

Nothing more was heard of the signalling for a long time.

When they returned to the trenches, their position was somewhat altered. The Rutlands were moved a little to the right, and Kennedy's platoon occupied a portion of the trench which had formerly been held by another platoon.

Kenneth was making himself comfortable in a dug-out with Harry and Ginger when he picked up, among the various articles left by its former occupants, a piece of ruled music paper dotted with notes.

"A relic of your friend Stoneway, Ginger," he said with a laugh. "He's the only musician in the company."

"Is he, by George!" cried Harry. "You forget I was in the school choir, old chap."

"So you were! I remember how the mothers used to admire your pretty little cherub face when you let off your songs on the platform. 'Isn't he sweet, mother?' I heard a girl say once. You remember how we rotted you."

"Yes, confound it! I was jolly glad when my voice broke, and I got out of all that. I haven't sung a note since; if I try, my voice is like a nutmeg grater."

"You've lost your cherubic mug too, old man. But look here; whistle over this tune; let's hear what it is."

Harry took the paper, scanned it for a moment or two, then said:

"It's no tune at all. The notes go up and down all anyhow."

He whistled a few notes.

"Oh, for any sake stop it!" implored Ginger. "It's Stoneway's exercises, by the sound of it. Call that music! It's enough to make a cat ill."

"I'll give it back to Stoneway next time I see him," said Harry.

"Tear it up," said Ginger. "If he hasn't got it, perhaps he can't--"

A shout interrupted him.

"Stand to! Here they come!"

They seized their rifles and rushed out into the trench, Harry stuffing the paper into his pocket. The men were posting themselves a yard apart on the banquette, looking excitedly through the loopholes. Across the open ground in front the Germans were advancing in a serried mass. It was a surprise attack, not heralded, in the customary way, by a bombardment. The testing moment had come for the Rutlands at last.

They stood at their posts, tense, quiet with excitement. Ginger's features twitched; Harry's lips were parted. With their fingers at the triggers they awaited breathlessly the order to fire. On came the dense grey lines. The Germans did

not fire; with fixed bayonets they swarmed forward rapidly. They came to the wire entanglement; with clock-work precision every man in the first rank plied his nippers, and then, in the trench, Kennedy cried in a hoarse whisper:

”Three rounds, rapid!”

All along the line sounded the crackle of rifles. On the right a machine-gun rattled; on the left another. Three times the rifles spoke. Men were shouting, they knew not what. Other sounds mingled with the din: yells, groans, guttural orders from the German officers; and at the wire entanglement lay a long swathe of fallen men.

But behind them another multitude was dashing on. They leapt over their stricken comrades, only to drop in their turn before the withering volley from their unseen enemy in the trench. Through the gaps poured an unending torrent; the grey-clad men were drawing nearer to the trench. The rifle-fire was now continuous, but it was of no avail to repel this close-packed horde. There was no longer question of taking cover. The Rutlands leapt up to meet the charge. They fired as fast as they could, until their rifles were hot. In spite of their losses the Germans pressed on until sheer weight of numbers carried them to the edge of the trench.

It is not for us to describe the scene of carnage there—the hideous work of the bayonets, the cries of the wounded, the hoarse shouts of defenders and assailants. The Germans fell back. Kennedy’s clear voice shouted the order for volley-firing. And now came a fierce reply from the German ranks. Then they fell on their knees and crawled forward again. Again they were driven back. They began to retreat. And then Kennedy leapt on the parapet and gave the command to charge. The men responded with alacrity. Up they scrambled, over the fallen men, and dashed forward with exultant shouts. There was a whizz and boom overhead. The British artillery behind was coming into play. From the front came deafening crashes; columns of earth and smoke rose into the air. The Rutlands lay on the ground until the guns had ceased fire; then dashed on. They plunged into the reek about the German trench; they sprang over the parapet and drove the Germans out; and a storm of cheers acclaimed their victory.

They were preparing to hold the ground they had won when word was brought that strong reinforcements were hurrying up to the Germans from the east. They had no reserve strong enough to hold the new line in face of a superior force. The colonel ordered them to evacuate the trench, after doing as much damage as was possible in the short time available.

The men set to work with their own trenching tools and with those abandoned by the Germans to hack down the walls of the trench. Kenneth caught up a pick, and remembering the pond at the right of the communicating trench, he began to cut a hole through the three or four feet of intervening earth. Gin-

ger joined him. In a few minutes the water burst through in spate, flooding the trenches, and driving the Englishmen out pell-mell.

Laughing, singing, throwing jokes one to another, they returned to their own trenches. They picked up swords, rifles, helmets, and other articles of equipment that were scattered over the ground, threaded their way among the fallen men, stopping here and there to assist wounded comrades. Meanwhile the British artillery was pounding the German lines to discourage a renewed attack, and the Red Cross men moved swiftly and silently over the field.

Kenneth had not seen Harry for some time, and was anxious about him. But the friends met at the edge of their trench. Each ran his eyes rapidly over the other; their set faces cleared when they recognised that neither was hurt.

Settled down once more in their dug-out, the three men talked over their experiences.

"I felt my blood run cold," said Harry, "but I hadn't time to be afraid. I feel worse now. Look at my hand shaking."

Ginger, very pale, was mechanically cleaning his rifle. He flung it down with a curse.

"What have they done to me?" he cried. "What have they done to me? I killed an officer, a nice young chap as might have been your brother. What for? What about his mother? And all those poor chaps yonder: why can't them as make wars let us alone? Men ain't made to kill each other. What's the good of it all? When the war's over, millions dead, millions crippled, millions miserable. It didn't ought to be."

"We're serving our country, Ginger," said Kenneth. "It's not a question of just the present moment. We've got to think of the future. What would life be worth to our people at home if the Germans had their way? You can get nothing good without paying the price, and it will be good if we can teach the Germans and the world that force isn't everything, that people have a right to live their own lives without being bullied. For every man that dies, whether English or German, perhaps thousands may have a better time in days to come. That's worth fighting for, and dying for, if need be. We've all got our little part to play. It's not a thing you can argue about: you feel it. Look at what Sir Edward Grey said: he'd rather cut the old country altogether than be obliged to give up our good English ways and to put up with German tyranny. Don't you feel like that too? Well, that's why we are fighting; we're fighting to call our souls our own,

and, please God, we'll win."

CHAPTER XI

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF GINGER

It was when the battalion next returned to billets that the meaning of Ginger's confabulations with the men of other platoons came out.

One evening after supper Kenneth and Harry were smoking in the Bonnards' kitchen. They were alone. Ginger and the other members of their billet had left them some little while before, and the men's faces had worn the sly, conscious look of those who are meditating a secret design.

"If I didn't know Ginger, I should think they were up to some mischief," Harry had said.

Presently the door opened, and Ginger reappeared, at the head of eight or ten men from other platoons of No. 3 Company. They all looked a little sheepish and uncomfortable as they filed into the room. Some hung back and were pushed forward by their mates. Ginger moved to the rear, and was instantly seized by several hands and expostulated with in fierce whispers.

"Keep your wool on; I'm only going to shut the door," said Ginger.

"What's in the wind, you fellows?" said Kenneth. "Why are you hanging about the door? Come round the fire and light up: we'll have a smoking concert or something."

There were mutterings among the group. Some words reached the ears of the two men at the fire-place.

"It's your job: you're a sergeant."

"No fear; you don't catch me..."

"Ginger's the man..."

"Spouts like a M.P...."

At last Ginger was pushed through to the front. He grinned, half turned to protest, was swung round again; then he drew his hand across his mouth.

"Mr. Harry, and Mr. Amory," he began.

"Oh, come now, no misters here," Harry broke in.

"Not in the ordinary way, of course," said Ginger, "but this ain't an ordinary occasion. The fact is, we're a deputation, that's what we are; a deputation from No. 3 Company, and the other chaps have made me foreman of the jury. Not

as I want to push myself; not me. I consider it's a job for a three-stripe man; but Sergeant Colpus here is a very bashful and retiring man, though you'd never think it to look at him."

"Dry up!" growled the sergeant, turning fiery red as the other men sniggered.

"Well, you *would* put it on to me," Ginger went on, "and I must do it my own way, always respecting my superior officer, of course. Being foreman of the jury, I speak for 'em all, got to give the verdict, as you may say. The fact of it is, we men of No. 3 Company, what you may call the Randall Company, ain't easy in our minds at the idea of being dogs in the manger like. We know as the colonel wants to make you officers, and we think it ain't fair to you or the army to keep you in the ranks 'cause of us. A promise is all right, and we take it very kind that you've stuck to your guns, in a manner of putting it, all these months. Speaking for myself, I didn't expect nothing else. But we think it 'ud be a dirty shame if we held you to your promise now, specially when every man of us knows you ought to be officers, and there's not a man of us but would be proud to follow your lead anywhere. And so we've come to say that the promise is off, and we don't stand in the way of your getting your rights."

There was a chorus of approval as Ginger wiped his mouth again and stepped back among his comrades.

"It's very good of you, Ginger," said Harry, "but I'm sure neither Amory nor myself want to leave the ranks."

"Not at all," said Kenneth: "thanks all the same."

"But it ain't right," said Ginger, coming forward again. "We've learnt a thing or two since we started being soldiers, and we've lost a lot of the bally nonsense that used to fill our heads, about all men being equal and such like. Mind you, I'm a Socialist, as strong as ever I was. I say now, as I've said afore, that there's no call for a man to stick himself up and think himself mighty superior 'cos he's got a quid for every penny I've got. And I don't say but what, if we'd had your eddication and chances and all that, we wouldn't be as good as you. But that ain't the point. We've got to look at things as they are, and be honest about it, and what I say is that you've had the training that makes officers and we haven't; and besides, you were born one way and we were born another, and it's no good trying to make out that chalk's as good as cheese. And there's another thing. When we've got a tough job afore us like licking the Germans we're bound to consider what's best for the company and the regiment, and if a man is cut out for an officer it's simply silly to keep him a private: he ain't in his right place, doing his right job. So we think it's only right for us and the army that you should do what the colonel wants, and that's the size of it."

"Is that what you all think?" asked Kenneth.

"Well, I can't say that; all but one or two, and they're a disgrace to the company. There's--"

"I don't want to know who they are," said Kenneth, interrupting. "We're both immensely obliged to you for your good-will, but we enlisted on certain terms, and I feel for my part that we can't break our contract without the unanimous consent of the company."

"I agree," said Harry. "The men enlisted on the faith of our promise, and it wouldn't be fair to break it without the consent of all. So we'll drop it, Ginger, and go on as before."

"It's for you to say, sir," said Ginger. "There! 'Sir,' says I. A slip of the tongue, mates; you can't get out of bad habits all of a sudden. Well, I'll say for No. 3 Company that we'd be sorry to lose such good pals, and as there's no chance that St-- that the pigheaded members of the jury will come round to the opinion of the sensible ones, we may reckon it as certain that the defendants will be condemned to serve as Tommies for three years or the duration of the war."

"And now we'll discharge the jury," said Kenneth, "and have a sing-song until 'lights out.' Come on, Ginger; start off with 'Dolly Grey.'"

Next afternoon Kenneth was summoned to the captain.

"I've a little job for you, Amory. You know how to drive a motor; do you know anything about the mechanism?"

"Not much; but Ginger--that is, Murgatroyd, sir--is a bit of a mechanic. Of course I'll have a shot at whatever is required."

"Add Randall, and we have the Three Musketeers complete. You didn't know that's our name for you, I suppose? Well, it's this. A motor cyclist came in just now with a despatch for the colonel, and reported that on the way he had passed a man who'd had an accident of some sort with a motor lorry, and wanted help. Just go and see what you can do, the three of you. I don't know whether the load is for us; if it is, so much the better. Take my map; the breakdown is thereabouts"--he pointed to a spot some three miles away--"and be as quick as you can."

The three men set out, Ginger carrying a bag of tools he had borrowed from the village smith. The place where the accident had happened was apparently on a by-road about halfway between the village and the headquarters of the next regiment on the left of the Rutlands. They followed footpaths across the fields, some of which had been sown by the inhabitants. The air was very misty, and but for the map they could hardly have found their way. But presently they caught sight of a man in khaki sitting on the grass at the corner of the main road and by-road. The man bore the badge of the Army Service Corps on his sleeve.

"What's wrong?" asked Kenneth, going up to him.

"Are you the Wessex?" said the man.

"No, the Rutlands. You've had a spill by the look of you."

"You're right," said the driver with an oath. "And I owe that there parson one. It's his fault. Did that cyclist send you along?"

"No, but the capting did," said Ginger. "Where's your lorry? We'll have a go at it."

"Well, if you two chaps 'll be a pair of crutches I'll take you to it. I'm bruised all over, and my ankle's got a twist so that I can't hardly walk. It's about a mile away."

Supported by Kenneth on one side and Harry on the other, the man led them slowly along the by-road.

"I only came out a week ago, a Carter Paterson man I am," he said. "I was driving up a load of grub for the Wessexes, and somehow took the wrong turning away back there. I'd drive over London blindfold, but I'm new to this job, see. It came over misty, and I got a sort of notion I was on the wrong road, and there was nobody about to ask the way of, even supposing I could have made 'em understand me. However, at last I happened to catch sight of a fat parson in a long cloak just ahead of me. I pulled up, and pointed to the name of the village on my map, for twist my tongue to it I couldn't. 'All right, my man,' says he, speaking English like a countryman. 'You take the first turning on the right': that's this road we're on now. That seemed about the right direction. 'Good road?' says I: 'not too soft for a heavy load?' 'Capital road,' says he. 'Go as fast as you like, straight through to the road you've left.'

"Well, it seemed all right. Wasn't a bad road for a bit, and I put on speed to make up for lost time. Then, just as I was going through an avenue of trees, and what with the mist and the shade couldn't see more than a few yards ahead, the road took a sharp dip, and I throttled down and screwed on the brakes; but the road made a sudden bend, and before I knew where I was, I was chucked in the ditch by the roadside. I was dazed for a bit, and when I come to, there was the lorry in the field. I crawled to it; it was stuck fast, and even if it hadn't been I couldn't have driven it in the mashed state I was in. A pretty fix to be in, in a strange country, with no garage handy. I didn't know what to do. When I'd recovered a bit, I crawled back to see if I could find that parson. It was all his fault, not warning me, and he ought to get me out of the mess. But I couldn't find him, so all I could do was to crawl to the main road, on the chance of seeing some of our chaps. It was hours before any one came along; just my luck; another time the road would very likely have been crowded. But presently that cyclist came up at forty miles an hour. He would have gone past if I hadn't bellowed like a bull. He wouldn't get off his machine to take a look at the lorry, but he said he'd send help if he could. And all I want is to get hold of that parson; I'd know him again in a minute by his size and the wart on his nose. Why, a German

couldn't have served me a dirtier trick; and he said he knew the road.... There's the lorry; I doubt whether you'll get it up; and the Wessexes howling for their grub, I expect."

The lorry was tilted over to one side, with the near front wheel embedded nearly up to the axle in the soft earth of the field.

"Got a jack?" asked Ginger.

"You'll find it under the seat."

Ginger fetched it, and with his companions tried to jack the wheel up; but the tool sank into the earth.

"Let's unload and then see," suggested Kenneth.

It took them half an hour to unload the car, working so hard that they were all bathed in perspiration. Again they plied the jack, but in vain.

"The only chance is to get something solid to put under it," said Ginger.

"There's nothing handy hereabouts. Any houses about here?" he asked the driver.

"Hanged if I know. It was too misty to see when I came along. The parson lives somewhere, I suppose."

"I'll run up the hill and take a look round," said Harry.

"Take your rifle, man," Kenneth called, as Harry was starting without it.

"All right; but we're miles away from the German front. You might have a look at the engine while I'm gone."

All this time there had been sounds of firing in the distance eastward, with reports of British guns at intervals nearer at hand. But they were now so familiar with such sounds that they scarcely heeded them. Guns and gunners were alike out of sight. There were few signs of war immediately around them; but for the absence of human activity on the fields the country might have been at peace.

Harry went up the hill and for some distance along the road before he discovered anything that promised assistance. A slight breeze was dispersing the mist; but the sun was already far down in the western sky; in an hour or two it would be dark. At length, on his right he noticed a rough cart track leading to a small farm building half hidden in a hollow about half a mile away. He hurried towards it across the fields, soon regretting that he had not gone by the beaten track, for the soil was soft and heavy.

Approaching the building at an angle, he saw a man pottering about in the yard. While he was still at some distance the man happened to glance towards him, then went into the house. Harry quickened his pace, and entering the yard, was met at the house door by a burly individual who gave a somewhat surly response to his salutation. In his best French Harry explained the circumstances, and asked for the loan of a stout board.

"You'll find one in the shed yonder," said the man. "You'll bring it back?"

"Oh yes," Harry replied, thinking that the farmer might at least have offered

to help. "By the way, could you lend us a horse to pull the lorry on to the roadway when we get it up?"

"I haven't got one; all my horses are requisitioned."

"That's hard luck. I hope we'll soon clear the country, and there'll be better times. Many thanks: I'll return the board presently."

Reflecting on the hardships war inflicted on honest country people, Harry trudged back with the plank, this time taking the cart track.

"Good man!" said Kenneth. "Where did you get it?"

"At a small farm. The farmer's rather a bear, but I suppose the war has pretty well ruined him. Now, Ginger, let's see what we can do."

Placing the plank by the embedded wheel, they set the jack on it and screwed up the axle until they finally succeeded in releasing the wheel.

"The lorry isn't damaged, luckily," said Kenneth. "We'll get the wheel on to the plank, then I'll start the engine and we'll back on to the road. You fellows shove."

In a few more minutes the lorry stood on the road, facing towards its original destination.

"Now for loading up," said Harry. "This is back-aching work; I shouldn't care to be a docker."

The three men started to carry the boxes and baskets from the field to the lorry, the driver sitting on the grass by the roadside. They were about halfway through the work when they heard the hum of an aeroplane. Like the reports of artillery it was so common a sound that they paid little attention to it. But Kenneth, glancing up as the sound grew louder, exclaimed:

"It's a Taube, about 5000 feet up. I fancy. There'll be a pretty chase presently. By Jove! it's dropping. Something must have gone wrong with the engine. I'll try a pot shot at it if you fellows will go on loading."

Seizing his rifle, he stood watching the aeroplane as it circled above them, gradually coming lower.

"Look out!" he cried suddenly.

Almost as soon as he had spoken there was a terrific crash on the road about thirty yards away, and a shower of earth and stones bespattered the lorry and the men. Kenneth fired as the Taube made another sweep round, still lower.

"Here's another!" he called. "Down with you."

They all threw themselves flat on their faces. The second bomb exploded farther away than the first, doing no damage. They sprang to their feet, and all three fired at the aeroplane, which was now making a vol plané, and would come to earth apparently about half a mile away.

"We'll nab them," cried Ginger. "Come on."

They ran up the hill. The aeroplane was descending on the far side of the

farm, near a clump of trees. They rushed across the fields, and were just in time to see a man leap from the aeroplane and dive into the copse. The farmer joined them as they ran past. They came to the aeroplane. The pilot was *in extremis*. After the shot had struck him he had managed to control the machine until it reached earth; he would never fly again.

"We must catch the other fellow," said Kenneth.

All three ran into the copse, the farmer following them. Separating, they scoured the plantation in all directions without finding the fugitive. After about half an hour Kenneth called the others together.

"He seems to have got away," he said. "We must give it up. It'll soon be dark, and we've got to get the lorry home. Ginger, will you mount guard over the aeroplane? Our fellows are sure to have seen it, and will no doubt be coming up shortly. We'll motor back if we can borrow a car."

"Right you are," said Ginger. "I'll wait for you, in any case."

The others left him, returned to the lorry, and lifting the driver on to it, drove off rapidly towards its destination. There they told their story, and the colonel at once sent off a motor omnibus with a number of men to secure the aeroplane. When they approached the spot where they had left it the machine was gone.

"Somebody must have fetched it already," said Kenneth. "It's a pity you fellows are too late."

They drew up at the rear of the farm. Kenneth and Harry sprang out, surprised that Ginger was not awaiting them.

"He's inside, perhaps," said Harry. "He makes friends of most people; perhaps he has got over the farmer's surliness."

They went through the yard to the house door. The farmer met them on the threshold.

"Ah, messieurs," he said, "this is lamentable."

"What do you mean?" asked Harry.

"Your comrade, messieurs, he is gone. I fear he is a prisoner. He made signs that he was thirsty, and I left him there at the aeroplane while I returned here to fetch him some little refreshment. *Ma foi!* I was just uncorking the bottle when I heard a whirr. I rushed out with the bottle in one hand and the corkscrew in the other, and *voilà!* there was the aeroplane already in the air."

"But how?—what..."

"I do not know," said the farmer, with a shrug. "I only guess. The man who ran away must have hidden until your backs were turned, then come back and overpowered your comrade and flown away with him."

"That's very rummy," said Kenneth to Harry. "Ginger isn't a man to be caught napping easily. What do you make of it, sir?" he asked the lieutenant in

charge of the omnibus party, who had followed them.

Kenneth repeated the farmer's story.

"Very curious," said the officer quietly. "The man wasn't himself a flier, I suppose?"

"No."

"Well, I think we'll run your farmer back to headquarters. It looks rather fishy: there are spies all over the place. You speak French? I don't, more's the pity. Just tell this fellow he's to come with me."

The farmer protested volubly, but the officer was inexorable. The omnibus party returned with their prisoner, and Kenneth and Harry tramped back in the twilight to their village.

CHAPTER XII

DOGGED

There was great indignation among the men of No. 3 Company when Ginger's capture was reported. Latterly the German airmen had rarely appeared behind the British lines; their experiences had usually been unfortunate. "Like their cheek!" grumbled one of the men. "And to carry off Ginger, too, after a lucky shot had brought 'em down. That farmer chap must have been a spy, and I hope they'll give him what he deserves over yonder."

The loss of the most popular man in the battalion was a blow to the Rutlands. And to be a prisoner they counted the worst of luck. Death they were ready for; to be wounded was all in the day's work; there was not a man of them but preferred death or wounds to captivity, to be the mock and sport of a misguided populace, and the victim of brutal and barbarous guards.

"And we can't do nothing," growled a sergeant. "Lor bless you, when I think of the stories I read as a nipper in the boys' papers, daring rescues, hairbreadth escapes and all that—what a peck of rubbish I used to swallow! And believe it all too, mind you. It all looked so easy. There was the prison, and the jailer's pretty daughter, perhaps a file to cut away the bars, or a knife to dig a tunnel underground, or a note carried to a wonderful clever pal outside, or the prisoner dressing up in the gal's clothes: gummy, how excited I used to get. Them chaps that write the blood-curdlers don't know nothing about the real thing, that's certain."

Kenneth laughed.

"The real thing tops anything ever invented, after all," he said. "You've heard of how Latude escaped from the Bastille; and how Lord Nithsdale escaped from the Tower; and how an English prisoner—I forget his name—a hundred years ago made a most wonderful escape from the French fortress of St. Malo; and only the other day, a German prisoner in Dorchester had himself screwed into a box and nearly got away."

"Nearly ain't quite, though. But I never heard of those other Johnnies; you might tell us about them—if they're true, that is; I don't want no fairy tales."

And Kenneth beguiled an evening or two by relating all the historical escapes he could remember.

Ginger's case, they agreed, was hopeless. The papers, it was true, had recorded the escape of Major Vandeleur from Crefeld, without giving any of the particulars which the men were hungry for. That a British lance-corporal could ever escape from a German concentration camp was beyond the bounds of possibility, and they had to resign themselves to the hope of one day, when the war was over, seeing Ginger again, perhaps half-starved, ill, wretched, a speaking monument of German "culture."

The Rutlands were sent into the trenches again, where they again endured the tedium of watchful inactivity.

One evening, Captain Adams sent Kenneth to the village with a message. The telephone between the village and the trenches had suddenly failed. Kenneth found the place busier than he had ever known it. A new regiment had arrived. Officers of all ranks were present; despatch riders were coming in. He was asked to wait for a return message to the firing line. While waiting he became aware of a considerable movement some distance in the rear of the British lines. There were sounds of heavy vehicles in motion in several directions. Something was clearly in the air.

It was about three hours before he was sent for and received a written message from a staff-officer.

"What's your name?" he was asked.

"Amory, sir."

"Oh! You had a hand in destroying that German gun the other day?"

"Yes, sir," replied Kenneth, rather taken aback to find that his name had become known.

"A capital bit of work! Get on with this despatch as quickly as you can. It's important. And if you have heard anything out there"—he pointed to the rear—"you needn't say anything about it. There are spies everywhere. The telephone wire has been repaired, by the way; it was cut near the village; but we've a reason for not using it just at present. Tell Colonel Appleton that, will you?"

The night was very dark, but by this time Kenneth knew every inch of the road to the trenches. There was desultory firing, both artillery and rifle, for a considerable distance along the lines ahead. As he left the village the sounds from the rear grew fainter, drowned by the firing and by a moderate wind blowing from the direction of the enemy's lines.

The road was quite deserted. All coming and going between the trenches and the billets had ceased for the night. But when he had walked for about a quarter of a mile he was conscious of that strange, often unaccountable feeling that sometimes steals upon a solitary pedestrian on a lonely road at night—the feeling that he was not alone. He had heard neither footfall nor whisper; the wind sighed through the still almost bare branches of the trees. His feeling, he thought, was probably due to mere nervousness caused by the knowledge that he was carrying an important despatch. But it became so strong that he sat down by the roadside and slipped off his boots, slinging them round his neck, and walked on heedfully in his stockings, keeping a look-out for holes in the road, and stretching his ears for the slightest unusual sound.

In a moment or two he came to the end of the avenue of poplars; those which had formerly lined the rest of the road had been felled, partly to provide wood for the trenches, partly for the sake of the gunners. On the left, a few yards from the road, was a small plantation. It had been sadly damaged by German shells, but many trees still remained. Just as he came opposite to the plantation his ears caught a sound which, though indistinguishable in the wind, was different from the rustling of branches or foliage. It appeared to come from behind him. He slipped from the road towards the clump of trees; then, as it suddenly occurred to him that some other person might be making for the same place, he reached for a branch just above his head, and swung himself up with the "up-start" of the gymnasium. It was a frail support, but he sat astride the branch near the trunk, and there, among the burgeoning twigs, he waited.

His senses had not deceived him. Three vague shapes moved out of the blackness, and passed almost beneath him. His ears scarcely caught the sound of their movements; yet sound there was, a dull muffled tread as though their feet were blanketed. Who were these nocturnal prowlers? What were they about? Kenneth wished there were no despatch buttoned up in his pocket, so that he were free to follow these stealthy figures. He had not been able to determine whether they wore uniforms. If they were villagers, they had no right to be hereabouts at night.

Peering through the foliage, he was just able to discern that the three men had halted at the edge of the plantation. For a moment or two there was complete silence. He guessed they had stopped to listen. Then they spoke in whispers. A few words were carried on the wind to Kenneth's attentive ears: "Soeben gehört

... ganz nahe ... ja."

"They're after me!" thought Kenneth. He had no doubt that it was he whom they had referred to as "just heard ... quite near." Spies were everywhere, as the staff-officer had said. These men must have learnt in the village that he was carrying a despatch. He wished that he could stalk the stalkers, but he dared do nothing that would endanger his errand. One man he might have tackled; with three the odds were too heavy against him. And while he was still debating the matter with himself the three dark shapes had disappeared as silently as they had come.

He waited a minute or two. They had apparently gone along the road which he himself was to follow. They might suspect that they had outstripped him, and ambush him before he reached the trenches. He must dodge them by making a detour. Dropping lightly to the ground he skirted the northern side of the plantation and struck across the ploughed land at what seemed a safe distance from the road. The soil was sticky; his progress was slow; and he stopped every now and again to listen. For some time he heard nothing but the wind and the crack of distant rifles or the boom of guns. Presently, as he drew nearer to the trenches, there fell faintly on his ear the customary sounds of conversation, laughter, singing. At one moment he believed he heard the tootle of Stoneway's flute. As these sounds increased in loudness, he despaired of recognising the stealthy movements of the spies. He unslung his rifle, resolving, if he caught sight of them, to fire. The shot, even if it failed to dispose of any of them, would probably bring men from the trenches in sufficient numbers to deal with them.

He had to guess his course across the fields, pushing here through a hedge, there descending into a slimy ditch and crawling up the further side. At last he caught sight of a landmark: a ruined shed which stood about two hundred yards in rear of the trenches. To reach the trench in which Colonel Appleton had his quarters he must strike across to the right, and pass between the shed and the road.

There was no sign of the three spies. The fields were quite bare; the shed was the only thing that afforded cover. Instinctively he gave it a wide berth, and was leaving it some paces on his left when he heard a sudden guttural exclamation, and two figures rushed from the shed towards him. There was no time to fire. Uttering a shout he thrust his bayonet towards the assailants. The stock of his rifle was seized from behind. And now, at this critical moment, the years of training on the football field, in the gymnasium, on Mr. Kishimaru's practice lawn, bore fruit in instantaneous decision and rapid action. Releasing his rifle suddenly, the man behind him fell backward to the ground. At the same moment Kenneth stooped, tackled the nearest of the other men, and brought him down. The second man toppled over them. Freeing himself instantly, Kenneth

sprang up and sprinted towards the road, hearing in a moment the thud of heavy footsteps behind him.

But there were sounds also in front. His shout had been heard in the trenches, and some of the Rutlands were running to meet him. A word from him sent them at a rush towards the shed. Leaving them to hunt for the spies, he hurried on and delivered his despatch to the colonel, to whom he related his adventure.

It was some time before the men returned.

"They got away," said one of them. "It was no good hunting any longer in the dark. But we've brought these."

He handed over Kenneth's rifle and a cap bearing the badge of a Territorial regiment. It was clear that the spies had disguised themselves in British uniforms. The colonel telephoned particulars to the village, asking that a thorough search should be made; but other matters were then engaging attention.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FIGHT FOR THE VILLAGE

In the darkest hours before the dawn the trenches were buzzing with excitement. Word had been passed along that next morning the Rutlands were to attack. The long, trying period of inaction was over. Sir John French had ordered the capture of the village within the German lines. The hill on which it stood commanded a wide stretch of open country, and its possession was an essential preliminary to the general advance which would take place when the weather improved and the reserves of ammunition were completed.

During these last hours of the night sleepy men trudged along the road and across the sodden fields towards the firing line. Fresh troops, some of whom had never been under continuous fire, crowded into the trenches. Some of the men tried to prepare breakfast in the constricted space; the most of them were too much excited to feel any inclination to eat. The bustle which Kenneth had noticed in the village was explained. Batteries of heavy artillery had been brought up and placed all along the rear of the British lines. The men listened eagerly for the boom that would announce the great doings of the day, and they gazed up into the inky sky, longing for the dawn.

Sitting, sprawling, packed tight in the trenches, they waited. Would morn-

ing never come? The darkness thinned; the blackness gradually was transformed into ashen grey, streaked here and there with silvery light. A gun boomed miles in the rear. The men stifled a cheer. Rifle fire burst from the German trenches. Bullets pinged across the breastworks, and some of the newcomers involuntarily ducked. Captain Adams passed along the simple orders of the day. "The battalion will advance in line of platoons at 7 o'clock." Another hour to wait!

The men took off their equipment and stowed their coats in their packs. Some munched sticks of chocolate, others lighted cigarettes but forgot to smoke them. Boom, boom! The British guns were in full play. The German guns were answering. Shells screamed across the trenches in both directions. The din increased moment by moment. The air quivered with the thunderous crashes, and sang with the perpetual *phwit, phwit* of bullets. Not a man dared to lift his head. Clouds of earth rose into the air before and behind, showering pellets upon the waiting soldiers.

Boom and roar and crash! Presently the stream of shells from the Germans diminished. It almost ceased.

"Platoons, get ready!"

"Fix bayonets!"

The men began to swarm up the parapet. There was no enemy to be seen. The wire stretched across their front had been battered down in many places.

All at once there was a great stillness. The artillery had finished its work.

"Now, men!" shouted Kennedy, commander of the leading platoon.

With a cheer the men rushed forward, Kenneth on the right, Harry on the left. On either side other regiments had already deployed and were advancing. They came to the first of the German trenches—empty, except for prone and huddled forms in grey, and a litter of rifles, helmets, water-bottles, mess-tins, equipment of all kinds. Kenneth sprang into the communication trench beside the pond, and splashed through the water at the bottom, the rest of the platoon after him. Where were the Germans?

They came to the second line of trenches, floundered through what seemed an endless series of mysterious zigzag passages, waded through two or three feet of greenish water, scrambled up the embankment beyond, and raced across the open field, as fast as men could race with packs on their backs, full haversacks, and rifle and bayonet, over ground pitted with holes, heaped with earth and stones, scattered with the bodies of men, strands of barbed wire, fragments of shells and all the dreadful apparatus of warfare. Still there were no Germans to be seen, but bullets spat and sang among the advancing men; here a man fell with a groan, there one tumbled upon his face without even a murmur, scarcely noticed by his comrades pressing on and on with shouts and cheers.

Kennedy's platoon reached the ruined church which Kenneth and Harry

had passed on their memorable night expedition. With shaking limbs and panting lungs they flung themselves down behind the wall of the churchyard for a brief rest. The next rush towards the village would be across two hundred and fifty yards of open ground, bare of cover until they came to the gardens at the back of the cottages.

The modern battle makes greater demands on individual effort and resource than the old-time battles on less extensive fields, where all the operations were conducted under the eye of the commander-in-chief. Kennedy's men knew nothing of what was going on on their left and right. They heard the insistent crackle of rifles, the rapid clack-clack of machine guns, the whistling of shrapnel. They saw the white and yellow puffs, with now and then a burst of inky blackness, in the sky. Boom and crash, rattle and crack; pale flashes of fire; the ground trembling as with an earthquake; all the work of deadly destructive machines, operated by some unseen agency. And in a momentary lull there came raining down from somewhere in the blue the liquid notes of a lark's song.

"Now, men," cried Kennedy, "the last rush. No good stopping or lying down. On to the village. Stick it, Rutlands!"

The men sprang through the gaps in the wall, rushed across the churchyard and into the open fields. From the houses a little above them on the hillside broke a withering fire. They pressed on doggedly, stumbling in holes and shell pits, scrambling up and moving on again, bullets spattering and whistling among them, their ears deafened by the merciless scream and boom. On, ever on, the gaps in their extended order widening as the fatal missiles found their mark. There was no faltering. A mist seemed to hide the houses from view, but they were drawing nearer moment by moment. Suddenly there was a tremendous detonation in their front; a vast column of smoke, earth and brick dust rose in the air, and where cottages had been there were now only heaps of ruins. "I hope our own gunners won't shell us," thought Kenneth on the extreme right, as he dashed towards the side street in which the explosion had taken place.

And now at last the enemy were seen, some on the ground, some fleeing helter skelter from the ravaged spot. The Rutlands yelled. From the further end of the village came answering British cheers. Working round the shoulder of the hill another company had forced the defences, and the village was won.

With scarcely a moment's delay the men set to work to prepare for the inevitable counter-attack. Lieutenant Kennedy was not to be seen. Sergeant Colpus took command of his platoon, diminished by nearly a half. Kenneth and Harry, bearing no marks of the fight except dirt, had time for only a word of mutual congratulation before they rushed off to place machine guns at the salient angles of the village. Others threw up new entrenchments and barricades, utilising the debris of houses and furniture. And meanwhile, on the shell-scarred field behind,

the ambulances and Red Cross men were busy.

The village consisted of one principal street, with a few streets springing from it on either side; crooked and irregular, following the contour of the hill. For a couple of hours the men toiled to strengthen the position they had carried; then warning of the impending attack was given by a shell from a German battery miles away to the east. It burst some fifty yards in front of the village. A minute or two later four shells plunged among the houses almost at the same instant. The warning had given the Rutlands just time enough to evacuate the houses and take what shelter was possible. An aeroplane soared high over the position towards the German lines. Shrapnel burst around it, but it sailed on unperturbed for several minutes, then swept round and returned. No visible signal had been observed, but almost immediately shells began to scream over the village: the British artillery had been given the range and had opened fire. For half an hour the German bombardment continued, gradually slackening as gun after gun was put out of action by the British shells from far away. Finally the German batteries were silenced, but the enemy had not relinquished his design of a counter-attack. In the distance, over a wide front, column after column of grey-clad infantry was seen advancing in the dense formation that had cost countless lives in the early months of the war, but which had succeeded many times in crushing the defence, even though temporarily, by sheer weight of numbers.

The Rutlands manned the houses, the ruins, the garden fences, the breast-works hastily thrown up. Other battalions occupied the German reserve trenches running close beside the church in the rear. The advancing Germans were met with rapid fire from rifles and machine guns. Great gaps were cut in their ranks, but they were instantly filled up. Time after time they were brought to a halt and showed signs of wavering; but in a few minutes their lines were steadied and they came on again with indomitable courage. It was soon apparent that the German commander was hurling immense masses forward with the intention of recapturing the village at all costs. As they approached they spread out to right and left, attacking the village on three sides. The Rutlands and the one company from another regiment which held it could look for no support, for the men in the trenches also were hard beset and unable to leave their positions because of the enfilading fire of the numerous German machine guns.

Kenneth and Harry, with the other survivors of their platoon, occupied two or three small houses on the southern slope of the hill. A dozen men held a detached cottage some forty yards beyond. It was on this cottage that the huge German wave first broke. Two or three times it was swept back; then Captain Adams, recognising the hopelessness of attempting to retain this isolated outpost, ran into one of the nearest houses and called for a volunteer to carry the order for its evacuation. Harry sprang forward among the group that instantly responded.

"Good, Randall!" said the captain. "Bring them back at once. Look out for cover."

Harry left the house, ran along for a few yards sheltered by a brick wall, then with lowered head sprinted along the open road towards the cottage. He entered it from the back. Of the dozen men who held it, only four or five were now in action. Two were dead; the rest, among whom was Stoneway, were wounded. On receiving the captain's order, the men who were unhurt carried out those of their comrades who were incapable of movement, and began to withdraw. The moment they left their loopholes the Germans they had held at bay swarmed up the slope. Laden as they were, they could hardly escape without assistance.

"Come on, boys!" shouted Kenneth.

Followed by several of his companions he dashed out of the house. At the wall they stopped to fire one volley, then with a ringing cheer charged with the bayonet. At the sight of cold steel the Germans recoiled, and their pause, short as it was, gave Harry time to bring the retiring men under cover of the wall. Then the Germans came on again in such numbers that Kenneth and his party had to fall back, firing as they went, and rejoin the men in the house.

For ten minutes more they held their position, hurling the grey mass back by the rapidity of their fire. Their rifles were hot to the touch. Still the Germans pressed forward, some of them flinging hand grenades, which set fire to the houses. To remain longer was to court certain destruction. Dashing out at the back, the men rushed from garden to garden towards the main street, only to find that the enemy had already forced their way into that, and were pressing hard upon the remnants of two platoons that were falling back, disputing every yard.

Kenneth glanced round among the men who had accompanied him from the houses. Neither Sergeant Colpus nor any other non-commissioned officer was with them.

"We'll give them a charge, boys," he cried.

Several files of Germans had already passed the end of the lane that ran along the rear of the gardens into the main street. Forming his little party in fours, Kenneth led them along the lane. They swept upon the flank of the enemy, their sudden onset cutting the column in two. The eastern portion recoiled: the western, caught between these new assailants and the Rutlands stubbornly retreating up the street, were cut to pieces.

"Well done!" cried Captain Adams, rushing up at the head of the men upon whom the pressure had been relieved, "Dash down those walls there."

He pointed to a house that was already tottering through the effects of the bombardment. Taking advantage of the enemy's confusion, the Rutlands completed the demolition of the walls, hurling bricks, plaster, rafters, furniture

across the street, and hastily raising a barricade. When the Germans returned to the charge, they found themselves faced by a formidable breastwork, from behind which the Rutlands met their rush with rifles and machine guns. They were thrown back again and again, and during every interval the defenders ripped up the pave and worked energetically at sinking a trench across the whole breadth of the street.

"They are checked for the moment," said the captain. "But they'll bring up field guns, and splinter the barricade. We'll hold the houses on each side. I've already sent word to the colonel; if we can manage to hold our ground for the rest of the day we shall get support to-morrow."

It was clear that the attack had been checked all along the line. The Germans immediately in front of the village established themselves at the foot of the hill facing the street, no doubt with the intention of renewing the attack after another bombardment. During the day the Rutlands were not further molested. Early next morning the village was heavily shelled by the German batteries, but British artillery had been moved up in anticipation of this onslaught, and after a hot duel that lasted for nearly an hour the Germans were again silenced. Their infantry was observed to be entrenching themselves in the fields half a mile away, and a certain amount of spasmodic rifle fire and sniping went on between the two forces.

The Rutlands were worn out with fatigue and hunger. It had been impossible to bring up supplies, and they had only their emergency rations and what food they could find in the village. But in the evening two fresh battalions came up to relieve them, and they were ordered back to their original billets. There the brigadier himself complimented them on their success, and promised them a well-earned rest.

When the roll was called, it was found that the success had been won at a heavy cost. Half the officers and thirty per cent. of the men were killed or wounded. Colonel Appleton was slightly injured by a splinter, Lieutenant Kennedy had narrowly escaped death: a bullet had shattered the wire-nippers in his breast pocket, causing lacerations of the flesh. Stoneway's wound turned out to be very slight; and some of the men who had been with him in the cottage were rather aggrieved that he had withdrawn from the firing line though not incapacitated. Captain Adams, Kenneth and Harry were among those who had

come through unscathed.

CHAPTER XIV

THE HIKIOTOSHI

The village appeared to be full of wounded. Some were being attended to by doctors on the spot, others were sent to the rear in motor ambulances as fast as these could be brought up. The Rutlands learnt that their attack on the village had been only one incident in operations that had extended for several miles along the front, and which had resulted in a certain gain of ground. The German trenches had been stormed, and the enemy thrown back for a considerable distance.

During the morning a motor despatch rider came in with a message from the general of division. An immediate answer was required, which Colonel Appleton at once proceeded to write, while Captain Adams questioned the cyclist on what he had seen in the course of his ride. The divisional headquarters was at a village some fifteen miles to the north-east as the crow flies, but the route taken by the cyclist, well behind the British lines, was almost twice that distance. He had been instructed to return the same way. It occurred to Captain Adams, however, that much time would be saved if a more direct route were followed, and he suggested that the colonel should take advantage of the change in position resulting from the forward movement and the confusion in the German lines, to send his message along a road that ran from the captured village in the rear of what had been the enemy's trenches.

"That's all very well," said the colonel, "but in the first place this man is ordered to go back the same way, and in the next we have no other cycles or cyclists."

"We have a couple of cycles," said the captain. "Don't you remember, sir, we sent a requisition to the base for a couple of new machine guns and by some blunder or other they sent us two motor cycles instead?"

"And we still have them?"

"Oh yes! We shall have to keep them until someone discovers that they are missing and ultimately finds out their whereabouts. And I've no doubt we've several men who can ride."

"There's a further consideration. The road you mention is now between our firing line and the enemy's. It will be decidedly unhealthy."

"A little risky, no doubt; but by all accounts the Germans have been thrown back some distance, and they'll be too busy consolidating their new position to be very dangerous to-day. I daresay there'll be snipers here and there, but they're not very successful at running targets. I'd suggest that you triplicate your despatch: send one copy by this man the long way, and two at short intervals by the direct road. You'd make sure of it thus."

"Well, I'll 'phone to the front and discover how the land lies. In the meantime see if you can find riders. If it appears reasonably safe I'll adopt your suggestion: it will save half an hour or more."

The captain at once hurried to the Bonnards' cottage. "Amory's a likely man," he thought.

The upshot was that when the official despatch rider was returning to headquarters by the long way round, Kenneth and Harry were speeding along the road north-eastward. Harry was the first to start; Kenneth followed at a minute's interval, just keeping his friend in sight. Their orders were to let nothing interfere with or delay the delivery of the despatch. If any accident happened, if either of them was hit by a sniper's bullet, there must be no question of helping the other.

Before starting they had attentively studied a large-scale map of the district. The colonel's information had shown the impossibility of attempting to reach headquarters without leaving the direct road. This lay, for about half the distance, between the new fronts of the opposing forces, but it then crossed the new position which the Germans were believed to be entrenching, and ran for several miles behind it. There was, however, a by-road forking to the left just before the halfway point was reached, and this opened into a bridle track leading in the right direction. By making this slight detour they would lose a mile or two, but they might hope to incur no more danger than they were bound to risk in the early part of the journey.

"Barring accidents, we shall save a good deal more time than the colonel thinks," said Kenneth, as he folded the map. "The way the other fellow has gone is sure to be congested with traffic: this will be clear."

"I hope so," replied Harry, "but don't forget there's been an action. The road is probably half pits. Well, I go first then; if I come a cropper, take warning and scoot."

At the outset the road was not so bad as he had expected, and he was able to run the machine at a pace of nearly forty miles an hour without much risk. There were few marks of gun fire, no doubt because the road followed the bottom of an indentation over which the shells had passed. But after a time it rose, and the ground fell away on each side, and Harry was warned of the necessity of reducing speed by a sudden jolt that made him bite his tongue. From that moment he had to watch every yard of the road. Sometimes on the left, sometimes in

the centre, sometimes on the right, yawned a shell pit deep enough to bury a wagon. Presently he had to pick his way through a litter of broken rifles, helmets, haversacks, all sorts of articles of equipment, evidently dropped or thrown aside by the Germans in their disordered flight the day before. Time was so important that, even now, he rode at a speed that would have seemed lunacy to a motorist with a proper respect for springs and bearings, avoiding only dangerous holes, and riding over most of the obstacles. His progress was a succession of jolts and jerks that threatened to dislocate the machine, and he afterwards wondered that it had not broken down under the strain.

He came into the by-road. This, being at a lower level than the road he had left, had not suffered so much from shells; on the other hand, it was scored with ruts and soft with mud, into which the wheels now and then sank several inches. He was beset now by a constant fear of skidding, and annoyed by splashes of mud on his face.

"It might be worse," he thought. "Lucky they are not bullets."

So far, it was clear, he had not been seen by the snipers whom Captain Adams had mentioned as the greatest risk of the journey. The ground on either side rolled away in gentle undulations. There was neither house nor living creature in sight. Guns were booming in the far distance, but though he knew that there were thousands of invisible soldiers on each side of him, nothing on the face of the country indicated a state of war.

Topping a rise, he came to a ruined hamlet in which not a single cottage was whole. Beyond this branched the bridle track that led to his destination. It was a lane no more than four feet wide, between hedges, and thick with slimy mud. It wound and twisted in an erratic and seemingly purposeless manner, and but for the evidence of the map he had conned Harry would have had no confidence in its general direction.

Suddenly he heard the characteristic scream of a shell not far ahead. Immediately afterwards the deep boom of a heavy gun came from his right. The German gunners had started work. In a few seconds there was rolling thunder on each side of him; it was evident that a violent artillery duel was in progress. The hedges prevented him from seeing anything; but reflecting that the gunners were aiming at each other's positions he was not disturbed about his own safety.

He had just turned an awkward corner, narrowly avoiding a sideslip, and was congratulating himself on a few yards of straight track and a widening that gave hope of reaching an open road, when, amid the sound of guns, he caught another sound, which at first he mistook for the whirr of an aeroplane. In a moment, however, he recognised his error. It was the purring of a motor bicycle, and in front, approaching him. Almost as soon as he knew this, the machine came in sight at the far corner, perhaps a hundred yards away, running at no

great speed. At the first glance he saw that the rider was a German; at the second that the German was not unprepared to meet him. He realised afterwards that, the wind being with him, the noise of his own swiftly running engine must have been heard first.

Each had only a few moments to decide what to do. The German, the instant he recognised the approaching rider as a British soldier, screwed on his brakes, turned the bicycle across the lane, sprang off and drew a revolver, no doubt expecting that the Englishman would swerve at the obstacle, be forced into the hedge, and present an easy target. His reasoning, if such it was, would have been sound enough had it not proceeded from a faulty estimate of the English mind—an error into which the Germans have been betrayed many times since the Kaiser made his initial blunder in the same kind. The German is a master of the obvious, and imagines that what he would do is the best thing to be done, and that an Englishman will do it badly.

Harry, however, was not committed by training or habit to either of the obvious courses: to allow himself to be forced into the hedge, or to stop dead and fight the German on foot. It seemed to him, in those few seconds that he had for deciding, better to clear the way for Kenneth, who, no doubt, was not far behind. A spill would at any rate not hurt his feelings, as it might a German's. Accordingly, instead of applying the brakes, he opened the throttle, and bracing himself for the shock, drove his machine at ever-increasing speed straight for the enemy.

This, of course, from the German point of view, was English madness. Still, it was unexpected, and when the German fired, at the distance of twenty paces, his aim was flurried by his natural surprise, and by the sudden realisation that his machine would certainly be smashed. Dropping his revolver, and shouting something that was far from complimentary, he tried to pull his bicycle clear; but his action was not only too late; like so many well-meant efforts to prevent mischief, it furthered it. His movement of a few inches caused Harry's bicycle to strike the hub of the driving wheel instead of the middle of the machine, for which he was steering. Harry was flung over the handle-bars into the hedge, a few feet in advance of the bicycles, which lay mangled together, and not quite so far from the German, who had very luckily escaped being crushed beneath them.

The two men staggered to their feet almost at the same moment, bruised and shaken, but equally unconscious of their hurts. The German, with his cultivated instinct, fumbled for his revolver, remembered it was on the ground out of reach, and was drawing his sword-bayonet when Harry, in the British way, flung himself upon him. And when Kenneth, half a minute later, drawn up at speed by the sound of the crash, came upon the scene, he beheld with mingled amazement and concern two military figures, begrimed with mud, struggling on the ground.

The figure in grey was undermost.

"Go on!" shouted Harry. "I've got the Hikiotoshi on him."

Kenneth had slowed down, but remembering the captain's injunction, and seeing that his friend was well able to take care of himself, he opened out and in a few seconds was pushing along at as high a speed as the greasy lane permitted. He could not help smiling at the recollection of his own bewilderment and naïve indignation when, in one of his early lessons in jujutsu from Mr. Kishimaru, he had found both legs suddenly swept from under him, and heard the Japanese, beaming down upon him, gently remark:

"That, my dear sir, is the Hikiotoshi."

Kenneth's experiences along the road had been identical with Harry's. But a few seconds after he had left the scene of the collision he had reason to wonder, for the first time, whether he would ever reach his destination. The bridle track opened into a road that intersected a stretch of plain. It had suffered hardly at all from shells; being on a higher level than the bridle track it was fairly dry and gave a better surface for riding; but it was fully exposed on either hand, without protection of hedge or dyke; and anyone passing along it must be in full view for a considerable distance left and right. And Kenneth found that he had run into the very centre of the artillery duel the sounds of which he had heard for some minutes. Shells whizzed over his head in both directions. Bang to the left of him, boom to the right of him, and above him shriek and moan in various tones. And in the midst of the broken sounds came the continuous hum of an aeroplane somewhere in the neighbourhood.

Neither the German nor the British batteries were visible. Kenneth indeed did not look round for their flashes or the smoke from the bursting shells. Bending forward over the handle-bars he raced on, congratulating himself that, his course being probably midway between the distant batteries, the gunners on each side were too intent on searching the hostile position to concern themselves about a solitary cyclist careering across their front at a shorter range. But he knew that between him and the guns infantry were watching in their trenches, perhaps awaiting the order to advance, and at any moment he might find himself caught between two fires.

He was not long left in doubt whether he had been seen. From the right a bullet sang across the road. It was a single shot, from the rifle of some sniper concealed somewhere in advance of the German lines. At a speed of fifty miles an hour he must be a difficult target even for the most expert of marksmen, and he hoped that speed would save him. Another shot whistled by his ear; that was a narrow escape, he thought; but there had been no volley from the German trenches: apparently he had not been seen except by the sniper, and it was only a stream of shot from rifles or machine guns that he had to fear.

Presently, however, he was startled by a loud explosion near at hand on his left; glancing round, he saw a column of earth and smoke rise from the ground. "That's a shell from a field-gun," he thought. "The Germans have spotted me, and are trying their hand." Another shell burst on his right, close enough to bespatter him with earth. A few seconds afterwards there was a shattering explosion on the same side, of such force that the concussion of the air alone was sufficient to hurl his machine sideways. Uncontrollably it mounted a low bank on the left, jumped a ditch, tore a furrow through the heavy soil, then stopped slowly and turned over.

Kenneth picked himself up, covered with dirt but unharmed. He looked at the fallen machine. Both wheels were buckled; from one the tyre had been ripped off; the bicycle was damaged beyond repair. A shell bursting within a hundred yards sent him scrambling into a ditch, where he rested for a few moments to collect himself. The German gunners were apparently satisfied; the firing ceased.

"Scuppered, and with only a few miles to go," he thought. "Both of us! The long way will prove to be the shortest after all."

After a little consideration he came to the conclusion that there was still a chance of arriving first at headquarters by making his way along the ditch parallel with the road. In any case he must attempt it, for the third rider might have met with an accident: his clear duty was to go on and deliver the despatch. He was farther from his destination than he supposed, and it would probably have taken him an hour to reach it on foot. But he set off along the bottom of the ditch, sinking sometimes over his ankles in slime and water.

Some twenty minutes afterwards he was surprised to hear another series of explosions on the road behind him. A little later the wind carried towards him the purr of a motor bicycle. It was rapidly approaching; the crash of bursting shells came nearer and nearer. Was the rider a friend or an enemy? It could not be either Harry or the German he had met, for he had seen at a glance as he passed by that their machines were crippled. He was bound to be discovered; the ditch, while deep enough to conceal him from the gunners in the distance, would not hide him from anyone passing along the road, even if he lay flat in the filthy ooze. He drew the revolver which Captain Adams had lent him, resolving to get his shot in first.

Only a few seconds elapsed between his hearing the sound and the appearance of the bicycle round a curve in the road behind. The rider was in khaki; he was flat over the handle-bars; the machine seemed to leap along the road. It flashed by, and Kenneth, crouching over the ditch, was amazed to see that the rider was Harry. Whether his friend had recognised him he could not tell. Quite oblivious of the shells that were still bursting on and near the road, he watched the bicycle's breakneck career until it passed under a bank that protected it from

the German guns, turned a corner, and disappeared. Next moment there was a crash behind him; he was conscious for the fraction of a second of sharp blows on every part of his body; then he knew no more.

CHAPTER XV

THE OBSERVATION POST

Harry reached the divisional headquarters without further mishap, and delivered his despatch. The rider who had come by the long way had not arrived. It was more than half an hour later when he at last rode in, and explained that he had been delayed at several points by congestion of traffic.

Meanwhile Harry had obtained leave to ride back and bring in his companion, whom he expected to meet within a mile or two. Evening was coming on; heavy clouds were heaping themselves in the western sky, hastening the dark. Harry had only the vaguest idea of the locality of the spot where he had caught a momentary glimpse of Kenneth, and after riding for some distance, untroubled by attentions from the German gunners, without meeting him, he began to feel uneasy. The sight of the abandoned motor bicycle increased his misgiving. Turning at the bridle path he rode back very slowly, closely scanning both sides of the road. At length he descried, in the failing light, a body lying half in, half out of the ditch. He jumped off his machine and hastened to the prostrate form, dreading to find that his friend was killed. But a moment's examination sufficed to reassure him. The heart was still beating. A few drops from his flask revived Kenneth, who sat up, a deplorable object, caked with mud from head to foot.

"How do you feel, old man?" asked Harry anxiously.

"Ugh!" grunted Kenneth. "Is my collar-bone broken?"

"Not a bit of it, or you couldn't move your neck like that. Can you get up?"

"Give me a hand."

He rose slowly to his feet.

"Is my skull cracked?" he asked. "Where's my cap?"

Harry picked it up, and put it on his head after feeling all over the skull.

"Just pinch me up and down the legs, will you?" said Kenneth.

"I don't think there's anything wrong," said Harry after pressing all the joints and muscles.

"Then I've cost the Germans a good few pounds for nothing. I'm horribly

dizzy; feel as if a whole rigger team had been over me. You got through to headquarters?"

"Yes. But look here, I'll tell you about it presently. D'you think you could stick on the carrier? The sooner we get out of this the better."

"Let me walk a little first. I'm rather top-heavy at present. You got there first?"

"Yes."

"Good man! 'Fraid we'd both muff it.... Is my face as dirty as my hands?"

"My dear child, your face is all right. If you talk like that I shall be certain you are cracked."

"All right, old man; only I was thinking of your face, you know. I don't mind so long as we are both pretty much alike."

"Well now, hop on, and I'll go fairly slowly. If you feel inclined to tumble off, sing out and I'll catch you before you fall."

Kenneth, however, managed to maintain his seat on the carrier, and the two rode into headquarters just before absolute dark. They were given a billet for the night, and told to return to their regiment as best they could next day. Luckily able to get a bath, they were then provided with supper, and Harry had an opportunity of telling at his ease how he had managed to save the situation.

"You see, after I had put him down with the Hikiotoshi--"

"I nearly rolled off with laughing when you sang that out," Kenneth interrupted. "How delighted old Kishimaru would be! I must write and tell him about it. Go on."

"Well, I had to lay him out, which wasn't very difficult, and for safety's sake I tied him up in his own straps. Then I had a look at my machine. The front wheel was hopelessly buckled. What about the German's, I thought. I found that the engine was mere scrap iron; it had got the full force of the collision. But the back wheel wasn't hurt a bit. By good luck it was exactly the same size as mine, and as the tool bag was there all complete, I set about exchanging the wheels--and also more or less pleasant remarks with the German, who showed a wonderful command of English bargee idiom when he recovered his senses. I had pulled my old Rover to pieces so often at home that I had no trouble, though it took me a long time. When I had finished, I wondered whether I could bring in the German as a prisoner, but I couldn't very well fix him on the carrier without help. And besides, the front forks had been so strained and twisted that I was afraid the whole concern might come to grief. So I went over and bade him a polite good-bye, eased his lashings so that he could wriggle free with a little exertion, and then set off at full speed. By the way, I had taken the liberty of examining his pockets, left him a photograph and a few trifles, and took a letter and a despatch which I handed to the general. On the whole I think we've done a good day's

work.”

”I rather think we have. Pity you didn’t leave the German tied up: we might have got him to-morrow on our way back.”

”No thank you! Once running the gauntlet of German shells is enough for me. We’ll go back the long way. And as we shall have only the one machine between us I’ll take it to the repairing shop and have it looked over. There’s not much wrong with it, and we’ll take turn and turn about on the carrier.”

They set off in a fine spring dawn, taking their midday meal with them. It was slow going on this outer circle. The road, lying well behind the British lines, was encumbered with military traffic. The pave was for long stretches occupied by motor omnibuses and lorries, carrying men, provisions, and ammunition. Here was a lorry loaded with bacon, there one packed with loaves of bread from the baking ovens, there another heaped with parcels sent out from home, another with new uniforms, boots and equipment. Time after time the cyclists had to hop off, leave the pave for the muddy unpaved border of the road, and stand ankle deep in mud until the heavy vehicles had passed, exchanging pleasantries with the cheerful drivers.

”I say, this is a nuisance,” said Harry, at one of these stoppages. ”If I’m not mistaken, the map showed a cross-road about halfway, leading into the road we travelled yesterday. It comes out by that hamlet we passed. I vote we take that and chance it. There’s no firing at present, and the road is less exposed at that end. Of course there’s no hurry, but this constant hopping off and on is too monotonous for anything.”

”We’ll have a look at the cross-road when we come to it. It may be too bad for riding.”

On reaching the cross-road, they found that there was no traffic on it, though there were marks of the recent passage of heavy vehicles. It looked fairly easy, so they struck into it, and bowled along for a mile or two without interruption. In spite of bruises due to their spills on the previous day they felt very fit, and the rapid movement through the fresh morning air had its usual exhilarating effect.

”This is better than the trenches—heaps better than hanging about in billets,” said Kenneth. ”I’d rather like despatch riding.”

”So would I,” replied Harry. ”But I don’t regret anything. All I’m sorry for is that poor old Ginger is collared. I’m afraid he’s having a rotten time of it.”

The road was winding and hilly, running through country for the most part bare, but dotted with clumps of woodland. Presently they passed a train of artillery transport. Shortly afterwards they came in sight of a low hill from the further side of which they expected to see the ruined hamlet. As they rode up the hill they suddenly noticed, just below the crown on their left, a battery of

British field-guns getting into position. The gunners were masking it from aerial observation by means of branches of trees and shrubs on which the foliage was well advanced. Then a bend of the road brought them in sight of a battalion of infantry, evidently in support of the guns.

"Halt there!" cried a man, coming towards them.

They slipped off, left the bicycle by the side of the road, and accompanied the man to the colonel.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

Kenneth mentioned the name of their village.

"You can't go this way," said the colonel. "The enemy isn't far on the other side of the road this leads to, and I don't want anything to attract his attention to this quarter. Ride back, and go along the main road."

"We can't get along very well for the traffic, sir," said Kenneth. "We rode the other way yesterday, and know it quite well. It's much shorter, and a good deal of it is in a hollow, so that we are not very likely to be seen. Besides, sir, we might possibly do a little scouting on the way."

"You're not in a signal company?"

"Not officially, sir, though we carried an emergency despatch yesterday."

"Well, I'll let you through on condition that you come back at once if you see anything worth reporting. You're a public school man, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir. Haileybury."

"O.T.C.?"

"Yes, sir."

"Couldn't wait for a commission, I suppose? Well, remember your work on field days. I can trust you to use your intelligence."

"Thank you, sir."

"By the way, I must tell you that a field telephone has gone ahead. Look alive; the gunners are in a hurry."

They remounted and rode on, passing a screen of scouts lying over a wide front below the crest of the hill. As they were nearing the foot of the farther slope they saw the telephone wagon coming towards them. On meeting it they stopped and asked the driver what was going on.

"Nothing yet. We've laid the wire to a cottage you'll see in the distance when you get beyond those trees. There's a lieutenant and four men in charge. You'd better hurry up."

"What, are there any Germans in sight?" asked Harry.

"No; but there's been a bit of sniping. I don't think they could have seen us going into the cottage, but they must have caught sight of us on the road. I heard the smack of a bullet on the back of the wagon, and was thankful when I got under the trees."

They went on. Beyond the trees the road ran straight up a long gradual incline. To the left, on the crest, stood a small cottage, enclosed, with its garden, within a brick wall. They had ridden only a few yards up the ascent when they heard the crackle of rifle fire ahead.

"The Germans must have seen or guessed that the men went to the cottage," said Kenneth. "We had better leave the machine and go up across the field. The cottage and garden wall will give us cover. It will be just as well to learn what's going on."

They left the road and ran up the grassy hill towards the cottage. On nearing the crest they became aware that the firing they had heard was being directed from the front of the cottage. There was no answering fire, but it was clear that the little party in the cottage was expecting an attack. Being an observation party, to whose success secrecy was essential, it was equally clear that they would not have fired except from urgent necessity.

"Ride back and tell the colonel," said Kenneth. "I'll go on and lend a hand."

At another moment it would have been Harry's way to dispute his friend's right to the dangerous part, and to settle the matter by the spin of a coin. It might have occurred to him, too, that the call for support would reach the colonel by telephone more quickly than he could convey it on the bicycle. But guessing that the position was critical, he turned his back at once, ran down the hill, mounted the machine, and rode back at his utmost speed. Kenneth meanwhile had vaulted the garden wall, and dashed into the cottage through the open door at the back.

During the next ten or fifteen minutes events crowded one upon another more rapidly than can be related, and we must pause for a little to make the position clear. The cottage stood on a spur projecting slightly eastward from the general line of the ridge. Below it the ground sloped gently down to the road which Kenneth and Harry had travelled on the previous day. Beyond that the country undulated for several miles. About a mile away was a young plantation. The road ran right and left, with considerable windings, and a mile and a half away, on the right, was the ruined hamlet through which the motor riders had passed. A little below the cottage a stone wall of no great height stretched across the ground, ultimately meeting the road. On the eastern side of it—that is, in the direction of the German lines—was a ditch, shallow and empty. During the night a full regiment of Germans, reorganised after their recent repulse, had occupied the wood and the hamlet, the advance guard of a large body whose purpose was to carry their line forward just as the British on their side were doing. The British engineer party had not completed the installation of the telephone in the cottage when the lieutenant saw the Germans debouching from the wood towards the hamlet, and considerable movement in the hamlet itself. Ordering his men to cut loopholes in the wall of the front room on the upper storey, and to fire if

the enemy appeared to be advancing on the cottage, he worked at the telephone, and had almost finished when the German scouts were seen creeping up the hill about half a mile away. Below them was a company in extended order; below them again a second company in support. They were coming straight towards the cottage, and the men, in obedience to their officer's orders, had fired.

Kenneth dashed into the cottage. The lower floor was empty. He rushed up the stairs into the only room above. Four men were posted at the loopholes; the lieutenant was screwing on the receiver of the telephone. He looked up as Kenneth entered.

"Are they coming on already?" he asked.

"No; but a pal of mine has ridden back to tell the colonel."

"That's good. It will be a minute or two before this wretched thing is in working order."

Just then there was a burst of rifle fire from the enemy. The windows were shattered. One of the men dropped his rifle and shouted.

"Get out and back to our lines," called the officer, seeing that he was *hors de combat*. "Take his rifle, will you?" he added to Kenneth. "For goodness' sake don't go near the window."

Kenneth picked up the rifle and hurried to a loophole. From the volume of the enemy's fire it was clear that the assailants were a very numerous body, and it struck him as madness for five men to attempt to hold the place. He ventured to say so.

"Done at last!" said the lieutenant. "What was that you said? ... All right" (he spoke through the telephone). "Infantry advancing. No sign of battery.... Hold it! Of course we must. If they get here they can see our battery from the roof. Besides, if we can hold them off until the battalion comes up we couldn't have a better defensive position than the wall and ditch in front.... Gad! that's bad."

A shell had burst on the slope between the cottage and the road, clear of the infantry advancing farther to the right.

"Take my glasses," continued the lieutenant, "go well to the left, and see if you can spot the direction when the next shell comes." In low distinct tones he spoke into the bell of the receiver: "Enemy firing line about 700 yards below crest, range say 5200."

Another shell burst about a hundred yards to the left of the cottage.

"See the flash?" asked the officer, with the receiver at his ear.

"No."

"They're firing at long range.... Yes: all right.... They've had to change their position—our battery, I mean. Want another five minutes." He looked at his wrist watch. "By that time the Germans will be upon us, even if a lucky shot from one

of their big guns don't tumble the place about our ears. However!"

Kenneth admired the young officer's coolness as, laying down the receiver, he took up a rifle and posted himself at a loophole. The Germans had stopped firing: bending low they were creeping up yard by yard towards the wall.

"Are you a good shot?" asked the officer.

"Fair," replied Kenneth.

"Then pick off the men on the flank. If they get across that dyke they'll work round to our rear and have cover until they are close upon us."

Kenneth, sighting for 500 yards, took aim at the man highest up on the enemy's extreme left flank. The man dropped. Then he fired at the next man, and missed. A second shot found its mark. Meanwhile the officer and his three men methodically fired, each through his own loophole. And for four crowded minutes they poured their bullets into the line of scouts, which thinned away until not one was visible on the hillside.

But the company behind was pushing steadily on, and now opened fire. A hail of bullets struck the walls of the cottage and whistled through the broken windows. The officer, creeping across the floor to the telephone receiver, was smothered with splinters of wood. One of the men uttered an oath and drew his hand across his cheek.

"A free shave, Tom," said the next man with a grin. "Whiskers won't grow there no more."

Meanwhile, every twenty or thirty seconds a shell burst in the neighbourhood of the cottage, every time nearer. The noise was terrific.

"Long time getting the range," said the lieutenant, holding the receiver to his ear. "Our boys are just going to start.... Yes; still coming on; range 5000: 400 less will smash *me*, so be careful." ...

Almost immediately afterwards a British shell burst in front of the cottage.

"Where did it fall?" asked the officer.

"Behind their supports, sir," replied one of the men.

"Make it 4800," said the lieutenant through the telephone.

The words had scarcely left his lips when there was a terrific crash. For a few seconds Kenneth was so dazed as almost to be unconscious. When he regained his wits he found himself lying in darkness on the floor. An acrid smell teased his nostrils. Wondering where he was, and why he was alive, he tried to rise, and knocking his head, discovered that he was under a bed. He crawled out, over a heap of rubbish, and wriggled to a gap in the back wall, and into the garden. And there, emerging from the framework of what had been a window, was the lieutenant, his face streaming with blood. But he still held the telephone receiver, which, by one of the freaks of such explosions, had remained undamaged.

"Cottage bashed to bits," he reported coolly through the telephone.... "No

answer. The line's broken somewhere. Wonder whether it was a German shell or one of ours. Hunt about for a rifle. By their howls they're coming on. We'll creep round into the ditch. I've got my revolver: come after me if you can find a rifle."

But Kenneth was diverted from his search for a rifle by groans from beneath a heap of debris. Removing it as quickly as possible, he released one of the privates, whose face was cut and bruised and his arm broken. He was wondering whether to look for the other men or for a rifle when he saw a khaki figure running along by the garden wall towards the ditch. Another followed, then another, then groups, all hastening quietly in the direction of the firing. The battalion had come up at last. Kenneth continued his search for the men. One was dead; the third badly wounded.

Meanwhile the British soldiers, puffing hard with the run up the hill, were filing into the ditch, opening fire on the Germans the moment they arrived. The enemy's artillery was silent, no doubt for fear of hitting their own men. But British shells were falling almost incessantly on the German columns down the hill. Still the enemy advanced, losing more and more heavily as the ditch filled up. And presently, unable to endure the terrible fire from the British vantage position above them, they recoiled and were soon in full retreat, with still heavier losses, for by the time they reached the road the whole of the British battalion was extended along the firing line.

The British at once set to work to deepen the ditch for a regular trench. Before long the German artillery again began to play, the fire becoming more and more accurate as the gunners found the range. The Red Cross men were kept busy in tending the wounded under cover of the ruined cottage. In a short time the British position on the ridge was consolidated, and preparations were made for a line of trenches, somewhat farther back and less exposed, which would become the permanent trenches if the Germans were in sufficient force to return to the attack.

By force of circumstances Kenneth had taken no part in the fight after the collapse of the cottage. But the engineer lieutenant, who had retired from the firing line as soon as the ditch was manned, and imperturbably rummaged among the ruins for the broken wire, thanked him for his help.

Kenneth wondered why Harry had not returned. As soon as he had an opportunity he enquired about him, and learnt that the colonel had sent him to the village with a message. The road by which Kenneth had intended to return being closed, he could only regain his billet by tramping back until he reached the main road. But Harry on the bicycle met him halfway, and they reached their quarters in time for dinner. And there they learnt that a portion of the village

which they had captured two days before had been won back by the Germans.

CHAPTER XVI

EXCHANGE NO ROBBERY

In a small room in one of the houses at the foot of the hill village, bending over a table spread with papers, sat Lieutenant Axel von Schwank, an officer of a crack Prussian regiment, and a scion of an ancient and exalted family.

He had had an excellent dinner, without sparing the wine: what need was there to do so when so many cases had been obtained gratis in Champagne? He would have liked to remain with his brother officers, convivially employed in the room on the other side of the passage; but his colonel had given him some work to do. That was the penalty of being a musician.

For Lieutenant Axel von Schwank was accomplished in music. His rendering of the Waldstein sonata was wonderful for an amateur and a Prussian; he sang "The Two Grenadiers" with *éclat*, as his friends used to say before the authorities ordered the French language to be abolished; and he was renowned for his ability to read the most difficult score at sight. With all that he was full of martial spirit: his cheeks were seamed with no fewer than three scars, proud memorials of his student days.

But it was for his musical skill that the colonel had selected him for the piece of work on which he was now engaged. It was very elementary work for a man who could play the Waldstein sonata and read a score by Strauss; any school girl could have done it; but even the greatest philosopher has at times to perform the simple operation of washing his face, and the lieutenant need not have felt that he was demeaning himself by a task so much below his powers. For what Lieutenant Axel von Schwank was doing was simply to transcribe into musical notation, on a sheet of ruled music paper, the two lines of German with which the colonel had supplied him.

Surely that is difficult, you say? He has only seven letters, A to G, to employ, representing the seven notes of the scale, and the German alphabet has twenty-six. What about the v's, and w's, and z's in which the German language is so much superior to the French? But in the first place, remember that the German musician calls H the note which the less accomplished Englishman calls B, and in the second place that the range of most instruments, including the German flute,

extends beyond a single octave.

So that if the lieutenant writes this

[image]

[musical note]

for A, there is nothing to prevent him writing

[image]

[musical note]

for I, and by means of the sharps and flats he can even arrive at Z, without exceeding the compass of that dulcet instrument.

He was busy with his transcription when he heard a scuffling of feet and the clank of swords in the opposite room. His fellow officers were hurrying to the street door. The colonel put his head in.

"We are called to the trenches," he said. "Go on with that, and follow us when you have done."

The lieutenant had sprung up, turned round and saluted. When his superior was gone, he sat down and set to work again. After all, he probably reflected, music has charms: it would preserve him for a few minutes more from the bullets of those hateful pigs the English.

The house was in silence.

A little while after the officers had departed, a strange, unshaven, unkempt face peered round the edge of the door, which the colonel had left open. It was a lined and somewhat careworn face; the eyes were bright and wild; the hair, very rough and tangled, was red. The face moved slowly forward; inch by inch a dirty, tattered khaki uniform showed itself; and the rays of the lamp on the table glistened on the blade of a long carving knife, held in the man's right hand. He wore no boots, and his stockings made no sound as he tiptoed across the room.

[image]

THE INTRUDER IN KHAKI

Lieutenant Axel, bending over the table with his back to the door, was ab-

sorbed in his occupation. But just as the intruder reached his chair he seemed to become aware that he was not alone. He turned suddenly, his right hand holding the fountain pen, his left, by some instinct, crushing the papers into his pocket, and found a determined face glaring at him, and a carving knife pointed at his breast. Before he could collect himself a sinewy hand clutched him by the throat, and a voice said in a hoarse whisper:

"Make a sound and you're a dead 'un."

Whether a knowledge of English was one of Lieutenant Axel's accomplishments or not, there was no mistaking the hand, the knife, the purport of the words. He turned pale; his eyes searched the room for a chance of escape; he was discreetly silent; and at a significant movement of the offensive blade he raised his hands above his head. A drop of ink fell on his nose.

The captor, in whose expression there was eagerness, anxiety, an air of listening, loosed his grip on the officer's throat.

"Take off your uniform and 'coutrements," he said, with a jerk of the knife.

Lieutenant Axel hesitated for a moment only. The Englishman's face was not pleasant. Hurriedly he stripped off tunic, trousers, belt and boots.

"That'll do," said Ginger, in whose eyes the look which the German had mistaken for fury really indicated that he was at his wits' end to know how to effect the change of clothes without putting down the knife and giving his captive an opportunity to dash for the door.

An idea flashed upon him. Still pointing the knife at the officer, he took up the lamp with his left hand, placed it on the chimney piece close by, and stripped the cloth from the table.

"Put it over your head," he whispered fiercely.

Again a movement of the knife abridged the lieutenant's hesitation. The shrouding table-cloth eclipsed the concentrated fury of his eyes. Ginger wasted not a second. He shoved the officer into a corner of the room, pulled a sofa across to bar him in, cut a bell-pull with the knife, and drawing the cord over his head, began to tighten it. The German began to struggle; for the first time he spoke.

"You shtrangle me!" came the muffled words.

"Shut up!" growled Ginger, with a premonitory dig of the knife. "I won't graze your skin if you don't make a fuss. But--"

Lieutenant Axel may have wondered: this hateful pig was certainly not expert in frightfulness; he was very soft, like all the English. But the struggles ceased; the officer was quiet while Ginger knotted the cord about his neck. And he stood there in the corner, a statue in table-cloth and pants, as Ginger, with a quickness learnt on raw mornings in the barracks at home, endued himself with the well-tailored habiliments of a Prussian officer. The boots were a trifle large for him.

He listened. All was quiet. He threw a dubious look at the rigid officer.

"Not safe," he muttered.

Hastening to the German, he loosed the cord, pulled off the table-cloth, and looking into the hot face said:

"You've got to be tied up. Make a row and you know what. Join your hands behind you."

While Ginger was tying his hands, and his feet to a leg of the sofa, Lieutenant Axel von Schwank cursed him in undertones in both English and German. Ginger made no reply. But as soon as this part of his work was finished, he caught up some papers from the mantelpiece—they were copies of the Hymn of Hate—twisted them together, and with a sudden movement thrust them into the German's mouth.

"There! Bite them," he muttered. "Such shocking language!"

He once more threw the table-cloth over the helpless man's head, put the pickel-haube on his own, and quietly left the room. Passing the open door opposite he hesitated for the fraction of a second, then went in, gulped a glass of wine, caught up the frame of a chicken from the table, and digging his teeth into it ravenously, hurried back, along the passage, down a dark flight of steps, and out through the back door into the garden. He drew quick breaths as he leant against the wall, gnawing the carcase. From somewhere on his right came low sounds he had learnt to recognise as signs of Germans in their trenches. On the left there was silence. In the distance guns boomed. After a few minutes he threw the chicken bones upon a neglected garden plot, sighed, drew his hand across his lips, and murmured:

"Blowed if I know!"

The village was a mile or more from his old trench; he knew that. It was, he supposed, wholly in possession of the Germans. He would have to go through it up the hill, or round it, and pass the enemy's trenches before he could reach his regiment. And at any moment the German officer might be discovered!

"I must skip," he said to himself.

The assuagement of his terrible hunger had seemed a necessity beyond all others. Now he realised his peril. Choosing the direction that was silent, he stole from garden to garden, scaling the fences, and presently found himself in a lane. It was uphill to the right: that was his way. The lane ended in a street. There he turned to the left, but had taken only a few steps when the tread of feet and the sound of guttural voices coming towards him sent him back hastily in the opposite direction. To his dismay, in a few seconds he heard other men approaching. There was no escape. On one side he was blocked by a high wall, on the other a house dimly lighted. The night was dark; he wore a German uniform; unless accosted by a real officer he might pass safely. With shrinking heart but

an assured gait he walked boldly on, close to the wall.

Dark though it was, the soldiers returning from the trenches recognised the officer's uniform and went by stiffly at the salute. Ginger was bringing his hand up smartly when he remembered that he was an officer, eased the movement, and dropped his hand again, quaking lest some terrible blunder in the mode of his return salute should have betrayed him. But in the darkness it passed muster. No doubt the men were tired. They went on. Ginger, perspiring and limp, leant against the wall for a moment or two.

"Oh crumbs!" he murmured as he braced himself and set off again.

A few steps brought him to a lane that broke the line of houses on his left. It was quiet. He turned into it. The ground rose somewhat steeply.

"Must be going right," he thought.

Soon the houses were left behind. The lane became a track across even ground, with a few trees at the borders. Suddenly the silence was broken by the sharp crackle of rifle fire from the upper part of the hill. Ginger threw himself down and crouched behind a stout trunk. There was no reply from the German trenches, which must be somewhere below him, he thought. He waited patiently until the firing died away, then rose and crept forward.

His heart sank into his boots when he came unawares upon a trench and heard the murmur of guttural voices. Before he had time to retreat, a sentinel addressed him in German.

"Sssh!" Ginger hissed, sliding into the trench a few feet from the dark figure. Further down the trench there were dim lights. It was neck or nothing now. Stepping on to the banquette he began to clamber up to the parapet. The sentry, no doubt believing that the officer was engaged on some special scouting duty, came towards him, whispering, "Erlauben Sie, Herr Leutnant," and gave him a leg-up.

Ginger scrambled over, fell on hands and knees, and crawled over the ground. How far ahead were the British trenches he knew not; the night was too dark for him to be seen, but at the least noise he would certainly be taken for a German and become the invisible target for a dozen rifles.

While he was slowly wriggling forward he heard a commotion far in his rear—shouts, the sound of many men on the move. Probably the muffled lieutenant had been discovered; the men in the trenches would be advised of the outrage, and the no man's land between the hostile forces might be swept by a fusillade. Crushing himself flat he dragged himself on.

Now there were sounds in front of him. He stopped, panting, listening. Yes, they were British voices; were they those of his own comrades? What should he do? If he called, he might be riddled with shot. So many Germans could speak English. The Rutlands would know his voice, but what if the men in the trenches

were not the Rutlands?

For a few moments he lay inert with hopelessness. Then an idea occurred to him. On again, inch by inch, feeling out for barbed wire. There was none; the position must have been hurriedly occupied. The voices were more distinct; his straining ears caught individual words.

"English, I surrender!" he called in a low tone.

The voices were hushed.

"Who goes there?" said a voice.

"Murgatroyd, of the Rutlands," he replied.

"Keep still."

There was a momentary flash of light.

"Don't fire!" called Ginger, instantly realising that his uniform must have been seen. "I surrender."

"Hands up and come on."

Ginger was just rising when bullets sang over his head from behind. He dropped down again; his last chance was gone; they would believe he was tricking them. But he heard an officer give an order. There was no answering fire from the trench in front, no repetition of the volley from the rear. He crawled on, dimly seeing the parapet a few yards away.

"I surrender," he repeated, and crawled on, over the sandbags, was seized by rough hands, hauled headlong into the trench, and held firmly by the neck.

"Got him, sir," said a voice.

CHAPTER XVII

STRATEGY

"Don't throttle me," Ginger murmured, scarcely able to speak from physical exhaustion and the reaction from mental strain. "Are you the Rutlands?"

"No, we ain't. Got a special fancy for the Rutlands, 'eemingly."

"I'm Murgatroyd, No. 939, 17th battalion, 3rd company, 1st platoon," said Ginger feebly.

"Oh, we know all about that. You German blighters all speak English, but you don't come it over us."

"Silence, Barnet; bring him along," said the officer.

"Yes, sir. Says he's a Rutland, sir."

Ginger was taken along the dark trench to a dug-out lit by a candle-lamp. The lieutenant looked at him. The uniform was German, from helmet to boots: the Iron Cross was on his breast; but the dirty, lined, unshaven face was not that of a German officer.

"Who do you say you are?" said the lieutenant, puzzled.

"Murgatroyd, lance-corporal in the 17th Rutlands, sir: called Ginger, sir: look at my hair."

He removed the helmet. The lieutenant laughed.

"The name suits you," he said. "But what have you been up to?"

"Taking French leave and German toggery, sir," said Ginger. "Beg pardon; could you give me a drink? My mouth's that parched. I'm all of a shake."

Refreshed by a cup of tea, Ginger told his story.

"A regular romance," said the lieutenant. "You're as plucky as you are lucky. By George! I should like to have seen the German taking off his uniform. He must have been very mad."

"He had a very swanky shirt, sir, but I couldn't stop to take that. Can I get back to my billet, sir?"

"Certainly. I'll send a man with you out of the trenches. You go round by the church, you know."

"I'll find my way, sir, never fear. If you'd give me a cigarette or two..."

"But you'll never get through in that uniform. I can't give you a change. Stay, I'll write you a note; don't wear the helmet."

"No, sir: I'll send it home to the kids, along with the Iron Cross."

"You've deserved that, at any rate. Well, good luck to you. I wish you were one of my men."

"Thank you, sir."

Somewhere about midnight, Ginger, after certain amusing adventures with the sentries, knocked at the door of Bonnard's cottage. There was some delay: then Bonnard opened the door, lifting a lighted candle.

"Bong swar, m'sew," said Ginger. "What O!"

"Ma foi!" ejaculated the Frenchman, throwing up his hands. "C'est Monsieur Ginjiaire!"

"Ah, wee, wee! Large as life! Give me some grub, m'sew: la soupe; more so; anything; haven't had a good feed since I saw your jolly face last."

"Oll raight! Mais c'est merveilleux, épatant! Entrez donc, m'sieur Ginjiaire; 'ow d'you do! Shake 'and!"

"Got the Iron Cross, m'sew," said Ginger with a grin, flicking the decoration with his finger-nail.

"Par exemple!" cried Bonnard. "Ah! vous avez fait un prisonnier; vous avez pris un officier prussien, n'est-ce pas? Bravo! 'ip, 'ip, 'ooray!"

There were growls through the closed door of the bedroom adjoining.

"Messieurs, messieurs," shouted the Frenchman excitedly, "c'est que m'sieur Ginjaire est revenu, avec la croix de fer. Eveillez-vous, messieurs, pour le voir."

"Shut up; taisez-vous!" called Harry, sleepily.

"Let 'em wait till morning," said Ginger. "Give me some grub. Don't want nothing else in all this wide world. I've got a fang, as you call it. J'ai fang, comprenny?"

"Ah oui! Vous allez manger tout votre soûl."

"Cheese'll do for me ... What O!"

The door had opened, and Harry appeared, blinking.

"What's all this? ... Great Scot! Where on earth ... I say, Ken, it's Ginger!"

"Shut up and go to sleep."

"It's Ginger, I tell you. Wake up, man. In a German uniform!"

"Ginger, did you say?" cried Kenneth, joining him. "Well, I'm jiggered!"

Ginger, a spoon in one hand, a hunk of bread in the other, grinned as they rushed to him, clapped him on the back, shook each an arm.

"Don't choke me, mates," he spluttered. "Let me finish this soup, and I'll tell you a story as beats cock-fighting."

"Tuck in. They starved you, I suppose—the brutes!" said Harry. "Let's get our coats, Ken: it's chilly. Bonnard will make up the fire."

Presently, sitting around the fire, they listened to Ginger's story.

"I was sitting on the wing of that aeroplane, thinking of the missus and kids, when all of a sudden I was knocked head over tip from behind. When I came to myself, there was I strapped in the aeroplane, going through the sky like an express train. We came down in the village over yonder, and they lugged me to a colonel, and he asked me a heap of questions, and of course I wouldn't answer, and then they hauled me to a room, took away my belt and bay-net and boots, and locked me in. Here's the end of my milingtary career, thinks I, and only a lance-corporal!

"They gave me some black bread, like gingerbread without the ginger, and some slops they called coffee; I called it dishwater. I wondered how long I'd last on fare like that. But just before morning I was woke by a touch on my face, thought it was a mouse, slapped my hand up, and heard a little voice say 'Oh!' If I could only speak French like you! It was the woman of the house. She let me out and took me down to the cellar, and said something which I took to mean she'd give me the tip when to get away, but it might have been something else for all I know. Anyway, she didn't come back."

"A very unsafe place, I should think, with Germans," said Kenneth.

"There you're wrong. For why? 'Cos there was no wine there. The cellar was empty. Hadn't been used for an age, I should think. It was almost pitch dark; just a little air through some holes at the top of the wall. Well, there I was. The woman had given me some pang and fromarge, and a so of o-rummy lingo the French, ain't it?—and for I don't know how long I waited, thinking she'd come back and tell me the coast was clear. But she didn't, and knowing the Germans were all over the village I didn't dare to stir of my own accord. Besides, when you're expecting something, you don't trouble for a time. I was so sure the woman would come when she could.

"Down there in the dark, of course, I'd no notion of how time was going. I heard guns booming every now and again, and sounds in the house above, and being pretty easy in my mind, as I say, I dropped off to sleep. When I woke I finished off my grub, waiting as patient as a monument for the word to clear. Whether it was night or day I couldn't tell: there seemed to be someone moving about the house all the time. At last I got hungry and mortal sick of being alone in the dark, and began to wonder what I'd do if she didn't come back. Thought I'd try and have a look round. I felt my way to the door, and came to the bottom of the staircase. It was light up above, and I heard the Germans talking overhead, and didn't dare go up. I decided to wait till night and try again. I went to that staircase a dozen times, I should think, before night; the day seemed extra long; and even when night came I was dished, for a lamp was burning, and there were more voices than ever, and I heard someone playing a flute. I guessed they'd sacked the woman for letting me go, and smiled to myself at their hunting like mad for me all over the place.

"But it was no smiling matter there, I can tell you. I didn't sleep a wink that night, but kept on going to the staircase on the chance they were napping above. Not they! And I was getting hungrier and hungrier, and thirsty!—I never knew before what thirst was. I felt seedy, and a banging in my head, and couldn't keep still, going round and round that cellar till I was nearly mad."

"Why didn't you break out when we stormed the village?" asked Kenneth.

"How was I to know about that?"

"There must have been a terrific row," said Harry. "Close by, too."

"If I'd known I'd have been out like a shot, you bet. But I guess how it was. I must have got fair worn out with traipsing round and round, and fallen asleep at last, and when you go to sleep like that, nothing on earth 'ud wake you. 'Specially being used to the sound of guns in the trenches. Anyway, when I woke up, I was so mad for food that I said to myself I'd get out somehow and chance it. I went to the staircase; there was a light above, so I knew it was night, and I began to crawl up. But there was a footstep on the passage, and down I went

again, but not into the cellar; that gave me the horrors. I sat in the dark at the foot of the staircase, in the hope there'd be quiet above in time.

"Well, I waited hours, it seemed. I heard laughing and talking, and knives and forks going, and that made me mad. I was just going to make a dash for it when I heard the Germans going along to the door. I didn't hardly dare to hope they'd all clear out, but I waited a bit, and all was quite still, and I crawled up on hands and knees so the stairs shouldn't creak. What I was afraid was that the servants were in the kitchen, but there wasn't a sound; and I crept along the passage.

"There was two doors, one on each side, open. On the right was the room where the officers had been dining. The sight of that table was too much for me, famished as I was. I must eat if I died for it. I was just a-going to begin when a little sound almost made me jump out of my skin. I snatched up a carving knife and whipped round, and there, across the passage, in the room opposite, was an officer writing at a table, with his back to me. Quick as lightning I thought if I could only get into his uniform I'd have a chance of getting through their lines in the dark. I listened: the house was quiet as a graveyard: and with the carving knife in my hand I stole across the passage."

He described his brief operations with the German lieutenant and his subsequent proceedings.

"And all I want now," he concluded, "is a photo of that Frenchwoman to send to the missus, and I hope she've come to no harm."

"You're a trump, Ginger," cried Harry, clapping him on the back. "You've certainly won that Iron Cross."

"It'll do for the kids to play with," remarked Ginger. "Myself, I wouldn't wear the thing the Kaiser gives away by the ton. Ah! I said I only wanted one thing, but there's another."

"What's that?"

"Why, to find that farmer that helped the German chap to strap me to the aeroplane. And he pretended to help us hunt for him. He's a spy, that's what he is."

"He was taken into our lines. I don't know what became of him," said Kenneth. "You must tell the captain to-morrow all about it, and he'll make enquiries. You must be fagged; get to bed. Our men will be jolly glad to have you back again."

Ginger's feat made him the hero of the battalion. The colonel promoted him full corporal, and sent a messenger at once to the Wessex regiment to enquire what had become of the farmer. The reply was that the French authorities had nothing against the man, who had lived in the neighbourhood for years, and he had been allowed to return to his farm. Colonel Appleton at once resolved to

arrest him.

"We had better do everything in order," he said, to Captain Adams. "We're in France, and the authorities might feel hurt if we dispensed with them. I'll get the police commissaire of the district to take the matter up as there are no French military officers within thirty miles: it will save time. Tell the Three Musketeers to be ready to go with him to identify the man."

Later in the day the summons came. The three men found Captain Adams in the company of a stout little spectacled functionary, resplendent in a tri-colour sash, and two red-trousered gendarmes. The police commissary not being on the spot, the maire of the neighbouring town had undertaken the task. He had been a sergeant in the army of 1870, and was full of zeal. A motor-car was in waiting. Into this the party crowded. Ginger, clad in a new uniform with the double stripe on his sleeve, fraternised with the gendarmes at once, and conversed with them on the back seat in a wonderful jargon. Kenneth and Harry, as more accomplished in French, sat with the maire in front.

He was a fussy little man, proud of his antiquated military experience. Inclined to dilate on the details of his service under Mac Mahon, he was adroitly led by Kenneth to the business in hand. Then he was full of tactics and strategy.

"We must proceed by surprise, messieurs," he said. "That is a sound principle. I know the place well. We will stop at some distance from the farm house, and advance through the wood in skirmishing order, myself in the centre, the gendarmes supporting me, and you English gentlemen on the flanks. Thus we will converge upon the rear of the farm house, taking care to arrive simultaneously, and carry the place by a coup de main."

It occurred to Kenneth that there were defects in this plan, and that their object was to arrest a spy, not to carry a fortress. But he deemed it best to say nothing. The maire evidently liked the sound of his own voice, and was bursting with elation at having the conduct, after forty years, of what he regarded as a military operation.

"By this means," he went on, "we shall cut off the enemy from his line of retreat, which would afford him good cover if he could reach it. That I take to be sound tactics, messieurs."

About a mile from the farm house, on a hillside above the wood behind it, they came upon a shepherd tending two or three sheep. He looked up as the car ran up the hill, called out, "Bon soir, monsieur le maire!" and watched the car as it descended on the other side. It stopped at the foot, the six men got out, and set off across the field towards the wood. The shepherd, a big man with a wart on his nose, instantly took to his heels, and running downhill on the near slope, out of sight of the maire's party, made at full speed for the wood, about a quarter of a mile from the spot where the maire would enter it.

Meanwhile the maire had halted, and was impressively declaring his final instructions.

"You will advance cautiously through the wood, with the silence of foxes. Take cover, but preserve a good line: that is a sound principle. When you hear my whistle, advance at the double, converging on the centre—that is myself. It is well understood?"

Kenneth explained all this to Ginger, who rubbed his mouth and said:

"He don't happen to be General Joffre, I suppose! I reckon we three 'ud do better without him."

"We're under orders," replied Kenneth. "We must look out for our chance. Of course he ought to have sent some of us to the other side."

"He ought to have stayed at home to mind the baby," growled Ginger. "However!"

They extended, crept through the wood, and at the given signal dashed out upon the farm house. The maire was left far behind. The doors were open, back and front. Ginger was first in at the front, Harry at the back. The house was deserted. In the kitchen the table was laid for a meal; there was hot coffee in a pot: one of the cups was half full. The occupants had evidently left in haste: the surprise had failed.

The Englishmen rushed out, and Ginger collided with the maire, who was puffing and blowing, partly from haste, partly from fury at having been outstripped.

"My fault, m'sew," said Ginger, picking him up. "They've bunked."

Kenneth translated, soothingly.

"They must have escaped by the front while we approached from the rear," he said.

"My plan was sound. It would have succeeded if they had waited," said the maire. "And we gave them no warning: it is incomprehensible."

Meanwhile Harry, Ginger, and the gendarmes were scanning the neighbourhood, hastening to various points of vantage. Suddenly Ginger gave a shout. Far to the right, along the road by which the motor lorry had been driven, three cyclists were pedalling at full speed away from the farm. The rearmost was a big man, like the shepherd whom the party had passed on the hill. As soon as Harry saw them, he squared his elbows and ran towards the motor-car, nearly a mile away, shouting to Ginger to inform the others. By the time he drove back in the car, the maire had decided on pursuit, and was making calculations of speed. In a few moments the car was flashing along the road. But the cyclists had had eight or nine minutes' start. There was no sign of them. They had evidently quitted the road and made off by one or other of the by-paths on each side, along which, even had their tracks been discovered, the car could not follow them.

"We're done, all through him!" growled Ginger, in high indignation, with a jerk of his head towards the maire.

That little man was explaining to Kenneth that the soundest principles sometimes fail in practice through unforeseen contingencies.

"But they will not dare to return to the farm house," he said, "so that we have accomplished something."

They returned to the village. Kenneth gave the colonel a faithful report of the expedition. Colonel Appleton let out a hot word or two.

"Next time we have an arrest to make we'll do it first and consult the police afterwards," he said.

CHAPTER XVIII

USES OF A TRANSPORT LORRY

The Rutlands had a somewhat longer spell in billets than usual. They were awaiting a draft from the base to make good their losses. The officers and kind friends at home had provided books and games as a relief from the constant mental strain to which modern warfare subjects a man, and with these and impromptu smoking concerts they beguiled the tedium of inaction.

Monsieur Obernai was very active in effort on their behalf. Speaking English with only a trace of foreign accent, he went freely about among the men, conversing with them about their experiences, retailing reminiscences of Alsace, making liberal presents of cigarettes. He was very affable with the officers billeted in his house, and sometimes joined them in their mess-room. On one of these occasions he remarked with a smile that but for the incessant booming of the guns he would hardly have known that war was going on, so little did they talk about it.

"Anything but that, monsieur," replied Captain Adams. "'Deeds, not words,' is our motto. The whole thing is so frightful that we try to forget all about it at off times."

"It is so different in our army," said Monsieur Obernai. "Our officers are not capable of such detachment."

"'A still tongue makes a wise head,' monsieur," said the captain.

Monsieur Obernai looked puzzled, but smiled amiably. He had a pleasant smile.

One day the battalion was suddenly paraded. A few minutes afterwards a motor car drove up, and the men recognised with a thrill that the commander-in-chief had come to inspect them. Sir John French passed up and down the lines, addressing a man here and there, then made a little speech to the battalion as a whole, complimenting them on the work they had done and promising them stiff work in the future and ultimate victory. After visiting a few slightly injured men who remained in the village, the field-marshal drove away amid ringing cheers.

The battalion had only just been dismissed when the whirr of an aeroplane was heard, and a few seconds later a Taube flew over the place.

"Look out!" cried somebody.

Some of the men scuttled for cover, others looked up nonchalantly into the sky. The aeroplane was out of range. Suddenly there was a terrific explosion. A column of earth and smoke shot up from a field a few hundred yards west of the village. The Taube was seen flying back, chased by a couple of English aeroplanes.

"It almost looks as if they knew the chief was to be here," remarked Colonel Appleton, watching the chase among his officers.

"And we only knew it ourselves twenty minutes before he arrived," said Captain Adams.

"Well, I knew it last night, but I kept it to myself. Got word by telephone. They may have tapped the wire. The spies aren't all scotched yet, Adams."

"The deuce!" exclaimed the captain. "I'd like to catch some of them."

"The Germans have very little for their money, though. Look! our fellows have brought the Taube down."

Behind the German lines the aeroplane was whirling in precipitous descent from an immense height.

"Two more good men lost!" said the colonel. "And the spies will go on spying."

Next night the Rutlands were ordered back to the hill village. The enemy was to be turned out at all costs. Regiments were coming up in support, and as soon as a sufficient reserve was collected the attack was to be driven home. The men were fired with grim resolution. News had just come in of the employment of poisonous gas at Ypres, miles away to the north, and as they cleaned their bayonets they vowed to avenge their fallen comrades from Canada.

The upper part of the hill had been held against repeated assaults by the Germans. The opposing lines crossed the main street, about ninety yards apart. Between them the houses had been demolished by one side or the other. The houses above the British trenches, and those below the German, were occupied by snipers. The British snipers had an advantage in being above the enemy; on the other hand they were more exposed to artillery fire, and their positions

had been a good deal knocked about. To protect themselves from the fire of these snipers the Germans had made the parapets of their trenches unusually high. This handicapped them to some extent in replying to rifle fire; but they had compensated themselves by installing a large number of machine guns, which were certain to take a heavy toll of the attackers when they charged down the hill.

Soon after the Rutlands reached their position at the top of the hill, in the dusk, a lorry came up from the rear with supplies for the next day. Owing to the rearward slope the vehicle could be brought to within a few yards of the trenches without being seen by the enemy, and since horses were employed as less noisy than a motor engine, supplies had been regularly brought up in this way without the knowledge of the Germans.

Kenneth and Ginger, with other men, were unloading the lorry when a second lorry appeared near the foot of the hill on the British side. It was heavily laden, and the slope proved to be too much for the two horses drawing it.

"Old cab horses, they are," said the driver of the lorry that was being unloaded. "Not fit for this job. I'll have to go down and lend a hand."

Placing a brick under one of the wheels, he unharnessed his horses and led them down the hill. Kenneth and Ginger were carrying a box between them to the communication trench running downwards from the crest when a shell came whizzing over from the German side and exploded near the lorry they had just left, bespattering them with earth, felling one or two of their comrades, and sending the rest scampering into the trench. The shock of the explosion caused Kenneth to drop his end of the box: both he and Ginger were dazed for a few seconds. When they looked round, they were aghast to see the lorry moving backward down the hill. Only half its load had been removed, and though its motion was at present slow, it would gather speed and, unless it could be checked, would crash into the second lorry to which the driver was now yoking his horses. For a moment they were paralysed by realisation of the frightful danger. Men, horses, stores would all be hurled and crushed in hideous wreck. The heavy vehicle was already rolling on more quickly when with mutual decision they left the box and sprinted after it. The case was desperate. Neither of them had any idea how the catastrophe could be averted. It would scarcely be possible to loose the skid and throw it into position while the lorry was running, faster every moment.

More fleet of foot than Ginger, Kenneth rushed ahead, overtook the lorry, and, a thought striking him, seized the pole, and exerting all the force of which he was capable while running at speed, twisted it to the left. The lorry swerved, appeared to hesitate, then ran into a shallow ditch at the side of the road and turned over. The pole, striking against a tree, snapped off, flinging Kenneth to

the ground.

"Whew!" gasped Ginger, running down. "That was a near thing."

"Twenty yards," said Kenneth, rising and rubbing his elbow.

"George! that was a near 'un!" panted the driver, who had hastened up. His face was very pale. "I owe you one, mate. Nothing else would have saved us. Hope you ain't hurt."

"Nothing to speak of. The lorry has come off the worst."

"George! you're right! It's what you may call snookered. Done for, that's what it is. We'll have to shove it out of the way before I can bring my horses up, and leave it. What you say, Bill?"

"Can't do nothing with it," said the driver of the second lorry.

"Take my tip, and put the skid on when you get yourn up, mate. George! it give me a fright and no mistake."

They drove the second lorry to the summit, leaving Kenneth and Ginger to carry up the spilled load.

"The lorry isn't so badly damaged as he thinks," said Kenneth. "The brake is bent, and a good deal of wood is chipped off, but the thing will run all right."

He so informed the driver when he met him.

"All the same, you don't catch me driving it back to-night," said the man. "It's nearly dark, the road's bad enough when you're too complay, as the Frenchies say. I'll leave it to the morning at any rate."

It was dark when Kenneth and Ginger had finished their task. They took their places with their platoon in the firing trench.

"Think they'll have any gas for us to-morrow?" said Ginger.

"It's not very likely," said Kenneth. "The gas the Germans have been using lies low; it would be more useful to us."

"Well, why shouldn't we use it too? What's the odds whether you're killed with gas or shrapnel? Gas don't hurt, I expect, and it's a deal cleaner."

"Upon my word I don't know," Kenneth replied. "There's no logic in it. But somehow it goes against the grain. You poison dogs with gas, not men."

"Besides, it's taking an unfair advantage," said Harry. "It depends on the wind—and there's no crossing over at half-time."

The notes of a flute came along the trench from the left.

"Stoneway's at it again," said Ginger.

"The fellow can play," remarked Harry. "Good stuff, too. He doesn't confine himself to the trumpery tunes of the musical comedies. That's a bit of Mozart."

"I've heard that tune somewhere," said Ginger reflectively. "I haven't got much of an ear for music, but I know them twiddles. Why, hang me, I heard 'em when I was in that cellar. Somebody was playing 'em upstairs."

"It's a concerto every flautist knows," said Harry. "The Germans certainly

lick us in music.”

”A pity they’re not satisfied with that,” said Kenneth.

They listened in silence till the conclusion of the piece, and joined in the general applause. After a short interval the performer began again, now, however, playing detached notes that had neither time nor tune.

”Those exercises, again!” said Ginger. ”That’s the worst of music. My little Sally is learning the pianner, and she makes me mad sometimes with what she calls the five-finger exercises. ’For mercy’s sake play us a tune,’ says I. ’I’ve got to practise this, Dad,’ says she. ’What’s the good of it?’ says I. ’Teacher says it’s to get my fingers in order,’ says she. Anybody’d think her fingers weren’t the same as other people’s; they’re all right; a very pretty hand she’s got.... He’s stopped, thank goodness! Pass up the word for ’Dolly Grey,’ mates.”

Silence presently reigned. The men reclined, dozing.

”I say, Harry,” said Kenneth.

”What is it?” replied Harry sleepily.

”I’ve been thinking. We might make good use of that lorry.”

”How?”

”Let it loose on the Germans.”

”Send it down-hill, you mean?”

”Yes.”

”What’s the good? They’d hear it coming and clear out of the way. It might break their wire and a bit of the parapet—hardly enough damage to be worth the fag.”

Kenneth was silent for a little. Then he roused Harry again. There ensued a long conversation between them, at the conclusion of which Kenneth crept along the trench to find Captain Adams. It was some time before he returned.

”The colonel agrees,” he said in some excitement. ”There’s no time to lose. We’ve got to attack at four o’clock. Wake up, Ginger.”

Ginger having been informed of what was intended, he and Kenneth stole from the trench, up the communication trench, and set off at a trot towards their billets. Two hours later they returned in a motor car, which halted at the eastern foot of the hill. They carried up a large rectangular object, and at a second journey a number of bolts and a heavy hammer. Soon the men in the trenches heard the clank of hammering, and Harry suggested that the lorry was being repaired.

His comrades were in fact at work on the lorry. The object which they had brought up consisted of several sheets of corrugated zinc which Ginger, a skilled mechanic, had bolted together in the village. This he was now fixing upright over the rear axle of the lorry, so that it overlapped the body of the vehicle on each side. With the assistance of Kenneth and the driver of the car he was turning the lorry into an armoured car, of unusual form, it is true, but likely, they thought, to serve

its purpose. When the zinc was in position, they filled up the space between the sheets with sand, and so completed a bullet-proof screen about nine feet wide. Then, going into one of the half-ruined houses, they brought out a number of planks and carried them to the centre of the firing trench. There, over a space of about ten feet, the parapet was quickly demolished, and the planks were laid across side by side, forming a bridge. The men of the platoon had meanwhile been taken into their confidence, and when Captain Adams called for volunteers to cut the wire immediately in front, several men crawled out and did the work without being detected.

These preparations having been completed, half a dozen men quickly pushed the lorry over the crest of the hill to within a few yards of the trench. Favoured by pitch darkness, and moving with the utmost quietness, they had everything in readiness by three o'clock, without the knowledge of the Germans, and even of the more distant platoons of their own battalion.

The orders of the day were already known along the British line. They were to attack just before dawn. The hill was to be cleared of Germans. It was a task for rifles, bayonets, and hand grenades. They could expect no help from artillery, so narrow was the space dividing the lines.

At the appointed moment, twenty men of the 1st platoon formed up in file behind the lorry, each carrying a hand grenade in addition to his rifle. The word was given. They pushed the lorry off; on each side the other men scrambled out of the trenches; some crawled forward and cut the wire on either side. Then, without uttering a sound, they charged down the hill.

The lorry rumbled slowly over the plank bridge, on to the road, and gathered way as it bumped and jolted down towards the German trenches, the twenty men running behind it. When it had covered a dozen yards it was greeted with rapid rifle fire from the German sentries. There were shouts from below, but before the enemy realised the manoeuvre, a shower of hand grenades fell among them, the lorry crashed through the wire entanglement, broke through the parapet, and turned a somersault over the trench.

Then a yell burst from the throats of the Rutlands, and the air was rent by the crackle of rifles all along the line except at the spot where the lorry had fallen. There Kenneth and his companions sprang into the trench, and pushing along to right and left, cleared it with the bayonet, the panic-stricken Germans fleeing before them or flinging up their hands in token of surrender. Confusion spread along the whole line. The British arrangements had been thoroughly made. While the Rutlands charged down the main street, other regiments were sweeping through the streets and alleys on either side, raking them with fire from machine guns, flinging bombs into the occupied houses, chasing the Germans at the point of the bayonet. Here and there were furious hand to hand encounters;

at one point a mass of the enemy's reserves surged forward and gained ground, only to be borne back in turn by the irresistible dash of British supports. In half an hour the streets were cleared, and while some of the British blocked up the captured trenches against counter-attack, others rushed the houses to which the enemy still clung, and stormed them one after another.

All this had happened in the grey chill dawn. By the time the sun's rim appeared over the distant horizon the position was completely won, at comparatively slight cost. More than two hundred prisoners remained in British hands, and among them Ginger, who had escaped with a few bruises, recognised the lieutenant to whom he had been indebted for a uniform.

When the roll was called, it was found that of the twenty men who had followed the lorry only one had been wounded.

"A capital idea of yours, Amory," said Captain Adams. "It's a pity we can't always be going down-hill behind screens. There's a fortune awaiting the man who invents a bullet-proof protection for infantry in the field."

"Wouldn't that result in stale-mate, sir?"

"Well, if it put an end to warfare by machinery it would give us a chance for our fists! Men will fight, I suppose, to the crack of doom. It would be much healthier if we could fight out our quarrels without killing one another."

CHAPTER XIX

SUSPICIONS

Next day fresh regiments were moved up, and the Rutlands, who had twice borne the brunt of the struggle for the hill, were sent into reserve and promised a long rest. They went back to their old quarters, now a good deal farther behind the firing line.

One night, when Kenneth was returning alone to his billet, he heard the thin squeak of a bat, and glanced up, though it was so dark that he could scarcely expect to see the animal. To his surprise, he caught a momentary glimpse of it as it flew across the lane. It was as though a moonbeam had flashed upon the wings for the fraction of a second. But the moon was not up. The sky was clouded; only one or two stars were visible; and the rays of a star were too feeble to light up the flittering wings.

Kenneth was puzzled. He stood still, looking up, waiting for the bat to

reappear. It was circling somewhere above him; he could still hear it faintly squeaking; but it did not again come within view, and after a while the sound ceased.

"Extraordinary!" thought Kenneth.

He was about to move on when he heard the grating of a key in a lock, so slight that it might have passed unnoticed had he not been listening intently for the bat. In this quiet lane, with trees on one side and a garden wall on the other, the sound challenged curiosity. The villagers were forbidden to leave their cottages after dark; Kenneth himself had only chosen this route as a short cut to his billet; he could not help suspecting that one of the inhabitants was breaking rules and entering his house by a back way to avoid detection.

It was no part of his duty to play the policeman, and he would have gone on his way if he had not at this moment heard a light, hasty footfall, as of one walking quickly but cautiously. Instinctively he remained still, keeping close to a tree trunk. A man passed him, moving very quietly, almost touching him. He appeared to be in uniform. A second later he heard the key again. Then all was silent.

He was now interested, suspicious. The man was going in the direction from which he had come. Who was he? What was he doing at this late hour? For a moment he thought of following him; but he was averse to getting a man into trouble for what was perhaps a harmless escapade, and he decided to proceed.

A few steps brought him to a door in the wall. The man must have been silently let out, and must have left without a word, the door being then as quietly closed and locked behind him. The wall, as Kenneth knew, bounded the gardens of two or three of the larger houses. It might perhaps be worth while to find out from which house this nocturnal visitor had departed so stealthily. It was too dark to see; Last Post would be sounded in a few minutes; all that he could do was to put a mark upon the door which he could identify next day. He scratched a cross with his pocket-knife on the right side of the door, on a level with the keyhole, which was on the left, and went on, treading lightly by instinct.

So soon as he could get off next day, he returned to the lane. The door he had scratched was one of three. Two were close together. The wall was too high for him to look over; he could only discover the house to which his door belonged by going to the end of the lane, and round to the front of the houses. The gardens were large; it meant a walk of some considerable distance. His most certain course was to number his paces along the lane, and take an equal number along the street which the houses faced. He went along with even stride, and in the lane counted 239 steps. In the street the 237th pace brought him to the front gate of Monsieur Obernai. This must be the house. His paces had probably differed a little, or the street and the lane were not quite parallel.

"It's all right," he thought. "The man was one of the officers' servants, perhaps, sent out on some late errand."

But as he went away, this explanation did not appear quite convincing. A servant sent on an errand by one of the officers quartered in Monsieur Obernai's house would not have been let out stealthily, and locked out. Furtiveness implied an uneasy conscience. Upon this thought came a sudden recollection of Madame Bonnard's dislike of the Alsatian. He had seldom himself come into contact with the village philanthropist; it seemed to him now that he had even avoided him. "It never struck me before," he thought, "but I haven't felt the least inclination to meet him. Yet some of the men are quite keen on him."

On the previous night he had not mentioned the incident to his comrades. It was not in Kenneth's nature to be expansive. He had told them about the sudden appearance and disappearance of the bat, which, however, they, not having seen it, had not regarded as extraordinary. But now, a little uneasy, he decided to tell them everything. He felt the need of talking it over.

"Capting wants you," said Ginger, meeting him at the door of Bonnard's cottage.

"What's it about?" he asked.

"That uniform I borrowed; they found some papers in the pockets, in German, seemingly, and Capting wants you to read 'em."

Kenneth went back to Monsieur Obernai's house, was admitted, and found Captain Adams with other officers in the mess-room.

"Ah, Amory, we want you," said the captain. "You know German. What do you make of that?"

He handed him a scrap of paper, straightened out after having been crumpled, on which were written two lines in German.

"Tell our friend it is now due east," Kenneth translated.

"That's what I told you, Adams," said one of the lieutenants. "There's nothing in it."

"Well, look at these, Amory."

He handed to him the contents of Lieutenant Axel von Schwank's pocket-book. Kenneth looked them over: a copy of the Hymn of Hate, a cutting from the *Cologne Gazette* announcing the blowing up of Woolwich Arsenal, some letters from members of the Schwank family, one or two memoranda of no importance. He translated them aloud one by one.

"Nothing of any value to us," said the captain. "I think we might give the letters back to the prisoner. His people idolise him, evidently. Well, the only thing left is this." He took up a crumpled piece of music paper. "Schwank seems to write music in his spare time—a setting of the Hymn of Hate perhaps. Our find is no use. Very good, Amory, that's all."

But Kenneth, rendered suspicious of everything by his recent discoveries, remembered that he had found a similar piece of music paper in the trench some weeks before.

"Before you tear that up, sir," he said, "I think I'd let Randall have a look at it. We found a paper like it in our trench."

"You think there may be something in it?"

"I'm rather suspicious, sir, but I'd rather say no more until Randall has seen it."

The captain sent a man to find Harry. When he arrived, Kenneth asked him whether he still had the piece of music paper he had found. After rummaging in his pocket Harry drew the paper out. The two pieces were laid side by side.

"Well?" said the captain, when Harry had examined them for a few moments. The other officers crowded round in an interested group.

"They are not alike except in one particular," said Harry: "that neither is a recognisable tune."

He whistled the notes.

"Very ugly, certainly," said the captain. "Any further suggestion, Amory?"

"What do you call that note in music?" Kenneth asked Harry, pointing to the first note on Stoneway's paper.

"B flat," said Harry.

"And the next?"

"E, then D, then E again; the next is A sharp above the stave."

"What are you driving at, Amory?" asked the captain.

"I was wondering if I could make a word out of it, but *bedea* doesn't begin any word either in English or German that I know of. Try the other paper."

"F sharp, A, G, E," said Harry.

"It's the sharps and flats that bother me," said Kenneth. "Do they ever call them anything else?"

"No ... Wait a bit. The Germans call B flat B, and B natural H. I remember toiling away at a fugue on the name BACH years ago. I say, give me a minute. I've got a notion."

He sat down at the table, took out pencil and began to write the names of the notes on the lines and spaces, beginning with A on the second leger line below the stave. Having written H on the third line, instead of writing A on the second space he wrote I, and on the third space J. Then he paused, looking reflectively at the notes originally written. Except in the case of B flat, all the accidentals were sharps.

"We'll try this," he said.

On the third space he wrote C sharp, and called it K, and so proceeding, completed the alphabet by writing two notes, the second sharpened, on each line

and space. Z fell on the third space above the stave.

"Now try again," he said to Kenneth.

Kenneth took up von Schwank's paper, and read off the names of the notes in this new notation. The first four letters were *Sage*.

"That's good German," he said.

"Go on," said the captain. "This is very interesting."

Kenneth wrote down the letters as he read them.

"By George!" he cried. "In English it reads: 'Tell our friend it is now due east.'"

"What's due east?" Captain Adams exclaimed. "Try the other paper."

"The first word is *bedeutend*, 'considerable,'" said Kenneth, writing. "The English of it all is, 'Considerable movement in the rear.'"

The officers glanced at one another.

"We've had a spy among us, then," said the captain quietly. "Where did you get this, Randall?"

Harry explained, without however naming the man whom, in common with Kenneth, he now suspected. But his reticence was unnecessary.

"It's that fellow Stoneway, without a doubt," said one of the lieutenants. "He makes the most weird sounds on his flute. You'll arrest him, Adams?"

"Wait a little. There's a deep-laid scheme here. There's more than one man involved. Who is 'our friend'?"

"I must tell you what I saw last night, sir," said Kenneth.

He described the stealthy exit from the gate in the lane, and the discovery that it led from Monsieur Obernai's garden—behind the house in which they were then assembled. Captain Adams whistled under his breath.

"Rather serious for our polite Alsatian host," he said. "We must get to the bottom of this. It won't do to act too hastily. We must catch the fellow at it."

"But hang it all, we can't stop here under the roof of a spy," said a lieutenant.

"If I may suggest, sir," said Kenneth, "do nothing yet. Nobody knows about this except ourselves. If you leave the house or show any sign of suspicion, those who are involved will smell a rat, and we shall perhaps fail to learn all there is to be learnt. Wouldn't it be better if you go on as usual, and let Randall and me, and perhaps Murgatroyd, keep a watch on the lane?"

"But Obernai won't appear in the lane," said the captain.

"Very likely not, sir. I believe his work is done in the house. You remember the lamp signalling we saw in the church tower."

"That's in our hands now."

"Yes, and the light now comes from due east."

"You think that's it? Have you seen a light?"

"No, sir; but last night I caught a sudden glimpse of a bat flying above my

head in the lane; it was for only the tenth of a second, just as if the bat had crossed a pencil of light. But I was puzzled, because there was no light visible. I can't help thinking that it has some connection with this discovery, and if you'll give us leave to keep a look-out at night, we may make sure of it and give you positive grounds for taking action."

"What about Stoneway? Hadn't we better keep him under observation?"

"Leave him to us, sir. I'd give him plenty of rope."

"And keep enough to hang him afterwards," said the lieutenant of his platoon.

"Very well, Amory," said the captain. "You'll of course say nothing to any one else. We'll do our best to keep up appearances before Obernai, though upon my word it will tax our histrionic powers. If you make any discovery, don't come to the house; report to me elsewhere."

"If we can collar the men, sir?"

"Oh, in that case do so, and put them under lock and key. But don't attempt too much: it's of great importance to get hold of the whole gang, for I imagine that we've been unawares in a wasps' nest all this time. We must scotch them all."

"One thing, sir, before we go: will you tell us the arrangement of the house?"

"So far as I know it. Our billets are all in the front. Obernai and his servants live at the back. On this floor there's a long passage between us. Upstairs there's no communication between back and front: the doors are blocked up, to secure our privacy, Obernai said."

"There's a back staircase, then?"

"No doubt."

"How many servants are there, sir?"

"Two men, whom Obernai brought with him from Alsace, he says. I've caught a glimpse of an old woman, too, but she rarely leaves the back premises."

With this information Kenneth and Harry left the house, and returned to their billet to consult Ginger.

CHAPTER XX

MONSIEUR OBERNAI'S ATTIC

"I can't hardly believe it," said Ginger, when Kenneth recounted the facts and his inferences. "Never thought Stoneway had the pluck."

"A man without pluck is no good as a spy," Harry remarked.

"True. He must have had an awful time of it, always wondering if he'd be found out, or copped by a German bullet."

"What strikes me most forcibly is the thoroughness of the German organisation," said Kenneth. "You'll always find individuals ready to take their lives in their hands, for patriotism or pay; but you won't always find things so perfectly organised. If we're right, Stoneway must have been employed first as an anti-recruiting agent, with orders to enlist and act as spy within our ranks if that seemed feasible."

"I see through that post-card business now," said Ginger. "He gave our address to some pal in London so that the Germans should know where he was, and make use of him. And then to put it on to me!—a dirty trick. But what can you expect when the Kaiser lets his men do dirty tricks and gives 'em Iron Crosses for it? Whatever he is, Bill is no gentleman."

"Stoneway is a German, I suppose?" said Harry.

"Steinweg—not an uncommon German name," replied Kenneth. "But now, how are we going to set about our job?"

"What was that you said about a bat?" said Harry. "I didn't pay much heed."

Kenneth again described the curious phenomenon, adding:

"That's why I want to do something more than watch the lane. If the man I saw was Stoneway, we might catch him again, but give time for Obernai to clear away anything suspicious. It seems to me that what we have to do is to get into the house, and have a look at the back premises."

"That means we should have to get in at the back secretly?"

"Yes; if we went to the front openly we shouldn't get farther than the lobby."

"Suppose it turns out that we are quite wrong, wouldn't it be rather a serious matter to break into a French house? Obernai is popular: it might not be easy to persuade the French authorities that we were not burglars."

"Let's chance that," said Ginger. "For any sake don't let the police know beforehand, or the whole thing will be messed up like it was with that maire. Besides, if it comes to that, we've got the capting behind us."

"I quite agree," said Kenneth. "We'll risk it. Well now, judging by the length of the side garden wall, the house is about sixty yards from the lane. With these mysterious comings and goings the back gate will very likely be watched; at any rate there'll be somebody about to let visitors in and out. I vote we get into the next garden, and clamber over the wall into Obernai's. We shall have to wait until the people in the next house are asleep—say eleven o'clock to-night."

About half-past ten, when the village was dark and silent, the three men

left their billet and, to avoid detection, took a round-about route to the lane. The air was rather chill, and a light mist hung low over the ground. Each of the three carried a revolver, and they had agreed not to speak except in case of necessity, and then only in whispers.

Creeping along softly under cover of the trees that lined one side of the lane, they passed Obernai's door, and halted opposite the door of the next house, a few yards beyond. Here they waited, listening. All was silent. Then Kenneth tiptoed across the lane and quietly tried the door of Obernai's garden. It was bolted. The next door opened to his touch. Joined by his companions, he entered and found himself in a garden much overgrown with weeds. They stole along by the side wall, and halted under it about fifty feet from the house.

"Give me a leg-up," Kenneth whispered.

In a few seconds he was down again. The top of the wall was spiked with glass. Stripping off his overcoat, he mounted again, laid the coat over the glass, and dropped lightly to the ground, after listening awhile to make sure that nobody was about. The others followed him in turn.

The back of the house was quite dark. There was no sound within or without. Through the mist they could just distinguish the path leading to the back door. Kenneth crossed the grass to it, stole along, and cautiously turned the door handle. The door resisted his slight pressure: it was locked or bolted. He looked up the wall. The windows were out of reach. It seemed that the house could only be entered forcibly.

He was returning to consult his companions when he suddenly heard behind him a sound like the ringing of a muffled electric bell inside the house. Hurrying on, he crouched with the other two at the foot of the wall and waited. In a few moments they heard a bolt drawn. They could see nothing, but apparently the door was being opened. Then from the doorway came a low whisper: "Geben Sie Acht," followed, as by an instantaneous after-thought, by the French words, "Prenez garde." There was no reply, but a slight rustle approached, and the three watchers, peering over the bushes, saw a woman passing in almost absolute silence down the path to the back wall.

Had she left the door open? Kenneth was thinking of stealing up to it to find out when it occurred to him that the woman had perhaps gone to let in a visitor. It would be well to wait a little. Very soon he was justified. The figure of the woman, scarcely distinguishable in the gloom, reappeared. At her heels was a man. They passed along the path within twenty feet of the lurking watchers; neither spoke a word. Presently came the sound of a bolt gently shot, then all was silent again.

It was pretty clear that the bell had been rung from an electric push in the garden door. Kenneth had seen none; it was probably concealed.

"Shall I find it, and get the door opened?" he whispered to his companions.

"That would give the whole show away," said Harry. "We don't want to raise an alarm."

"Then I don't see that we can do anything. The only thing is to tell the captain to-morrow, and he'll arrest the lot."

"Why not?" said Ginger. "If they're innocent, they won't mind—not much."

"But we shan't catch them at it. You may be sure there's nothing suspicious to be found in the daytime. We've got very artful men to deal with."

They were still discussing their course of action when they heard the bolt drawn again. Next moment there was a perpendicular streak of dim light, which widened rapidly. The door was open; the room or lobby behind was now lit by a small oil lamp, turned very low. Through the illuminated rectangle of the doorway came a man and a woman. The man was in a British uniform. They stepped down to the path.

"Stoneway!" whispered Ginger.

Pressing themselves almost flat on the ground they watched the two figures walking down the path, the end of which, towards the garden wall, was scarcely reached by the feeble rays from the doorway.

"Now!" murmured Kenneth.

Bending double, they hastened across the grass, and slipped in through the doorway. They were in a lobby. At the further end of it was a closed door. There were doors on both sides, one of them slightly open. In the corner on the right was the staircase leading to the upper floor, and on the square-topped newel-post stood the small oil lamp.

Taking in all this at a glance, Kenneth peered through the open door on the left. The room was dark and untenanted. He beckoned to his companions. They followed him into the room. In less than a minute the woman returned from the garden, closed and bolted the door, and was moving along the lobby when the stairs creaked slightly, and an old man came tottering down.

"Bier, noch Bier," he said in low tones to the woman.

The woman muttered something, took the lamp from its place, and accompanied by the old man went into one of the rooms off the lobby on the opposite side from the three watchers. They were heard clumping down wooden steps, no doubt leading to the cellars.

"Now's our chance," Kenneth whispered.

The three stole out of the room into the dark lobby, and crept on hands and knees up the staircase. The landing above was equally dark, except in the far corner on the right, where light came through a door slightly ajar. The three men tiptoed to it. Kenneth peeped in. The room was apparently Obernai's bedroom. No one was in it; the bed had not been disturbed. A candle was burning on the

dressing-table. Pieces of heavy French furniture afforded means of concealment.

"You stay here," whispered Kenneth. "I'll go on."

He slipped off his boots, blew out the candle, and crept out. There was no sound from below. On the opposite side of the landing was a narrow staircase, leading, he presumed, to the attics. Up this he groped his way. At the top there was a passage, at the end of which, on the right, was a streak of light on the floor. Feeling his way along, he felt two other doors, the handles of which he turned in succession, hoping to slip into a dark room as he had done below. Both doors were locked. At this moment, hearing the footsteps of the old man coming slowly up the bottom flight of stairs, he slipped back to the dark end of the passage and stood watching there.

The old man mounted the upper flight. A can clinked against the post as he turned to the right towards the door beneath which the light shone. He tapped on the door; it was opened; the man passed in. Kenneth heard a guttural voice say: "Zwei Batterien heute morgen—" The remainder of the sentence was cut off by the closing of the door. In a few moments it opened again; the old man came out, closed it behind him, and sat down on a stool at the end of the passage, either as sentry, or to be at hand if more beer was required.

Kenneth scarcely dared to breathe. What was going on in that room? What could he do? After several uncomfortable minutes the door suddenly opened—too wide for his comfort—and a voice said:

"Frisch auf! Die Lampe ist beinahe erlöscht."

The door was shut. The old man rose wearily and hobbled downstairs, no doubt to fetch oil or whatever was used for the lamp.

Kenneth felt that the time had come for action. The mention of the lamp left no doubt in his mind of the work on which the occupants of the room were engaged. Waiting until the old man had reached the foot of the lower staircase, he stole down to the room where he had left his companions and told them in a few whispered words what he had discovered. They removed their boots and stood behind the door, prepared to follow the man when he came up again.

In a few minutes he returned. They waited until he had ascended the upper staircase, then followed him noiselessly, saw him enter the room, and crept along to the door, drawing their revolvers. From within the room came the smell of acetylene gas. Standing back against the wall, they waited for the reopening of the door. As soon as the old man reappeared, they started forward, pointing their revolvers at him, pushed him before them and entered the room.

There was an exclamation, a moment of confusion.

"Hands up, or I fire!" cried Kenneth in German.

There were four men in the room, three seated at a table drinking beer, the fourth occupied with a steel lever operating a disc that worked from side

to side in front of a bright bull's-eye lamp. Kenneth's warning had checked a movement on the part of two of the seated men towards their coat pockets. The man at the lamp, who had faced round at the sudden intrusion, was quicker than his companions, and drew his revolver at the moment of turning. But as he was raising his hand Harry fired. His revolver fell to the floor with a crash, and with a curse he clasped his broken wrist with the other hand.

The three others had fallen back into their chairs. A stream of beer from an overturned mug trickled from the table to the floor, for one tense moment the only sound in the room. The men's faces were pale and contorted with fear. They sat, limp, with no spirit for resistance, recognizing that the game was up.

Kenneth and Harry glowed with a quiet satisfaction. Ginger was more demonstrative.

"Blest if I haven't got him at last!" he exclaimed, smiling triumphantly at one of the prisoners. "It's the chap that downed me when I was sitting on that aeroplane."

"Monsieur Obernai is unfortunate in his friends," said Kenneth.

Obernai glared at him; it was not the expression of a bland philanthropist. One of his companions, a big man with a wart on his nose, did not wear the look of pious resignation that might have been expected from a man dressed in a cure's soutane. The features of the fourth man seemed familiar to Kenneth, though at the moment he could not recall the time or place of his seeing him before.

"We'll just hand these men over to the captain," said Kenneth. "Then we'll deal with Stoneway."

After ordering the men to empty their pockets, they marched them downstairs, and through the door connecting the back part of the house with the officers' billets. Captain Adams, like the others, had gone to bed. He came to the door of his room in his pyjamas.

"We've caught Obernai and three others signalling with a lamp, sir," said Kenneth.

"You don't say so! What have you done with them?"

"They are below, sir."

"Take them off to the provost-marshal: I don't want to see them."

"Stoneway is in it, sir, I am sorry to say."

"Arrest him, as quickly as you can. Then come back and tell me all about it."

The spies were marched off to prison. Then Ginger with a corporal's guard went to the cottage where Stoneway was billeted. Stoneway was not there. Enquiry and search were alike fruitless. It was not until an hour later that Ginger hit on a possible explanation of his absence.

"By jinks!" he exclaimed, with a gesture of vexation. "I forgot the old

woman.”

He hastened back to Obernai’s house. The old woman had disappeared.

On returning to the house some time before, Kenneth and Harry found the officers, all in their night attire, examining the signalling apparatus in the upper room.

”They are all safely locked up, sir,” Kenneth reported.

”That’s well. How did you catch them?”

Kenneth gave an account of the night’s work.

”You did very well, Amory,” said the captain. ”The battalion is lucky in having the Three Musketeers. And the whole brigade is indebted to you. This is a fiendishly ingenious arrangement.”

He explained the working of the apparatus. The acetylene lamp faced one end of a long tube, which pierced the outer wall of the house. By means of a delicate mechanism the position of the tube could be altered by millimetres. The length of the tube prevented the rays from converging like the rays of a search-light, so that the light, directed eastward, was not likely to be seen except by a person at an equal height.

”I have no doubt at all,” said the captain, ”that some miles away in the German lines there is an operator with a similar lamp, at the same height and in the same straight line with this. We have kept a look-out but seen nothing; no doubt the cessation of the flashing gave them warning. To them the light would appear like a star on the horizon, and the alternate exposure and dousing of it by means of the disc made the signals. No wonder we’ve got it unexpectedly hot sometimes.”

Here Ginger came in.

”Stoneway’s got away, sir,” he reported. ”I guess the old woman gave him the tip.”

”Poor wretch! He can’t get far. I’ll circulate the news at once and he’ll be hunted down. Now get to your billets, men; I shall want your evidence in the morning.”

As they were returning through the silent streets, talking over the exciting incidents of the night, Kenneth suddenly exclaimed:

”By George! I remember now. That fellow was the man I saw talking French to Stoneway at St. Pancras station.”

CHAPTER XXI

MARKED DOWN

About four o'clock on the following afternoon, an old French peasant was walking along a road some fifteen miles to the west of the village in and around which the Rutlands were billeted. His lean form was bent, wisps of white hair straggled from beneath his broad soft hat, his legs dragged themselves along. There was no one else upon the road, which was remote from the main highways that had been for nine months streams of traffic; but the old man glanced continually right and left, before and behind, as if searching for something with his shrewd bright eyes.

He came to a wood abutting on the road, and, after another look round, disappeared among the trees. A few minutes later he halted, then took a few slow careful steps forward, and stopped again, looking down with a curious eagerness. There, stretched on the fresh springing grass of a glade spangled with bright spots of sunlight, lay a man asleep. He was clad in the uniform of a British soldier, without a belt. His cap had fallen off, his arms were thrown out, his face was half turned to the ground. Perhaps the Frenchman noticed that the regimental badge was missing from his cap, the regimental letters from his shoulders.

After standing for a few moments contemplating the prostrate form, he bent down and touched the man's shoulder. The soldier started up instantly; the expression of his eyes might have betokened anxiety or fear; but it changed when he saw that his disturber was just a simple old Frenchman, with mildness written all over his brown ruddy face, withered like an apple long laid by.

"Bon soir, monsieur," said the Frenchman. "It is a hot sun, to be sure, but monsieur l'Anglais will catch a chill if he remains here asleep."

"Ah yes, I must be going," said the soldier, in French surprisingly good for an English private. "I have lost my regiment. I fell lame and dropped behind. Can you get me anything to eat?"

"Why yes, if you will be content with simple fare. These are hard times, monsieur. But who would not suffer for France? Come to my cottage hard by; I can at least give you a crust and a mouthful of wine. We French and you English are comrades, to be sure."

"Is your cottage far?"

"A few steps only; it is quite by itself. You would get better food in the village, but that is two miles away."

"I'll get a good meal when I rejoin my regiment. All I want now is a little to help me on my way."

"Yes, yes, I understand. Come then; it is only a few steps."

He set off through the wood, the soldier limping by his side, crossed the

road, and came within a few minutes to a little timber cabin. There the soldier, sitting on a low stool, ate ravenously the bread and strong cheese given him, and drank deep draughts of the thin red wine. The old man watched him benignantly, thinking perhaps that he ate as though seeing no near prospect of a full meal.

"You haven't seen my regiment, I suppose?" said the soldier.

"How can I tell?" replied the Frenchman, lifting his hands. "I have seen many regiments; whether yours was among them I do not know."

The soldier noticed a glance towards his shoulders.

"I gave my badges away to the French girls," he said lightly. "They clamoured for souvenirs.... There's no chance of my running into the Germans?"

"God forbid!" said the old man. "They are a little nearer, it is said; they are using poisonous gas against our brave men. But we do not lose heart. They will never beat us, never. When I look at the mists on yonder hills every evening—"

"Mists, are there?"

"Why yes: they creep over the hills at sunset; one can hardly see a dozen metres ahead. They say the Germans crept up a night or two ago in the mist, and took an English trench."

"Ah! well now, my regiment was marching to Violaines; you can put me in the way? I must find them before night."

"To be sure."

He went with him to the door, and pointed out the direction. The soldier offered to pay for his food, but the old man, with many gestures, refused to accept a sou. He bade his guest good-bye, returned to his cabin and shut the door. In his eyes was a look of satisfaction mingled with a strange eagerness. He hurried to the little window facing the road, and looked out from behind the curtain. The soldier was limping along in the direction his host had indicated. But presently he stopped and threw a furtive glance backward towards the cabin, another up and down the road, then walked on again. His lameness had been suddenly cured; his gait was even and agile. And instead of continuing in the way shown him, he turned off abruptly and re-entered the wood. Beyond it lay those hills which night clothed with mist.

The old man waited a little, then issued from his cabin, trotted to the road, and, he also, re-entered the wood. In a few minutes he was back again, and set off at the best speed of his aged legs for the village two miles away. Arriving there, he went straight to the mairie, and peered through the wire frame on the door, within which a notice in large handwriting was posted. It was headed in big letters,

SOLDAT ANGLAIS,

and beneath was a methodical description, in numbered sentences, of the deserter for whose discovery a reward was offered. The old man ticked off the details one by one; then, his bright little eyes gleaming, he knocked at the door.

It was a small and unimportant village. The maire was of scarcely higher social standing than his visitor. He had no gendarmes at his disposal: all the able-bodied men were in the ranks.

"He is a big man, Jacquou?" he said.

"He! Big, brawny, a regular beef-eater."

"Then we will telegraph. The English must arrest him. For us it would be dangerous. But what if they delay, and he escapes? There would go that fine reward, Jacquou, like the maid's chickens."

"Ah! Trust me for that, monsieur le maire, trust me for that," said the old man as he hobbled away.

Something less than two hours later the soldier emerged from his hiding-place in the wood, at a point at some little distance from the road. He came out slowly, nervously, glancing around and behind him. There was in his eyes that look of anxiety and fear which had appeared in them at the moment of his being roused by the old man. It was like the look of a hunted animal. He gazed towards the hills. Their ridges were sharp and clear against the sky. He looked up, and behind. Shafts of sunlight were still piercing the foliage. He glanced at the watch on his wrist, appeared to make a mental comparison between the time indicated and the position of the sun, made restless movements, then went a few steps back among the trees. From his pocket he took a map, and spreading it on a trunk, in a sunbeam, he studied it anxiously.

Just as he was folding it up, he heard a low throbbing hum far away to the south. Hurriedly replacing the map in his pocket, he went to the edge of the wood, and peered into the southern sky. The sound was faint; no speck dotted the cloudless blue. But the hum was drawing nearer. He dropped his eyes, and scanned as much of the road as he could see. Nothing was in sight. His mouth worked; a furrow between his eyes deepened; he rubbed his hand across his brow, and shuddered to see how damp it was. Again he looked along the road. That humming made him impatient: was it really growing louder, or were his nerves redoubling the sound in his ears?

At length, with the suddenness of one tired of waiting, he turned his back on the sound, and plunged into the depths of the wood northward. He had gone but a hundred yards when he stopped with a start, chilled to the marrow. Somebody was there, close by. He stared; his breath came and went in pants; but after a moment he went on with a smothered laugh that was like a groan. It was only a peasant boy whittling a stick. The boy looked up as he passed, idly, vacantly. The solitary British soldier apparently did not interest him. He dropped his eyes

again, fell again to his whittling, and softly hummed the air of "Au clair de la lune."

The soldier went on among the trees. He was not startled when he caught sight of another boy collecting twigs blown down by the gales of early spring. He had even so far recovered as to throw a pleasant "Bon soir!" to the boy as he passed. The boy looked up; he gave no response, not so much as a smile. Were the boys hereabouts deaf, or silly, or what? The man looked back; the boy, on one knee, an arm stretched out as with arrested movement, was watching him.

On again. Insensibly his pace was quickening. At the sight of a third boy away to his left, apparently doing nothing, he felt unreasonably angry. Was the wood full of boys? Why had he not seen them before? Why were they so quiet? Himmel! Was he being watched? He would soon stop that. He turned about, glowering, to scare away these disturbers of his peace of mind. They had vanished. Relieved, almost amused at his nervousness, he strode on, glancing up at the waning sunlight through the trees to make sure of his direction.

Suddenly, a little ahead on his right, he saw the flicker of a boy's white blouse amid the undergrowth. With a muttered execration he slanted towards it, but was checked by a slight rustle on his left. Swinging round, he caught a glimpse of a small figure flitting among the trees. He stopped. His limbs were shaking; streams of perspiration trickled down his face. Now at last he knew the meaning of these stealthy movements, this sinister silence. The boys had been set to dog him. The certainty appeared to paralyse him. He stood swaying on his feet, glancing around for a means of escape from the toils that he felt closing about him. Mechanically he raised his hand and dashed from his face the rolling beads.

The spell was broken by the sound of a motor cycle and shouts behind. As though galvanised, he made a sudden break at full speed ahead, in a line between the two boys he had last seen. Looking neither to right nor to left he pounded on until he was breathless. Then he paused to listen. Had he shaken off the trackers? The whirr had ceased, the shouts were fainter; he was beginning to think that he had gained a few minutes when a small figure scurried through the undergrowth in front of him. He started again, bearing to the left. A glint of white amid the green intensified his terror. He lost command of himself. No longer did he take the dying sunlight as his guide. Blindly, desperately he struggled on, every moment changing his course. The sounds had ceased; there was not even a rustle to warn him.

Presently he stopped, aghast. Before him was the patch of grass which his weight had flattened. He had been moving in a circle. Then a gleam of hope lit the darkness of his despair. He was now near the road; perhaps his pursuers had penetrated far into the wood. He pushed on, staggering, came to a sunken track,

and, supporting himself against a tree trunk, looked fearfully around. There, to the left, at the side of the track, were two motor bicycles. The old Frenchman was keeping guard. No one else was in sight. Gathering his strength, he rushed headlong towards his last hope.

The old man heard his footsteps, looked up, and raised his feeble voice in a quavering shout. There was no time for a second. The soldier hurled himself upon the aged peasant, felled him with one blow, sprang to one of the bicycles, started the engine, ran the machine a few yards and leapt into the saddle. With every jolt as the bicycle gained speed on the rough track his heart grew more elate. Whither the track led he neither knew nor cared; his whole soul was in the present.

Right and left of him were the trees. He had ridden perhaps thirty yards when, from the right, a khaki-clad figure dashed into the track just ahead. The fugitive increased his speed and rode straight on. If the man stood in his way, so much the worse for him. Then, in a moment, Atropos cut the thread. As the bicycle was whizzing by, the man flung himself bodily upon it. There was a crash, a thud, then silence.

A few minutes later, Kenneth and Harry came hurrying to the scene.

"Is he killed?" asked the latter, as Kenneth stooped over the body lying on the machine.

"No, he's alive," replied Kenneth, after thrusting his hand into the man's tunic.

He unscrewed the stopper of his flask, and poured weak spirit into the unconscious man's mouth. Not until Ginger had recovered consciousness did they turn their attention to the other man, whose case, indeed, they had recognised at the first glance as hopeless. When he was hurled from the machine, his head had struck a tree trunk on the opposite side of the track. Stoneway was dead.

Yet he had survived his partners. Perhaps half-an-hour before, Obernai and the rest of the gang, after a drumhead court-martial, had paid the last penalty. Spying, at the best, is ignoble work; and when it is accompanied, as in Obernai's case, with the treacherous abuse of hospitality and the betrayal of trusting folk, the spy's doom awakens no sympathy.

CHAPTER XXII

"RECOMMENDED"

"A fig for reasons!" exclaimed Madame Bonnard. "We women can do without them. Monsieur Amory will bear me witness; I said that wretch Obernai was a villain."

"Pardon, mon amie," said her good man, mildly: "you said you did not like his voice."

"Well, was not that enough? I did not like his voice: therefore he was a villain. It is plain."

"The Kaiser is said to have a very pleasant voice," remarked Kenneth, slyly.

He was sitting in the Bonnards' kitchen, awaiting the return of his comrades for supper.

"I should like to ask his wife what she thinks of it," said Madame Bonnard. "Poor woman! what a terrible thing it will be for her when she goes with him into banishment, and she has to listen to him all day long!"

"Think you they will banish him, monsieur?" asked Bonnard.

"Who can tell?" Kenneth replied. "We have got to catch him first."

"Ah!" sighed Madame. "It is terrible. The end is so far off. Every day I dread to hear bad news of my poor boys. And to think that there are millions of poor women whose hearts are bleeding through that wicked man! What punishment is great enough for him? I should like to think of him worn and hungry, roaming the world like the Wandering Jew, with no rest for his feet, always seeing with his mind's eye the burning cottages, the maimed children, the weeping mothers, the poor lads he has massacred."

"Is it fair to put it all down to the Kaiser?" said Kenneth.

"Yes, it is fair," cried the good woman, vehemently. "Poor people copy their betters. His soldiers do what they know will please him. Has he said one word of blame for all the dreadful things they have done? Like master, like man."

"I say, old man, here's the post," shouted Harry, bursting in at the door. "Two letters and a thumping parcel for you; nothing but a newspaper for me.... Good heavens!"

"What is it?"

"The curs have sunk the Lusitania.... Oh! this is too awful. That gas they are using—the poor fellows die in agony. It is sheer murder."

Kenneth read the paragraphs Harry indicated. The Bonnards had left the room.

"We must just stick it," said Kenneth, handing the paper back. "Nothing but a thorough thrashing will bring them to their senses. And there are silly stay-at-home people who talk of not humiliating them! The Germans are doing their best to show that the world would gain if the whole race were wiped out."

"Are there no decent people among them at all?"

"Of course there are, and they'll be horrified when they learn the truth.

There's my partner, Finkelstein, as good-hearted a man as ever breathed. He'd never believe the brutes capable of the crimes they are committing. But the people are being fed with lies. I can't but think a lot of them will sicken with disgust by and by."

"I only wish we could hurry it up.... Hullo, here's Ginger! I didn't expect to see you, old man."

"I'm going home, boys!" cried Ginger, with a smiling face. His arm was in a sling. "Doctor says I'll be no good for three months. Shoulder dislocated! My word! he did give me beans when he jerked it into place. But I'm going home, home! Fancy how the missus and kids will jump! Not but what I'm sorry to leave you."

"I don't grudge you a rest, old chap," said Harry, "but we shall want you back again. Listen to this."

He read parts of the newspaper paragraphs. Ginger swore.

"I tell you what," he cried. "I'm not going home to do nothing. I'm going recruiting. That's what I am. I've spouted a lot of rot in my time; they'll hear some hard sense now. By George! and if I don't have at least a score of recruits to my name, call me a Dutchman. But I've got some news for you—better than those horrible things in the paper."

"What's that?" asked Kenneth.

"Well, you see, Colonel sent for me, and we had a talk, man to man; Colonel's a white man, that's what he is. As a matter of fact, I've done a bit of spouting this evening. But the chaps didn't want much talking to; they're all right. Verdict unanimous this time. To cut it short, that promise of yours is off. The chaps say they're quite satisfied with their job. Not one of 'em wants to go back to the works until they've seen the Kaiser get his deserts. And Colonel is writing home to say he wants commissions for you in the Rutlands."

"You mean it, Ginger?"

"That's just what I do mean. When I come back, you'll be officers. There's just one thing. If I should happen at first to forget to salute—"

"Oh, rot, man!" cried Harry. "You're a good sort."

"You'll thank them all for us?" said Kenneth. "I'm afraid we shan't be allowed to stay with the Rutlands, though. Army rules are against it. But we'll see. Now, come and have some supper. Bonnard will give us something to celebrate the occasion."

"Can't," said Ginger. "I'm under orders to start in half an hour. Going back with a batch of crocks. It's good-bye. But I hope I'll see you again."

He shook hands with them warmly. They were all moved. Each felt that in the chances of war they might never meet again. But, in the British way, they hid their feelings. Only as Ginger went out he turned in the doorway and said:

"Mind you keep your heads down in the trenches."

Kenneth and Harry were silent for a while as they ate their supper.

"Well, old boy?" said Harry presently.

"Yes. It's good, isn't it?"

"The governor will be happy.... I say, Ken!"

"Well!"

"I can't make you out. You remember when I met you at Kishimaru's. Well, you seemed jolly casual—not a bit keen. Yet it was you who set the ball rolling at the works, and you've been keen enough since."

"Oh well!" was Kenneth's indefinite response.

"Really, I couldn't help thinking you were hanging back. It was because you'd been seedy, I suppose."

"Perhaps."

"What was wrong with you? German measles?"

"Not so unpatriotic, my son. A trifle run down, that's all."

"Wanted a holiday, I suppose. The war scrapped holidays for most people."

"I daresay."

"Hang it all! What's the mystery? What do you mean by 'daresay' and 'perhaps' and so on and so forth? What had you been doing?"

"You're a persistent wretch, Randy. Well, I don't mind telling you now. I was in Cologne when war was declared, and I had a pretty strenuous time for a fortnight."

And he proceeded to outline the adventures which the present writer has related elsewhere.

"Well I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Harry. "Why on earth didn't you tell me?"

"Well, you see, you as good as told me I was slacking."

"What's that to do with it? All the more reason to open up."

"Give me a cigarette, old chap; it's all right now."

A bugle called them to their feet. They flung on their equipment and hurried out. The battalion was assembling in the market place.

"The trenches again?" asked Kenneth of a sergeant.

"No. We're ordered north."

"Advancing at last?"

"Let's hope so. Fall in!"

THE END

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