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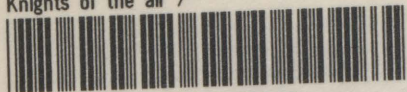


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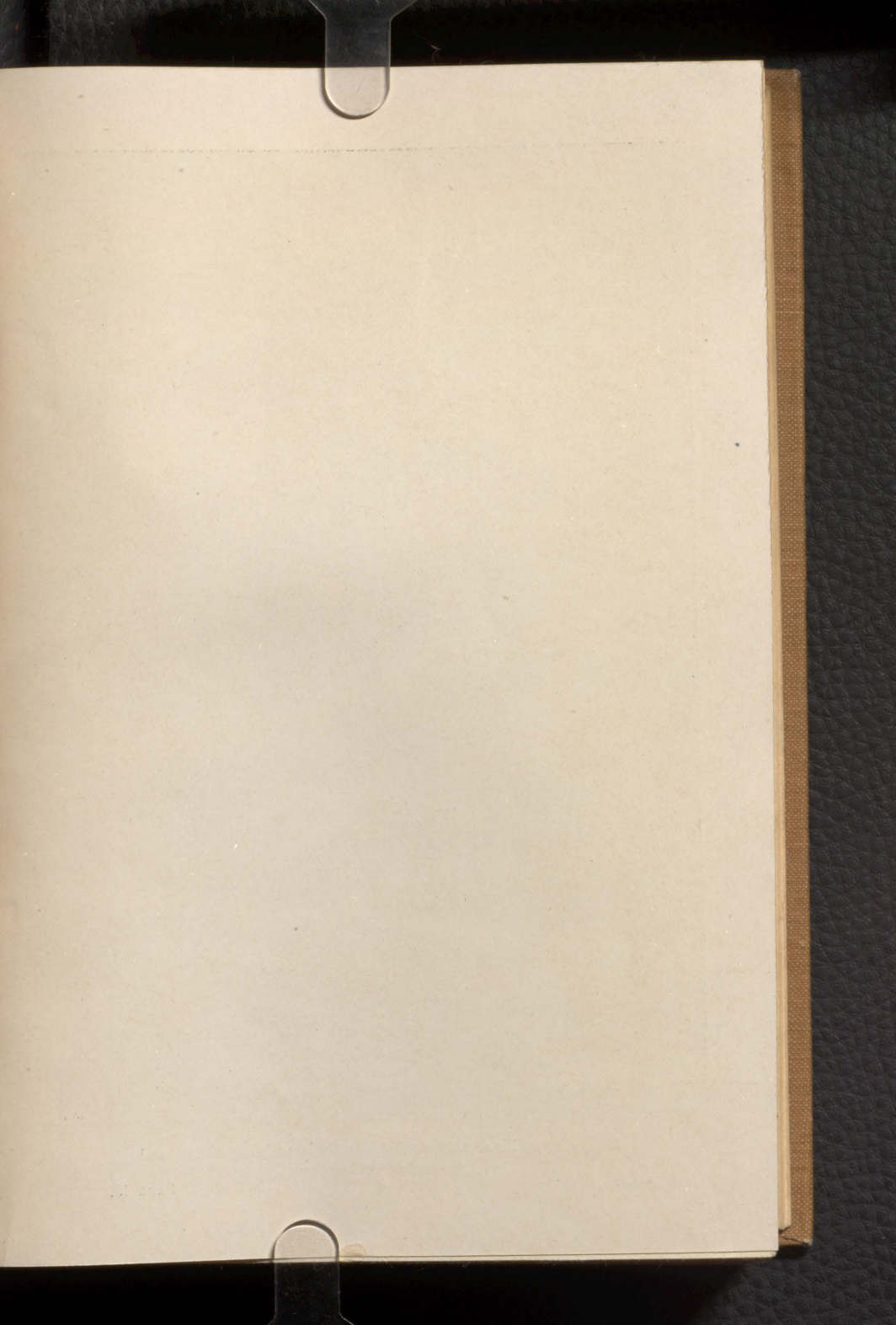
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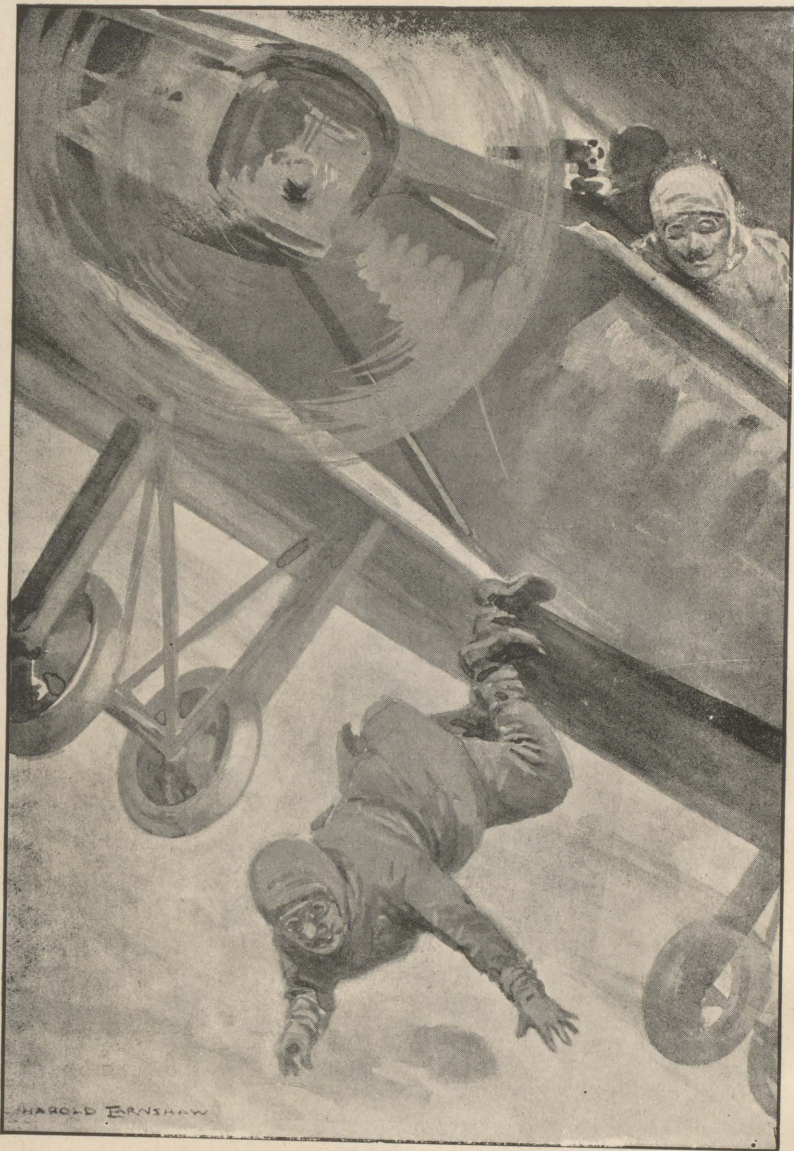
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Throwing up his arms, the pilot literally leapt from his seat, and crashed to the ground.

K.A.

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PAGE 18.

KNIGHTS OF THE AIR

BY
ESCOTT LYNN

Author of
'A Hero of the Mutiny,' 'A Cavalier of Fortune,' 'In Khaki for the King.'

Illustrated by Harold Earnshaw

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TO MY SON

JACK.

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KNIGHTS OF THE AIR.

CHAPTER I.

THE NEW SERVICE.

‘**BY** Jove, there’s the general! I didn’t even know he was in England.’

These words were uttered to himself by Lieutenant William John Granville, of the Royal Flying Corps, as he was crossing the aerodrome at Hendon.

General Sir William Hastings, K.C.B., caught sight of the boyish figure of his nephew, and waving his stick, cried out, ‘Hallo, young fellow! I’ve run you down, have I? I thought you would be somewhere up above the clouds.’

Lieutenant Granville approached his uncle, who was in uniform, saluted in his best parade manner, and then shook hands heartily.

‘How do you do, sir?’ he asked.

‘None so bad for a shot-riven old duffer,’ replied the general heartily.

‘You are looking very well. When did you get home? Aunt did not tell me you were coming.’

‘She did not know,’ chuckled General Hastings. ‘I like to take them by surprise sometimes.’

‘Are you on leave, sir?’

‘No. The powers at Whitehall are graciously pleased to think that I shall be of more use at home at present. I’m going to look after remounts, and I take up my duties at the War Office on Monday.’

‘I say, that will be ripping. You’ll be able to live at home, of course, and if you won’t think me a nuisance, I may hope to see you sometimes.’

‘I dare say you will. Your aunt tells me you’re a pretty regular visitor.’

Lieutenant Granville, his thoughts probably flying to his cousin Lucy, turned a fiery red, on seeing which the general chuckled knowingly.

‘One never knows when you flying gentlemen may be off,’ he said, ‘and that’s why I came over this morning to make sure of seeing you.’

‘No such luck as getting “across” for me just yet, I’m afraid. The commander says I’m not quite fit to be trusted with a “bus” on my own yet.’

‘Well, there’s plenty of time, lad;’ and the general’s face grew grave. ‘Flying officers at the front are not noted for longevity. And that reminds me; what on earth made you transfer into this new-fangled branch of the service?’

‘Well, uncle, flying is getting more and more important; everything seems to indicate that the final decision in this war will be reached in the air.’

‘Never, my boy; never! Lance and rifle will be the factors, and they will achieve the victory through the unconquerable spirit and unflinching courage of the British soldier.’

The general evidently being an enthusiast on the subject, the young sub. discreetly turned the conversation. ‘In any case, it’s a change,’ he said; ‘there’s more variety here than in the line. It was pretty dull at Chillingdon, with its everlasting drilling and marching.’

‘Good Lord, Jack! and you served something less than six months; while your father, than whom no finer soldier ever lived, spent nearly thirty years in one battalion.’

Lieutenant William John Granville tried to look guilty, whereupon his uncle laughed, and taking the youngster’s arm said, ‘There, there, boy; other times, other fashions. After all, this is a young man’s war, and we old fogies, with our antiquated ideas, must take a back-seat. Now, show me round; there’s a good fellow.’

The youngster was intensely proud of his uncle, and he knew he had reasonable cause to be so. The double row of ribbons on the general’s tunic bore witness to gallant services rendered on many a hard-fought field; his recent knighthood had been gained for his splendid handling of his battalion at the battle of Loos. Neither was there much of the ‘old fogy’ about General Hastings. Though nearly sixty years of age, his step was as firm, his eye as clear, his brain as active

as when he was only thirty; and many an admiring glance was cast at the soldierly figure as he and his nephew went round the aerodrome.

The machines, the sheds, the repair-shops, and all the various things that go to make up an aerodrome were inspected, and the two were on their way towards the entrance, Lieutenant Granville walking behind his uncle, when a young officer, not knowing that the general had anything to do with Granville, cried out, 'Hallo, Billy! I've been looking for you all over the shop. I've got news for you, my boy.'

Now at home Lieutenant Granville was generally called Jack or John, notwithstanding that his first name was William, but at school he had been at once dubbed 'Billy,' and the name seemed to fit his fair hair, blue eyes, and bright English complexion.

Billy, on hearing the hail, held up a warning hand, and then said to his uncle, 'This is my chum, Douglas M'Leod, uncle. May I introduce him?'

'Certainly.'

Billy beckoned to his friend, and the general shook him warmly by the hand.

Douglas M'Leod was dark, with curly hair, shorter than Billy, but broad and muscular. He had a firm, square chin, was two years older than Billy, being nearly twenty, had seen six months' service at the front, and was reckoned one of the cleverest and most daring pilots in the corps. He and Billy had been

schoolfellows, and it had been largely owing to his friend's persuasion that Billy had transferred from the Lincolns to the R.F.C.

'I'm sorry, sir,' said M'Leod to the general after the ceremony of introduction; 'I had no idea you were Billy's uncle—though I might have guessed it, for Billy is never tired of talking about you—or I should not have hailed him so unceremoniously.'

'That's all right, my boy; I'm glad to make your acquaintance.' After talking for a few minutes, the general announced his intention of going. 'I have a lot to do,' he said, 'and I dare say you youngsters are busy too.—I've been much interested in all you've shown me, Jack, though I wish you'd remained in the infantry.'

'Don't say that, sir,' said M'Leod quietly. 'We want every good man we can get in the R.F.C. Believe me, the Germans are a clever and a scientific people; they are keenly alive to the possibilities of flight, and once they master it, or get a better machine than we've got, England is as much in the war zone as Belgium.'

'I don't think you need fear for that,' smiled the general.

'I don't know, sir. The Boche is always springing surprises on us, and I should not be astonished any day to find their machines dropping bombs on us from above.'

'What! here; right inland, and in broad daylight?'

'I think it's possible.'

The general looked as though he suspected the youngster of trying to 'pull his leg,' though even a flying officer would hardly dare to do that to a real general. However, he said nothing, and as the friends saw him into his car, he waved his hand and said, 'By the way, if you have nothing better to do this evening, I shall expect you both to dinner. 7.30 sharp.'

'We shall be delighted,' said Billy.

As he and M'Leod turned back, the latter said, 'I say, old man, the chief has chosen me to make the trial of the new "gun-bus,"* and I'm going to take you with me.'

'That's ripping,' said Billy. 'Come away to the hangar, and tell me all about it.'

* Gun-bus = armed aeroplane.

CHAPTER II.

THE TRIAL-TRIP.

THE two young flying officers—mere boys they looked—full of eagerness, went off to the hangar in which the new aeroplane was housed. She was a Bristol Fighter, with a nine-cylinder 190 horse-power Gnome engine. All the flight officers were eager to make a trial-trip in her, but Douglas, as he had told Billy, had been chosen. Douglas M'Leod was a flying-man to his finger-tips. A master of the theory of flying, he was an expert engineer, a practical constructor, and a cool and daring flier. As a soldier pure and simple he would have broken any adjutant's heart, for he could not have formed a platoon from column of route into line even to save his life. On the other hand, Billy was both a plucky flier and a good infantry officer; together they worked exceedingly well.

'I did not like to ask the chief to take the new "bus" out for her maiden trip,' said Douglas, 'as so many of the others have superior claims. But he sent for me this morning and offered me the job, so I was on it like a bird. He suggested that I should take Bryson with me, but I said I would rather take you.'

'Jolly decent of you, old chap; I'm no end bucked.'

'Of course I should choose you,' grinned

Douglas. 'We were chums at school, and we're chums in the service. I shall stick to you till a Boche downs me, or I break your neck.'

'Right-o! And I hope both events are in the very dim future.'

By this time the hangar was reached, and a number of subalterns and mechanics stood round admiring the new machine.

'Here come Mac and his *fidus Achates*,' cried a sub. 'Lucky beggars!'

'Merit, Wilson; pure merit!' grinned Billy. 'We'll just give you an exhibition.'

'Don't do the same as Tommy Napier did when he promised us an exhibition,' smiled Captain Reekes.

A ripple of laughter ran round the group, for the unfortunate Napier, taking up a new machine for the first time, after looping, banking, and spiral diving, ran suddenly into an 'air-pocket,' and feeling his machine dropping, against all flying rules suddenly switched off his engine, and came down with undue suddenness, totally wrecking his 'bus' and narrowly escaping breaking his neck.

Douglas had already 'tuned up' the machine, and while the mechanics wheeled it out he and Billy put on their flying jackets and caps. Then Douglas tested once more all the controls, while Billy took a good look round. He gave a special eye to the machine-guns, the drums of ammunition, and the rifle, fastened in clips close to the observer's seat.

'Getting ready to meet the enemy, Gran-

ville?' asked a lieutenant, taking his cigarette from his mouth.

'You never know your luck, Ransom,' replied Billy. 'Mac may take it into his head to run over to the front, and it wouldn't do to be without a few compliments to present to a stray Fokker.'

'Quite right,' agreed Douglas. 'It's no good making a test unless we've got all the load we should carry against the enemy.—Now, Billy, if you're ready, hop in.'

In a minute both had wriggled into their places, a mechanic gave the propeller a swing, Douglas switched on the electric current which sets the starting-magneto sparking, and then, with a cheery shout of 'Contact!' from Douglas, the machine glided quickly along the ground. The noise of the engine was deafening and the vibration terrific as the machine shot forward, but in a few seconds she rose gracefully from the ground. Douglas gave the control-lever a gentle pull towards him, the noise decreased, and the vibration was succeeded by a gentle swaying seesaw motion. The green field appeared to be tearing past them, going more and more slowly as they rose gracefully, and the crowd below gave a rousing cheer, waving their caps and hands at the aviators. As the roar of the engine seemed to subside into a settled growl, the air rushed past the faces of the occupants of the machine and the planes, making a peculiar characteristic singing sound as it cut against the bracing.

It was a fine sunny morning, with a haze

overhead, there being very little wind—an ideal day for flying. It was still early, being little more than ten o'clock, and as they climbed quickly, Billy felt all the delights of flying. Douglas turned round to his friend, and his smiling face showed that the machine was coming fully up to his expectations.

They mounted quickly to three thousand feet, and Douglas, after circling the aerodrome, banked, made a nose-dive, and performed one or two tricks for the edification of those below; then, rising again, he set his machine due north, and 'let her rip.'

Whetstone, Barnet, and South Mims were quickly passed, the country looking magnificent in all its summer glory as they swept along. At Hatfield, Douglas, still ascending, made a sweep to the east, and leaving Hertford behind them, the aviators passed over Hoddesdon and Waltham, and made for London.

For some time past Billy had thought he heard the booming of guns, but had paid little attention, thinking it was only some of the practice which was always going on. As they rapidly neared the Metropolis, however, the insistent sound began to get on his nerves, and thumping with his fist upon the body of the machine, he attracted the attention of Douglas, and shouted out to ask him if he had noticed the noise. But the young Scotsman, full of the joy of controlling a first-class machine, and not being able to hear what his friend said on account of the noise of the

engine, shook his head and smiled, continuing his way.

Suddenly out of the mist came a sight which sent the blood rushing back to his heart in a wild turmoil. There, flying in a line at an angle to their course, was an immense squadron of aeroplanes.

It was the first time either of the young airmen had seen so large a number of machines in orderly formation, and they stared for a few moments in amazement. The formation was V-shaped, a monster machine carrying two guns being at the apex. Along the sides were smaller machines, evidently intended to act as scouts, or to drive off any attack that might be made upon the squadron. The centre of the formation contained more big double-gun machines, and the whole were advancing at a great speed and in perfect order.

Douglas stopped his engine after a few moments, and in the comparative silence Billy said, 'What do you make of them, Douglas? What are they?'

Douglas looked up, for the machines were a couple of thousand feet above him, and his brow puckered up. Then he turned pale, and turning round to his friend, cried, '*Good Lord, Billy, they're Germans!*'

Billy looked up, and for the first time noticed the big black crosses painted on the wings, and his face grew as pale as his friend's. With a catch in his voice he asked, 'What are you going to do, Douglas?'

The pilot seemed to shake himself like a dog that has just left the water. He turned toward his chum, his mouth shut, showing his square, determined jaw, while his eyes seemed positively to gleam. 'Do!' he cried. 'What am I going to do? Why, fight 'em as long as I can keep this old bus in the air.'

CHAPTER III.

LONDON GETS A SURPRISE.

NO sooner had Douglas announced his intention than he switched on his engine, and with a roar the propeller began to whirl. Apparently the Germans—for Germans they were—sailing quite calmly in broad daylight over the metropolis of the Empire, had not observed the British machine, or if they had, did not deign to notice such a gnat, for not one machine deviated a yard from its course.

During the minute that Douglas had shut off his engine while he and Billy stared in open-mouthed astonishment at the enemy, the distance between them had considerably increased. Consequently when Douglas again started his engine he was a long way behind the invaders. He was, moreover, on a much lower level than the enemy planes, and he knew that meant annihilation did the enemy attack him in numbers in that position.

Hence he began to rise, all the while following the enemy, from whose squadron Billy never took his eyes.

Had there been any doubt as to the nationality of the machines it would quickly have been dismissed, for now London, over the eastern suburbs of which they were then racing, seemed to have realised at last that the

enemy was upon it, and the flashes of guns were quickly followed by the bursting of shells, little black clouds of smoke showing where the bursts were. Louder and louder grew the reports of the bursting shells, shriller and shriller rose the scream as they flew by, and the smoke-puffs, growing thicker, mingled together and drifted lazily away in the air. But still the German squadron swept on in perfect order. As the Bristol Fighter climbed higher and ever higher it seemed to Billy as though some of the Germans *must* be hit; but if they were, the shrapnel did little damage, for the speed was not decreased or the formation broken.

By that time they were well over the town, the great docks being below them, and there the fell bombing-machines—the large ones in the centre of the formation—got to work, and the aviators, with horrified eyes, saw the murderous bombs falling upon the houses below. Flash after flash shot up, fires were seen to break out, and the crashes of the terrific explosions were borne faintly to their ears. And yet on that sunny morning the German squadron sailed undisturbed, unchallenged, over the capital of the British Empire. The Tower of London, St Paul's, Trafalgar Square appeared below them, and all the while bombs were being showered down.

Billy, knowing something of the city, pictured to himself the defenceless crowds beneath; the busy warehouses, with their armies of porters; the offices and banks, with

their crowds of clerks; the millinery-houses full of women; the hotels, the railway stations, teeming with visitors and passengers; the hospitals full of wounded; the crowded streets, buses, taxis, trams; millions of defenceless people—men, women, and children—on whom the bestial Hun was indiscriminately raining down his bombs. The young officer's blood boiled in his veins. He fitted drums to his Lewis guns, took the rifle from its clips, and crammed the magazine full of cartridges, while he shouted out to his friend to 'push her along,' so that he might get a shot at the devils before them.

Douglas, however, heard no word; with his compressed lips making a straight line across his face, he climbed and drove on, following in the wake of the enemy. There was for some time great danger of being shot down by their own guns, and many a dose of 'shrap' whistled closer to them than to the Germans; but the two cared nothing for that; they would take their chance.

Presently other British aeroplanes joined in, and the chase grew warm. Over the City and the West End, then across the river to the south-east, a swing round and re-entry from the south-west, and the Germans turned to cross London once more on their way to the coast.

It was when they made their sweep to recross the river that Douglas saw his chance. Divining their intention, while the enemy made its half-circle he shot across the arc of it,

and driving straight at them, somewhere over Chiswick got well within striking distance. Billy, mad with excitement, and yelling wildly, fired drum after drum from his gun, and being only a few hundred yards distant, could take a fair aim at the hooded heads of the Boches. The gun-fire from below was growing heavier, too, and several British aeroplanes were up, but they were miserably inadequate to meet the German machines.

These, Billy could now see, were of an entirely new type, of great size, armoured, fitted with twin-engines, and carrying three men—a pilot and two gunners. The roar of the engines of that vast crowd was simply indescribable, and the sight of the great planes with shining bodies, as seen from an aeroplane, was awe-inspiring.

At close quarters Douglas, with a wild Highland yell, got to work with his machine-gun. The moment he had worked and striven for had arrived, and he poured streams of lead amongst the raiders, pausing only to change the drums.

Right over the West End, and again towards the City they swept, and then the efforts of the gunners and of British aeroplanes, always increasing in number, and attacking with great bravery, began to tell. The formation became broken; the Germans lost their order, and dashed hither and thither, apparently in great danger of colliding, and looking from below like so many darting silver fish.

Then one big aeroplane led off north, another east, and the Germans split up. Douglas hung on to the group which went east, firing rapidly at them as they crossed the City. Not that the Germans let him fire with impunity; their own guns blazed away; but so cleverly did Douglas manage his machine, now climbing, now diving, now banking, that he escaped injury, though the planes were riddled with bullet-holes.

Flying out again into the country, the German squadron had got well broken up, and numerous individual fights were in progress.

The smaller scouting German planes had endeavoured all along to engage the British, and to keep them off the large bombing-machines; but Douglas was determined to pit his strength against one of the latter, and picking out one machine, the pilot of which had a heavy, flaming-red moustache, he stuck to him, and time after time spattered bullets on the body of the aeroplane, in the hope of piercing the petrol-tank or hitting the machinery. But the armoured side of the body deflected the bullets, and the machine held on its way. Billy, too, had fired heavily at the pilot and the gunners, but without success.

Another British plane, which had joined in the chase near London, was also very persistently attacking, and so for miles across Essex the struggle continued, getting more and more stretched out into a long, straggling,

running fight the nearer the coast they got. At last, near the mouth of the Thames, Douglas succeeded in cutting off one of the big German machines from the rest, and getting between it and its companions, emptied a stream of cartridges into it. The German, however, handled his machine well, and dived and twisted, and then mounted again, apparently trying to get above Douglas, so as to drop a bomb on him. This, owing to the masterly way in which Douglas managed his machine, he was unable to do; whereupon two German scouts joined in, and Douglas was beset by three machines.

The same British Farman that had several times engaged the Germans near Douglas and Billy came swooping down to the rescue, and Billy gave a loud shout of defiance. The Boche swung round his machine, and fired just as the Farman got within fifty yards of him. To his horror, Billy saw the pilot, evidently struck by a bullet, drop forward over his control-lever; the machine made a sudden lurch, and then went spinning down to earth, six thousand feet below.

Billy saw that the pilot of the German aeroplane was the same red-moustached fellow he had engaged once or twice before, and with a cry of rage he fired at his face, on which there was still a smirk at his success. Billy's bullet hit the pilot in the throat, and throwing up his arms, he literally leapt from his seat, and turning over and over, crashed to the ground.

'Hurrah!' shouted Douglas, and as the big German machine tipped up on one wing, Billy poured in a drum of bullets, whereupon the German turned completely over and crashed down after its pilot.

At the fall of the first of their machines, the Germans seemed to take warning. They mostly increased their speed, and some, climbing very high, were soon lost in the haze over the sea, which they had now reached.

Douglas, knowing that the R.N.A.S. men were rather strict about land machines flying over the sea, turned about and came inland. The necessity for flying at so great a height having passed, he dropped to one thousand feet, and directly after, when flying over an aerodrome, noticed a signal for him to descend. He did so, and he and Billy clambered out of the machine and looked at one another.

They both appeared somewhat the worse for wear, and, if the truth must be told, felt a little shaky.

'By Jove, old chap,' said Billy, 'that was somewhat of an experience!'

'You've had your baptism of fire, anyway,' replied Douglas grimly. 'But, I say, you're hit! Are you much hurt?'

'Hit!' said Billy vaguely. 'Where? I didn't feel anything.'

'Your cheek's all covered with blood.' A hasty examination showed that a bullet or a shell-splinter had grazed Billy's cheek, just cutting the skin.

'It's nothing,' said that youth; 'a wash

and a bit of sticking-plaster will put that all right.'

Just then the flight-commander of the aerodrome came up, and asked the two youngsters who they were, and where they had come from. The information being given, the commander complimented them on the plucky fight they had put up, and told them the German machine brought down was of a new type known as the Gotha.

'And the worst of it is that the Boche stole the idea from one of our machines which accidentally fell into his hands some months ago.'

'Yes, I heard about it,' said Douglas quietly. 'But what of our machine that was shot down?'

'Smashed, and the pilot killed,' replied the commander.

Billy and Douglas looked grave.

'It's the fortune of war,' said the commander; 'our only consolation is that his slayers met the same fate. You, at any rate, quickly avenged your comrade's fate.'

'To think of such things happening here in Old England!' said Billy. 'It seems impossible.'

'Brings the war home to us, anyway. But you lads will be anxious to return. I'll ring up Hendon, and let them know you're all right. And now good-bye; I've a lot to do.'

Five minutes later Billy and Douglas were on their way back, and in half-an-hour had landed at Hendon. The news of their fine

fight had preceded them, and they received quite an ovation when they left their machine. But they took the matter very quietly, and went off to their own commander to report. They felt that England was in grave danger when a squadron of aeroplanes could with comparative impunity bomb London in broad daylight, and return to their own country almost unscathed.

CHAPTER IV.

A FAMILY PARTY.

NOTWITHSTANDING the exciting, even terrifying, events of the morning, London was in no way perturbed. Within ten minutes of the raid the town had resumed its normal appearance; traffic was as busy as ever, the streets were crowded, and business had resumed its sway. Hun frightfulness did not seem to have quite the intended effect.

At the aerodrome spirits were high; London was well within the war zone; attacks might be expected at any time, and the flying-men's chance might come without their having to travel over to France to find it.

Billy and Douglas were for the moment the heroes of the hour, and several times had, in a very modest way, to relate their experiences.

Some sticking-plaster on Billy's cheek did not add charm to his appearance, and he had to put up with a good deal of chaff about having an unsteady hand, being advised to buy a safety-razor. He took it all in good part, however; and when the evening came, in his best tunic, and with his cap set on at a very jaunty angle, just over his right ear, he and Douglas set off for General Hastings's house.

The Hollies, at St Albans, where the Hastingses lived, was an easy journey from Hendon, and both subs. knew the way quite

well. Half-an-hour found them trudging up the neatly gravelled path, and in another minute Billy was trying at one and the same time to shake hands with his uncle, to kiss his aunt, and to cast a languishing look at his cousin Lucy, a strapping, handsome girl. The general seemed rather grave, and asked the boys if they had taken any part in driving off the German aeroplanes.

'Yes, sir, we had a cut at them,' said Billy cheerfully; 'but M'Leod here will give you all the details. To tell the truth, I was in a blue funk.'

'Oh, you've been hurt!' said Lucy quickly, noticing the patched cheek. 'How did you get that?'

'I'll tell you all about it later on; at least Mac will. But first I want to know how you liked that song I brought you on Wednesday.'

'Fine; and the accompaniment is ripping. You must try it over.'

They all entered the drawing-room, and there they were met by a good-looking young officer, whose red tabs showed that he belonged to the staff. Beside him stood a fair-haired, handsome girl.

'Why, it's Marjory!' cried Billy, kissing his cousin. 'This is a treat.—And you, too, Vivian! How do you do?'

'I'm very fit, Jack.'—Be it noticed that 'Billy' was always 'Jack' to his relatives.—'How's the flying?'

'Topping.'

'Haven't broken your neck yet?'

‘Not quite. Fact is, I’m getting quite expert, and can make a twenty-foot flight without getting seasick.’

‘You’re quite a professional, then. I must run over and see you do your tricks.’

Douglas had not yet met Vivian, and Billy introduced him. ‘My chum, Douglas M’Leod,’ he said; ‘my cousin Marjory’s husband, Captain Vivian Drummond, D.S.O., brass hat, and I don’t know what else.’

Vivian laughed as he shook hands with M’Leod. ‘Happy to make your acquaintance,’ he said. ‘I expect you are never dull, if you are much in Master Jack’s company.’

‘No; he’s a cheerful body,’ said Douglas, ‘and we can do with it. A man who’s got a smile for everything and everybody is a national asset.’

‘A man—ahem!’ chirruped Lucy from the window.

‘Don’t be uncharitable,’ said Marjory; ‘man or not in years, he’s doing a man’s work.’

‘Hooray, Marjory! You always were ready to help a lame dog over a stile.’

‘You look more like a scratched cat now,’ came *sotto voce* from Lucy; and every one tried hard not to smile.

‘Indeed, Miss Lucy,’ said Douglas, ‘if you knew how your cousin got that “cat’s scratch” you’d feel proud of him.’

‘Do tell us,’ cried Lucy.

But at that moment the dinner-gong sounded, and Billy said, ‘Hooray! there’s the mess bugle. Let’s feed, and we can tell the

yarn over the bully-beef and the biscuits. It will sound better.'

Despite Billy's efforts to turn the conversation, the air-raid was one of the chief subjects discussed at dinner, and the part which he and Douglas had played was dragged from them. The evening papers had, of course, been full of the topic, and had given the casualties as thirty-seven killed and one hundred and forty-one injured, while considerable damage had been done. The fact of one of the raiders having been brought down at the mouth of the Thames was mentioned, but nothing was said of the plucky British airman who had lost his life. It was further reported that the Royal Naval Air Service had engaged the raiders forty miles out at sea, and that three more machines had been brought down.

When the ladies had retired to the drawing-room, General Hastings, who had spoken but little during the meal, said it was a very serious business, and that this inhuman killing of women, children, and non-combatants would lead to grave complications.

Douglas, naturally reticent, said but little, till Vivian Drummond, ever eager to acquire expert views, asked him what were his ideas on the subject.

The young Scotsman shrugged his shoulders. 'It's a nasty business, of course,' he said, 'but no more than I expected.'

'You think we have not taken all the precautions we might have done, perhaps?' asked Vivian.

‘Candidly, those are my views. But I admit I am an enthusiastic aviator, and have always thought flying of the utmost importance in war.’

‘While the British Government did not, eh?’

‘Well, you can hardly blame me for so thinking. If you look at the facts, I fancy they will bear me out.’

‘And what are the facts, as you see them?’

‘Perhaps that is hardly a fair question for a staff-officer to ask a poor flight-subaltern.’

‘My dear chap, this is only an informal chat. I have nothing to do with the flying service, but any information I may gain I may turn to some account; and if I could do anything for the flying service, nothing would please me better, for I hold a pilot’s certificate myself.’

‘Of course, I remember now. Billy has told me how you flew across from France with his cousin Oliver.’

‘Give us your views, Mac,’ said Billy. ‘I’ve heard you spout on the subject by the hour.’

Douglas laughed. ‘Many things are said unthinkingly which one would not repeat in cold blood.’

‘Oh, rats! You’re too modest.’

‘I should certainly like to hear your opinion, M’Leod,’ said the general.

‘Well, sir, it seems to me somewhat this way. Take the first air menace from Germany—the Zeppelins. I fancy the tendency in this country was to underestimate the danger.’

The experts doubted whether Zeppelins could make a voyage as far as England. They said the winds would baffle them; that, even if they came, they would be easily spotted and shot down. These prophets did not allow sufficiently for the great height that the Zeppelins could mount to, or for the fact that they could operate by night, and become practically invisible, and unassailable by any means then at our disposal.

‘Perfectly true,’ said Sir William. ‘I remember the opinions given at the time.’

‘Which the enemy has certainly upset,’ said Douglas.

‘Quite correct,’ agreed Vivian. ‘We know now that the Zeppelin is a danger to be reckoned with.’

‘Well, in my opinion—and, mind, I give it with all humility—the authorities even now have not grasped the essential facts. Even to-day we don’t possess an airship fit to take the air against a Zeppelin, and less than twelve months ago a responsible Minister of the Crown gave it as his opinion that the Zeppelin danger was much exaggerated, and that the whole thing was a German bluff.’

Vivian laughed. ‘He has probably altered his opinion ere now,’ he said.

‘Perhaps so,’ agreed Douglas; ‘but that doesn’t cure the matter. Take the case of the bombs they drop. They are more powerful and more deadly than any we possess. We know that their incendiary bombs are charged with thermit, which is a mixture of a metallic

oxide and powdered aluminium, and the flame they kindle into will consume anything they come in contact with. We have nothing so powerful. And in the matter of aeroplanes, to-day's show speaks for itself.'

'Well, all in good time,' said Vivian.

'I hope so. If we had thousands of aeroplanes where we have only hundreds, we could make things hum in Germany.'

'Then you believe in reprisals?' asked the general.

'I am afraid they will have to come. We had to adopt gas and liquid fire, and if the Boche is going to make war on our civil population, then, again with all humility, I maintain we ought to pay him back in his own coin.'

'I am afraid there is some truth in what you say,' said Vivian. 'I lived for years in Germany, and understand something of the Boche creed of "frightfulness." It is all part of a nefarious scheme, and I believe that the only thing to do with the Prussian of to-day—and, mind, I don't say German—is, when he hits you, to hit him a deal harder, and then he begins to whine.'

'Well, well,' said the general, 'it's all very horrible. Let us join the ladies, and forget all about war for an hour or so.'

'With all my heart,' said Douglas, who was a lover of music; 'let us get Miss Lucy to sing to us.'

'And you shall give us a song, Douglas,' said Billy, jumping up; 'we shall have plenty

of bombs and battles later on. Just now let us devote an hour to

Music, dear music! that can touch
Beyond all else the soul that loves it much;'

and so quoting, he led the way to the drawing-room.

Anything like music appealed at once to Douglas. Possessing a very good baritone voice, and having a sharp ear, he knew a number of songs, and was always ready to sing them. Billy, besides being able to warble a tenor song fairly well, was a really good pianist—one who could play a Beethoven sonata or a Liszt rhapsody, and yet did not despise the latest rag-time.

The ladies welcomed the gentlemen to the drawing-room.

'I declare it's like living in a barracks to see all you men in uniform,' said Mrs Drummond. 'It's khaki, khaki, wherever you go.'

'True, dearest,' said Vivian; 'and beastly ugly stuff it is. I can assure you, ladies, you are not nearly so tired of it as we are who have to wear it. The only thing we can do, if the sight of it gets too much for you, is to get transferred to some far station where we shall get our fourteen days' leave only once in six months.'

'Oh, I know, Vivian, you're dying to get back to the front, and I believe, if a Medical Board would pass you, you'd be off again to-morrow.'

'And the general's quite as bad,' said Lady Hastings. 'I'm sure he thinks the war will never be won if he is not there to keep an eye on things.'

'And you boys are dying to get over to France; now, aren't you?' said Lucy to Billy and Douglas.

'Yes, Miss Lucy,' said Douglas, 'so that we can finish up the war, and get back to the real business of our lives once more.'

Billy had crossed to the piano, on which stood the last song he had brought his cousin. He ran over the accompaniment softly. 'Do you know it yet, Lucy?' he asked.

'Yes, I think so.'

'Then, do sing it. Will you play your own accompaniment, or shall I?'

'You shall, if you promise to follow me, no matter what liberties I may take with the score.'

Billy grinned genially. He was a good accompanist, and never imagined he was playing a piano solo double forte, in which the voice could join, if it got a chance—a peculiarity that some pianists are not free from.

After Lucy had sung, Douglas followed with a couple of Scotch ballads which just suited his voice, and Billy played some popular selections. The war and its horrors were forgotten, and a very pleasant hour or two were spent.

One rather amusing incident took place. There were several songs that Douglas

sang that were great favourites with Billy. Among them was 'My Old Shako.' Taking up the song from a pile of music, Billy said, 'Come on, Mac, give us this old galloper. I'm sure uncle will like it;' and without further ado he played the introductory bars. The trumpet-like call in them at once arrested the general's attention, and as an old Light Dragoon himself, the words appealed to him strongly.

'Capital, capital,' he cried; 'a fine song well sung. It's the best song I've heard for some time, Mr M'Leod.'

'It's quite an old thing,' said Douglas, 'but it's got a rollicking swing with it.'

'Give us the last verse again, just to oblige me,' said the general, and Douglas complied.

Now it was a peculiarity of the young Scotsman that though in conversation he spoke with no accent whatever, whenever he sang his nationality was at once apparent. Hence the rendering of the last words was something like this:

'Hee-ho—mony a yeer ago
We rode along thegither, you and I, ma auld shako,
And we didn't care a button if the odds were on the
foe,
Ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fufy yeers ago.'

The general again expressed approval, and putting on his gold pince-nez, strode over to the piano. 'The man who wrote those words must have been a countryman of yours, M'Leod,' he said. 'But one would have thought he would have chosen a Highlander

for his hero, not an English Light Dragoon, eh?' and he chuckled to himself.

He picked up the song from the piano and glanced at the words, which had pleased him so much. 'Why, it—it—isn't written in the Scottish dialect,' he said, puzzled. 'It's prosaic English, after all;' and he peered over the top of his glasses at Douglas.

Then Billy could contain himself no longer, but burst into a roar of laughter. 'By Jove, Douglas, you've done it this time!' he said.—'You know, uncle,' he continued, 'when Mac is talking he thinks he's a London University lecturer, but directly he begins to sing he always fancies himself Harry Lauder, "and acts as sech."' "

No one could help laughing at the comical fashion in which Billy explained the matter; in fact, Douglas seemed to enjoy the joke the most of all, for he laughed more heartily than than any one.

And so the time passed until that pleasant evening, long to be remembered by most of those present, came to an end, and Billy and Douglas found themselves on their way back to the aerodrome.

'What a change from our experience of the morning!' said Billy, looking round at the perfect quiet of a moonlit summer night.

Douglas made no reply to his chum's remark; perhaps, not having fallen a victim to Lucy's bright glances, the moonlight had not the same effect upon him. Instead, he replied, 'I like your cousin's husband, Billy.

He looks like a man who's seen and done things, and one you could rely on in a tight corner.'

'He is that. He was in Germany at the beginning of the war; fought at Mons, the Marne, and the Aisne. He has been a prisoner, escaped, was in Serbia, and I don't know where. He's earned the decorations he wears, I can tell you. My cousin Oliver, who, you know, was with Vivian through the whole thing, used to yarn to me by the hour while he was convalescent at home, and he always says that he should have been lost a dozen times if it hadn't been for the pluck and resource of Vivian.'

'I hope some day to meet your cousin Oliver. I've heard so much about him from you that I quite seem to know him.'

In fact, so enthusiastic was Billy, and so fond of talking about the adventures of that object of his hero-worship, his cousin Oliver, that a less sympathetic listener than Douglas might have grown a little impatient; but Douglas was a hero-worshipper himself, and was never tired of hearing Billy tell of his cousin's doings in the great world conflict.*

And, strangely enough, while Douglas was confiding to his chum the fact that he had taken a liking to Vivian Drummond, that officer was saying to his father-in-law, 'There's something in that young M'Leod,

* The adventures of Oliver Hastings and Vivian Drummond in the Great War were related in the author's two previous war books, *In Khaki for the King* and *Oliver Hastings, V.C.*

general. If he gets a chance he'll make himself talked of—unless'— and Vivian paused.

'Exactly,' agreed the general; 'unless the fate of so many of our gallant lads overtakes him.'

CHAPTER V.

AN ADVENTURE IN MID-CHANNEL.

FOR a week after the air-raid Billy and Douglas were kept very busy, and had little time to visit their friends at The Hollies. One musical evening was all they could work in. They had just left the mess one Monday morning, when an orderly corporal approached them, and saluting, said to Billy, 'The wing-commander sends his compliments, sir, and would be glad if you and Mr M'Leod would step across to his quarters.'

'We'll come over at once,' replied Billy.

As he and Douglas went off, the former said, 'What's up, I wonder, Douglas? Some neglect of duty, or are we going to be made flight-commanders on the spot?'

'You can dismiss the last suggestion from your mind, Billy, and my conscience acquits me of the first. We'll wait till we see his highness, and then we'll know.'

In five minutes they were in the presence of their superior officer, who received them very cordially.

'It seems you have friends at court,' he said. 'Some one in high quarters has been interesting himself on your behalf, and has recommended that you be employed on the Western front.'

Billy blushed a fiery red. 'I know no one who could do so but Sir William Hastings, my uncle,' he said, 'and he never mentioned his intention of speaking for me.'

'I did not say it was he,' smiled Major Wentworth. 'However, it doesn't matter who it was. The main thing is, you are going over; and M'Leod is going too.'

'Delighted to hear it, major,' said Douglas.

'I think you acted for some time as a Ferry pilot? '* said the major.

'Yes, sir, for several months.'

'That's lucky. We want to send that new "bus" over, and some new-fashioned bombs that we've been experimenting with, so we can kill two birds with one stone. You can get across to Dieppe, and can take the bus too. I'm sorry you cannot have a few days' leave before you go, but it's essential that you should start this afternoon. You can arrange to have your overseas kit sent on after you; or you, M'Leod, can go on with the bus first, and Granville can follow in a couple of days, if he wants to get any extra kit.'

'I'm ready now, sir,' said Billy. 'I can arrange to have my things sent on after me. I'd rather go with M'Leod.'

'And as my relatives are all in Scotland, two days' leave would be of no use to me,' said M'Leod.

'That's settled, then. Be ready to start

* A Ferry pilot is an airman who takes machines across the Channel.

at four o'clock. Till then run away and amuse yourselves. You are free of all further duty here.'

In high spirits the two subs. put on their best uniforms, and went off to The Hollies to tell the news and to say good-bye.

Perhaps the ladies there did not think the news so good as the young officers did; they had seen too many departures for that field of hopes and disappointments—France. However, they made much of their visitors, and Lady Hastings telephoned to Sir William, who said he would join them at lunch. This he did, and they all lunched together. The ladies, when it was time to depart, were very silent, and Lucy tried bravely not to shed a tear as she and Billy shook hands.

'Take this as a keepsake,' she said; and she gave her cousin a silver cigarette-case.

'Thanks! Thanks awfully!' said Billy. 'I'll never part with it as long as I live;' and there was an unwonted huskiness in his voice as he spoke.

The general's gift to each of the boys was a fine automatic pistol.

'I hope you'll never be in such a tight corner as to have to use them,' he said; 'but if you are, I trust they won't fail you.'

He drove them to the aerodrome in his car, and Billy and Douglas went off to receive their final instructions.

This did not take long, and by half-past four all was ready for a start. Douglas went

very carefully over all the controls, while Billy saw to the guns, for, as he said to the general, 'You never know what may happen.'

Everything being in readiness, Sir William gave each of the boys a hearty handshake.

'Remember,' said he, 'do not run into unnecessary danger. Take heed to an old soldier's warning. The duty of a soldier—and soldiers you are, though belonging to an arm of the service about which I know nothing—is to kill the enemies of his country, but not to get killed himself.'

With this parting advice he stood clear of the machine, the propeller was given a swing, the engine started with a roar, and after running along for a few yards the aeroplane left the ground, and the two subs. were off to meet those adventures related in the following pages.

After circling the aerodrome once in order to rise to a sufficient height, Douglas, who was steering, headed straight away over Cricklewood, Willesden, Acton, and Chiswick, and picking up the Thames, followed its course to the mouth.

It was a glorious panorama that was unrolled beneath them. The broad river, with its noble bridges, the Houses of Parliament, Charing Cross Station, The Tower and the handsome bridge near it, the port of London, with its crowds of shipping, Greenwich, and Woolwich were seen beneath them in turn; then away they went, with Essex on

their left, and Kent on their right. The river widened and widened until the forts at its mouth came in sight, and beyond them the sea, Britain's natural bulwark, could be seen. It was a new sensation to Billy, this crossing the sea, and he gazed about him with great interest, noting the foam-crested waves as they curled and tumbled. But before they were really over the sea Douglas rose to a yet greater height, and increasing their already high speed, turned south-west, and crossed the land again, flying above Dover and Folkestone, and then out over the Channel. Billy gazed lovingly at the cliffs behind them—those white cliffs of Albion that Cæsar spoke of—and wondered in his heart when, if ever, he should see them again.

In the Channel they met with contrary winds, and Douglas rose and descended by turn in order to avoid them. On and on they went until land was entirely lost sight of, and only the rolling sea, looking gray, was visible. Vessels were observed passing up or down, and presently the attention of both of them was drawn to a big ship from which a bright flash was seen occasionally to spit, followed by tiny puffs of fleecy white smoke.

Douglas turned round to Billy, a meaning look on his face, and depressing his planes, began to descend rapidly. As they did so the scene below them grew plainer and plainer. A big vessel was zigzagging about, occasionally firing a gun. She was evidently trying to escape from some danger, though what it

was could not at that moment be discovered. But soon a foamy streak in the water passing just astern of her showed what the danger was. She was being fired at with torpedoes, and one had just missed her. The fell U-boats were attacking her; the German pirates were at their murderous work!

Lower swooped the aeroplane, and Billy got his gun ready for action, while Douglas circled round to discover the submarine. As they got lower they saw the big ship's deck crowded with men. It was evidently a transport, though for the moment Douglas could not discern the customary destroyer escort.

Presently away on the lee bow of the transport Douglas's keen eyes discerned the periscope of a U-boat as it ascended to fire yet another torpedo at the transport. The two aviators held their breath and waited, expecting to see the liner blown half-out of the water, but, due either to the pirate's bad aim, or to the masterly way in which the skipper manœuvred his boat, or perhaps even to the U-boat commander's fear of being hit by the transport's guns—for she kept firing—the torpedo missed. During the moments that elapsed, the aviators saw the escort thrashing through the sea at a terrific speed, coming up to the rescue of the transport. Even as the T.B.D. flew through the water, she opened fire on the U-boat. This was quite enough for its commander, who, realising that the game was up, began to submerge. He had disappeared before the T.B.D. could reach him, and for a few

moments Douglas thought he had got clear off. He circled round, gazing down into the water, and presently, to his joy, saw the dim outline of the submerged submarine a good distance from the T.B.D., the German having altered his course. But his satisfaction was of short duration when he reflected that the bombs he had would be of no use while the submarine was submerged. He could, however, signal the T.B.D., which was sure to have depth-charges. But just then, for some unexplained reason, the U-boat again came to the surface; and Douglas, a fierce joy possessing him, made a nose-dive, swooped down upon the pirate, and loosed a bomb, one of those precious two he was conveying to Dieppe. It was a very near thing, but it just missed the submarine, exploding pretty close to it, however, and causing the waves to wash right over the U-boat.

A wild cheer went up from the throats of a thousand watchers on the transport, and the pirate, seeing his new enemy, again began to submerge.

Meanwhile Douglas was zigzagging, circling, and banking, working to get into position, always drawing closer to the U-boat, while the T.B.D. temporarily withheld her fire.

Douglas did not mean loosing his remaining bomb until he was pretty sure of his mark.

The U-boat's periscope had already disappeared when Douglas, being in such a position that a bomb must strike his prey,

let fall his one remaining hope at the black shadow under the water.

It was a direct hit; the terrific explosion which followed actually scattered bits of the boat about, and the cheers which had gone up from the transport before were but as whispers to the tremendous full-chested roar that rent the air when the effect of the bomb was seen.

Douglas descended still lower, and soon great patches of black oil, appearing on the surface of the green waves, testified to the U-boat's fate.

Billy yelled with delight, and had he not been strapped in his seat would have jumped up and waved his arms.

But suddenly his attention was called to the curious behaviour of the aeroplane. It began to plunge and wobble, and then the engine stopped.

'Engine trouble,' yelled Douglas; and then, making a graceful swoop, the aeroplane plunged down towards the sea.

Neither Billy nor Douglas, however, lost his presence of mind, and each instantly undid the straps that held him in his seat. Hardly had they done so than the machine struck the waves. It floated, but a wave washed Billy from his seat. Encumbered as he was by his heavy clothes, he sank, but coming to the surface again, struck out for the aeroplane. He was a strong swimmer, but he feared for Douglas, who, he knew, was only an indifferent one. He saw his chum

holding on to one of the elevators, when another wave dashed over the machine and swept Douglas off. He was washed towards Billy, who immediately yelled out, 'I'm coming, Douglas,' and swam towards him. He reached his friend, who was wildly struggling in the icy water, and cried out, 'Don't struggle; I'll save you.' Placing a hand under his chin, he supported his head.

'Don't trouble about me, Billy. Save yourself. I won't survive the machine.'

'Hang the machine!' answered Billy. 'Do as I tell you. The bus'll float for a little, at all events.'

They had been in the water only a very short time when a cheery shout rang out, and a boat propelled by brawny arms approached. On its coming up with them a dozen hands seized them and lifted them in safety into the boat, which had been put off from the T.B.D. immediately the aeroplane touched the water.

In a few words Billy thanked the officer in charge of the boat, and said, 'Do you think you could manage to salve the aeroplane before it sinks?'

'We'll do our best,' replied the officer, and, another boat coming to their assistance, the aeroplane was secured until it could be salvaged.

A brief conversation with the lieutenant in charge of the boat showed Billy that he and Douglas had better go aboard the transport, which was better adapted to save the aeroplane. The larger vessel had been driven from her course by the presence of the sub-

marine, but had now resumed it. Hence it so happened that she was close at hand, and Douglas and Billy were soon on board.

Hardly had they reached the deck when a tall, bony figure dashed forward, began to pat them violently on the back, and dancing round them, cried, 'Bully for you, boys; bully for you! You're just it! You are the goods! I reckon you've got the bulge on old Fritz every time. You wiped his eye pretty slick.'

Douglas gave one glance at the capering figure, then said calmly, 'I shall be happy to hear all you've got to say by-and-by. At present I should like a few words with the captain, to whom I must report.'

CHAPTER VI.

ABOARD THE TRANSPORT.

HARDLY were Billy and Douglas on the deck of the transport than they were surrounded by officers, some belonging to the vessel, the rest soldiers on their way 'over' either for the first time or returning from leave. These officers insisted on shaking hands with the airmen, and there was a chorus of 'Good man!' 'Well done!' 'Very pretty work!' 'Another pirate gone to join the Boche grand fleet!' and so on.

Others made practical suggestions: 'Come and get some dry things,' 'Have a nip out of my flask,' 'Come down to my cabin,' &c.

But most of the speakers were waved aside by the tall, thin young man who had been so outspoken in his praise.

'Now, boys,' he drawled, 'this is my show. I'm the only airman here, and these gents are my chums. Come below; I've got heaps of clothes, and can rig you out as completely as a Fifth Avenue store.'

Billy looked at the speaker, who was in American uniform, and whose badge showed that he belonged to the air service. He wore no cap, and his long, black, lank hair had a way of flopping up and down as he skipped about. He wore a white collar, which gave him rather a peculiar appearance. The

American noticed Billy attempting to hide a smile, and himself broke into a broad grin.

‘Don’t trouble to take off that smile,’ he said. ‘I pride myself on making more smiles than scowls. Nathaniel Brownrigge, the laugh-maker—that’s me; known to my chums as “the Gnat.”’

It was impossible to avoid feeling at once on good terms with the young American. There was a personality about him that appealed to one, and Billy held out his hand. ‘My name’s Granville,’ he said; ‘and my friend is Douglas M’Leod.’

‘Put it there,’ cried Brownrigge; and all three shook hands.

‘Before we think about dry clothes,’ said Douglas, ‘we must see to the aeroplane. I wouldn’t lose her to get the D.S.O.’

The captain came to Douglas’s assistance. A steam-derrick was manned; some nimble seamen, acting under the directions of the young airmen, who had insisted on going out in the boat to superintend the work, passed a rope round the body of the aeroplane, and this was fastened to a longer rope attached to a block when the machine was hauled alongside. The derrick got to work, and in a very short time the aeroplane, which had been kept afloat entirely through the efforts of the destroyer, and was now somewhat the worse in appearance for its ducking, was hoisted on deck. Then Billy and Douglas, followed by several other officers, went down into one of the cabins with Brownrigge.

'I can fix you two in no time,' he said, and he produced from his kit dry underclothes in plenty. While the two subs. were dressing, after having had a good rub down with warm dry towels, Brownrigge chattered away at a great rate.

'I venture to state that the way you worked that bus of yours was IT,' he observed. 'I was hopping mad on the deck to think I wasn't in her with you, for I fancy Nat Brownrigge can handle a flier some. I've been at the game ever since I cut my double teeth, and joined up long before the U-nited States decided to jump into this with both feet.'

'You've been training with our service, I suppose?' interposed Billy.

'You bet I have; but when we decided to take a hand in the game on our own I got transferred to my own army, though I am still attached to the R.F.C. I am a bit useful in teaching your boys a thing or two.'

The American's egotism only amused Billy, but the more serious Douglas felt a little irritated.

'Your countrymen were some time making up their minds to come in,' he said tartly, and several of the officers standing round, who had been amused at the American's talk, winked at one another.

'Sure!' said Brownrigge calmly. 'We don't jump till we've looked twice; but now we are in, you'll see things!'

'Some day,' said Douglas; 'though it's a

good thing France and Britain can hold the Boche till you're ready.'

'Sure!' again said Brownrigge. 'We ain't goin' to be hustled. Old Daddy Wilson knows his game. He didn't speak till he was ready, and he ain't goin' to hit till he is ready. But when he does hit, it'll be good and hard, right in old Kaiser Bill's neck—and don't you forget it.'

'Well, when you are ready, let us know.'

'That's so; and as I figure it out, it'll be none too soon, for Fritz would have had your old country bottled if it hadn't been for us coming in. I reckon Old England's a grand place, but she's a bit slow in her ideas. And the way you hang on to your old dug-outs, and refuse to give your brainy boys a chance, just licks creation.'

This was too much for Douglas, who fired out with, 'It sounds comical to me to hear you talk about slowness. If it hadn't been for the Allies, I think America would have felt something of the power of the mailed fist before this.'

'Sure as a gun; but under different circumstances we should have acted differently. I tell you, Boss Wilson knows the game he's playing, and not a soul outside White House has the faintest idea of what we're doing. But you'll see in due time. I tell you, we're working with brains, and when I see how the game's played in your country, I'm bored almost to tears to see the way you're hoodwinked.'

Douglas gave up trying to argue with such a self-satisfied subject of the United States, who all the while was busy assisting the two subs. He would have completely clothed them, but several officers offered boots, and slacks, and tunics, and soon Billy and Douglas were ready to go on deck.

They immediately set about getting their aeroplane in order, and Brownrigge, in shirt-sleeves, announced his intention of helping. Such was his cheery good-humour that Douglas could not find it in his heart to refuse his help, and it was soon evident that although he was a good talker, he was an equally good mechanic. There was not much about aeroplane construction that he did not understand, and he went to work rapidly and skilfully.

While they were busy, the transport had been cutting her way through the water. The destroyer which formed their escort kept close at hand. It was learned afterwards that she had become temporarily separated from her convoy only through an unfortunate accident to her machinery.

'We had a narrow squeak for it,' said one of the officers to Billy later on. 'If it hadn't been for your timely appearance, I fancy we should now be at the bottom of the sea.'

'Well, if we've been of any use, I'm glad we arrived when we did.'

'There's no doubt, my boy, you saved us. That confounded Hun boat would have got us sooner or later. She'd let rip three

torpedoes at us, and the next would very likely have done for us. You two chaps ought to bag the D.S.O. for this.'

'If we don't bag a wiggling for swamping our bus and using two special bombs without orders, I shall be only too jolly well pleased,' said Douglas. 'You don't know the air service; they're sticklers for red tape, I can tell you.'

'Just what I say,' exclaimed Brownrigge, joining in. 'I've seen something of their ways, and I give you my word they've sometimes made me ache.'

The aeroplane, having been put into as good a condition as possible, was secured, and, at the invitation of the captain, Billy and Douglas joined him in his cabin.

'Gentlemen,' he said, 'now you've finished doing what was possible to your machine, I want to thank you for the great service you have rendered me personally, and your country generally. I shall write a report of your skilful and gallant conduct, and should, of course, like to give your names.' Captain Baring looked first at one, then at the other; and Billy, being the junior, left it to his companion to explain.

'My name is M'Leod,' said Douglas, 'and my friend's is Granville. As you can see, we are lieutenants in the Flying Corps, and I can assure you the fact of being able to help you in any way gave us great pleasure. Of course, it was our plain duty to do so, and I think the less said about it the better.'

'That won't do, Mr M'Leod,' smiled

Captain Baring. 'I know you flying-men are as modest and retiring as the Royal Navy men themselves, and I dare say no mention of the affair will ever be publicly made; but that does not relieve me of my duty in reporting it. Now, I should be obliged if you would tell me how it was you happened to be in the Channel at all.'

Douglas explained in a very few words, and went on to say that he had his doubts as to how the authorities would take the matter, as the bombs he was carrying were of a special sort, and were to have been handed over to the wing officer at Dieppe.

'But, my dear fellow, by disobeying your instructions and acting with common-sense, you have probably saved the lives of hundreds of useful fighting-men, for you know what a playful way the Hun has of opening with his guns on drowning men.'

'Still, orders are orders, captain.'

'Bah! red tape, the plague of the British services. Nelson won a victory and made himself great by throwing red tape overboard and disobeying orders; Wellington was always fighting it; Gordon flatly refused to be bound by it; and with such examples before us we need not fear.'

'They were all successful men, though, captain,' ventured Billy.

'And so are you lads; so that ends the matter.'

The rest of the run into Dieppe, for which port the transport was bound with details

from Southampton, was quite uneventful ; but when they arrived there they were not allowed to disembark, and had to anchor outside the harbour until morning.

‘Just to give some Boche tin-fish a chance to sink us,’ observed Brownrigge. ‘Say, boys, yours is a great nation, though why it hasn’t gone the way of those other nations, Greece and Rome, and the other old things, the great Columbus only knows.’

‘And perhaps even he doesn’t,’ laughed Billy.

‘Perhaps not. Anyway, I’m going to sleep with a life-belt on, so that if I take my bath before it’s light I’ll be able to float till the Froggies have the dry towels ready.’

CHAPTER VII.

THE SUB.'S REPORT.

IN spite of the pessimistic utterance of Lieutenant Brownrigge, morning found the transport riding safely at anchor, and in glorious sunshine they steamed into the harbour, Billy staring curiously at the great crucifix there, never having been in Dieppe before.

The harbour was crowded with vessels of all sorts, sizes, and conditions, and it was some time before the ship was safely berthed, and the business of disembarkation began. Then what a babel there was! Officers getting their detachments together; sergeants calling rolls; sailors bustling and crying out, 'Mind your backs;' brass hats from shore slanging everybody; and youngsters on the quay shouting welcomes in English and French.

'We'll wait until the crush thins out a bit, Billy,' said Douglas; and this they did.

They had to explain to different officers, wearing tabs of various hues, how the dickens they came to be aboard, where the aeroplane came from, why they weren't part of the original human freight, and so on, at least half-a-dozen times, until Douglas began to get really savage, and half-wished the machine had gone down after sinking the submarine.

At last the aeroplane was landed, and with

a hearty handshake they parted from Captain Baring and the rest of his officers.

'I shall look in the *Gazette* for your names amongst the next recipients of the D.S.O.,' were the jovial captain's parting words.

'Look rather amongst the reports of courts-martial,' said Douglas; and he and Billy tramped down the gangway ashore.

'Now what on earth are we to do?' asked Douglas as he stood beside the aeroplane.

'Find the squadron commander and report,' replied Billy cheerfully.

'And where the dickens shall we find him?'

'That's just where I come in,' said a cheerful voice behind them, and turning, they saw Brownrigge. 'Excuse me, boys,' he said; 'I could not help overhearing what you were saying, and as I'm bound for his nibs the S.O. myself, why shouldn't we all go together?'

'A jolly good idea, I think,' said Billy, and Douglas agreed.

'We're going to be chums,' said Brownrigge. 'I'll bet we shall all be attached to the same flight; and, I tell you, I like you boys. If you don't like me now, it's a corn-cob to a sky-scraper that you soon will. At school, at Harvard, and at West Point, Nat Brownrigge had nothing but friends, and we're going to be like bananas on one stem. To begin with, I'm going to call you "Billy" and "Mac," and every time you call me anything but "Nat," "the drinks is on you," as

they say out West. And now, have a gasper ;' and he handed out his cigarette-case.

'Too early,' replied Billy, and Douglas said he didn't smoke cigarettes.

'Come and have breakfast, then.'

'We can't leave the machine,' snapped Douglas. 'I'm answerable for that, and I don't want to lose it.'

'Shucks!' replied Nat. 'I'll soon wangle that ;' and off he darted.

'Well, of all the cool fish I ever met,' said Douglas, 'our Yankee friend takes the biscuit, as he himself would say.'

'I rather like him,' grinned Billy. 'He keeps one alive.'

Douglas muttered something about his being a 'chattering monkey,' and then they both watched to see what he would do. They saw him go up to a red-tabbed staff-officer with a white moustache, and talk earnestly to him for a few minutes. Then the brass hat beckoned to an underling, and a lieutenant came up and saluted in true Camberley style.

A moment later Nat, with the lieutenant at his heels, came striding with his long, loping step towards his newly found friends.

'Now this is the machine,' he said to the lieutenant in the coolest way possible, 'and it's the latest design from—no matter where. Understand, please, that it's not to be touched—hardly looked at, in fact ; and my orders are to hold you strictly responsible for placing sentries over it and guarding it till I relieve you of your responsibility.'

‘Right-o!’ said the lieutenant cheerily. ‘Just wait here a few minutes, and I’ll send a sergeant and a squad of men;’ and away he went.

‘Of all the dashed cheek’—— began Douglas.

But Nat said, ‘Wait, young man, and observe how the world takes you at your own estimate. I bamfoozled the old brass hat in twenty seconds, and his runabout is my slave. Your precious bus is as safe as if it were at Hendon.’

Presently a sergeant and four men were seen marching towards them, the staff-lieutenant in the rear.

‘Here we are,’ he said as they reached the aeroplane.

‘Halt—right turn—order—arms!’ growled the sergeant, and the rifle-butts sank noiselessly by every Tommy’s right foot. ‘Stan’-at-ease—stan’-easy!’ and the sergeant, slapping the butt of his rifle with his right hand, faced the staff-officer.

‘You’ll put a sentry on to guard this machine, sergeant, and you’ll relieve the man every hour until this officer relieves you.’

‘And understand, young feller-my-lad,’ said Nat, ‘that your men have got to keep their eyes peeled, and that I shall hold you responsible for any dereliction of duty.’

The sergeant slapped the butt of his rifle again. ‘Very good, sir,’ said he; then to his men, ‘Fall out, first relief!’ and he posted his

man and gave him his instructions. 'Guard, ri' - turn — quick — march!' and away they tramped.

'I'll just take a receipt from you,' said Nat coolly to the staff-officer.

'Is it necessary?' smiled the lieutenant.

'Rules of our service; just a matter of form,' said Nat; and the staff-officer scribbled a receipt on a page from his note-book and walked off.

'Now for breakfast,' said Nat; 'and I can take you to a top-hole place, for I happen to know Dieppe pretty well.'

From the foregoing episode it was pretty clear to Billy and Douglas that they had in Nathaniel Brownrigge a somewhat original character to deal with.

The American led the way to a small café, where, speaking in excellent French, he ordered a breakfast that to hungry subs. was a feast to be remembered, and then, having had a general smarten up, they sallied forth, enjoying their morning smoke.

During the meal Nat had kept his companions in a constant laugh, and his shrewd opinions of men and things, expressed in American terms, convinced his new friends that he was no fool. The wide extent of his information, and his knowledge generally, showed that his educational attainments were of no mean order. Certain it was that he spoke French in a fashion that few Americans do; and in answer to a question from Douglas, who spoke German very well, as to whether

Nat spoke that language, he replied, '*Ja wohl, mein guter Freund. Ich spreche Deutsch ebenso gut wie Französisch.*' Laughing, he continued, 'I knew heaps of Germans the other side the herring-pond, and jolly decent chaps some of them were. I spoke German with them very often; and during a nine months' trip through the Fatherland, where I kept pretty tolerably awake, I polished up my knowledge, and learnt one or two things worth knowing.'

After leaving the café Nat hailed a taxi and gave the man his instructions. In half-an-hour they had arrived at the Flying Corps headquarters.

'Now, the boss here is Major Corcoran,' said Brownrigge, 'and for a Britisher he's hot stuff. If you take my advice, you'll let me tell him the tale, and I'll engage to have him whacked to a frazzle in five minutes. I knew the old firework at Roehampton, and took his measure good and proper. We had one or two friendly chats, and he got to be quite loving with Nat Brownrigge.'

To this arrangement Douglas, however, would not consent. 'Billy and I will make our own report,' he said. 'We will stand by what we've done; and, besides, I have a letter for the major.'

They found Major Corcoran in his office, exceedingly busy with his staff, asking questions and giving orders in a tone of voice that went far to prove Nat's statement that he was 'hot stuff.'

Having been announced, they entered the great man's presence, Billy being at once struck by his fiery-red, bristly moustache.

The three subs. saluted, Nat afterwards nodding cheerfully and saying, 'Morning, major. Hope I see you in the pink?'

The major snorted, and glared at Billy and Douglas. 'I expected you last night,' he said; and Douglas, explaining how they had been delayed, handed over his letter.

'H'm! thought perhaps you'd made a mistake and landed in the Boche lines,' growled Major Corcoran. 'When pilots don't arrive according to schedule it makes one anxious;' and he proceeded to read the letter.

'Well, where's the machine?' he asked.

'Down at the harbour, major,' replied Douglas.

'The harbour, sir! The harbour! What on earth is it doing there? Why didn't you come straight on to the aerodrome, as you were ordered?'

Douglas explained in an apologetic tone.

'Confound it! why were you in that part of the Channel? The letter says you were a Ferry pilot. A nice sort of a one you were, I should say. And the bombs, too, that I was to give an expert opinion upon. You've chucked them into the sea.'

Douglas admitted it, and Major Corcoran grew more angry still.

'Confound it all!' he cried. 'I don't know what on earth the service is coming to. No one ever thinks of carrying out orders. What

the deuce do you want to go hunting submarines for?'

'You should ask the opinion of the thousand men or so who were aboard the hooker, major,' interposed Nat. 'If Mr M'Leod and his observer hadn't butted in, England would have lost a transport and a few hundred men.'

'All right, Brownrigge; all right! I can form my own opinion about that. We don't do things in a hap-hazard way in the British service.'

'So I've found, major.'

'But the main thing is, where is the machine? It ought on no account to have been left. I shall hold you personally responsible for it, Mr M'Leod.'

'You need not worry about that, major,' said the irrepressible Nat. 'It's safe under the charge of a brass hat and a file of Tommies of the most orthodox, penny-a-box, all-made-to-stand-up fashion you ever saw.'

'The British infantryman, sir, is the finest soldier in the world,' said the major.

'Wait until you've seen the United States men, major. They're some boys, I can assure you.'

'If you will give me a lorry, sir, I will fetch the machine up at once,' said Douglas.

'You shall have a lorry, and I'll send a sergeant in charge. Lose no time in fetching the machine; then report yourselves for duty. Wait outside until I send Sergeant Norman and two mechanics to you. Meanwhile I will

report the matter to Hendon;' and looking very fierce, he dismissed them.

'Fiery sort of gentleman,' said Billy when they were outside. 'We're in for lively times, Douglas, I should say.'

'Bah! old Corky's all right. All bark and no bite,' grinned Nat. 'I'll bet you'd be surprised if you were to see what he writes home about this business.'

And so indeed the subs. would, for after pointing out that they had exceeded orders, and that he regretted no official notice could be taken of their deed, the major praised them highly, and said they had shown 'just the spirit it was desired to foster in the Royal Flying Corps.'

CHAPTER VIII.

SERGEANT NORMAN IS REMINISCENT.

THE three officers had not long to wait before a sergeant and two air mechanics approached them. The mechanics were just of the ordinary type, but Sergeant Harry Norman at once attracted attention. He was a tall, very well-built man; his khaki was spotless, his boots and his buttons were as resplendent as blacking and the brass-brush could make them, and the fit of his clothes showed the old soldier. The South African ribbons he wore spoke of previous service, and the angle at which he wore his cap gave him a jaunty air. He was a good-looking man, with a heavy, dark, waxed moustache.

He stepped up to the officers, halted at two paces distance, saluted, and in a deep voice said, 'We're to fetch a machine up from the harbour, gentlemen. Will you walk, or come down on the lorry?'

'We're for riding every time, sergeant,' said Nat.

'*Very* well, sir;' and saluting again, the sergeant said to his men, 'Fetch the lorry round, and put some jerk into it. The major wants this job done smartly.'

In a few minutes the lorry was there, and the three officers and the sergeant clambered in. They were off in a second, and sitting on

the rail of the lorry, Nat offered his brother-officers his cigarette-case. He then passed it to the sergeant.

‘Do you smoke, sergeant?’ he asked.

‘When I get a chance, sir.’

‘Help yourself, then.’

‘Happy to do so if these officers don’t object.’

‘I think you can indulge, sergeant,’ said Douglas, and the sergeant took the proffered cigarette, in turn handing round his matches.

‘I see you served before the days of flying,’ said Nat, nodding at the sergeant’s ribbons.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘In the infantry?’

The sergeant looked disgusted. ‘No, sir,’ he replied. ‘I served in the Royal Horse Artillery, the Right of the Line, the Pride of the British Army.’

‘I say, did that hurt you much?’

‘What do you mean by that, sir?’

‘All that artillery stuff, “Prides,” and “Rights,” and the rest of it.’

‘No, it didn’t hurt me, sir; but it’s hurt a good many others. Johnny Boer did not care much for us.’

‘H’m! I suppose you “Royal Right of the Army” and “Pride of the Line” thought no small beer of yourselves, eh?’

‘The Horse Gunners may well do so, sir; and the Gray Battery—that was my battery—was the cream of the service.’

‘I think I’ve seen pictures of your Horse

Gunners. Wear a kind of brigand jacket with a herring-bone pattern of braid on their manly breasts, and a sort of muff affair on their heads, don't they?'

'You've got the home service dress to a T, sir. They wear a muff *on* their heads, and the artillery of some nations have a muff *at* their heads.'

Nat laughed outright at this remark, and both Billy and Douglas had to smile; but they looked a little annoyed too, for the sergeant was speaking with unusual freedom to an officer, even allowing for the fact that they were on active service.

Indeed, it is very doubtful whether the sergeant would have spoken so freely to an officer of the British service, but he had noticed the American eagle on Nat's collar, and probably did not consider him quite on a par with his own officers.

'Remember you are talking to an officer, sergeant,' said Douglas.

'I ask his pardon if I have been too free, sir,' said Sergeant Norman instantly. 'I had no intention of being rude.'

'That's all right, sergeant,' said Nat. 'I'm delighted to meet a man who's got a ready wit. They're none too common in the good old British Army. Let's go on with our little heart-to-heart talk. Why did you leave the muff-hatted gunners?'

'Because I was a fool, sir. I was senior sergeant, with nine years' service in, and my B.S.M.'——

‘B.S.M.! What’s that stand for? Best Sunday Manners?’

Sergeant Norman looked pityingly at the American. ‘Battery Sergeant-Major,’ he explained. ‘My batt’ry sar’n-major was a single man, and a regular sticker. I didn’t see no chance of getting the job if I stayed for my twenty-one; so after the Boer War, when I’d got my nine in, I took my discharge and got married.’

‘A very sensible thing to do.’

‘So I thought at the time. But within six months of my leaving, old Paul—that was the B.S.M., you know—went on a bu’st, got bowled over, and lost his crown.’

‘Lost his crown! Why, didn’t he wear a muff then, like the rest of you?’

‘He got reduced to sergeant, and had to take from his arm the crown, the sar’n-major’s badge of rank.’

‘Oh, now I take you.’

‘He jolly nearly got broke altogether.’

‘Then it would have been a job for seccotine, eh?’

‘It would have taken all the seccotine old Paul could get to stick that crown on again. However, he got reduced, and a man who was junior sergeant of the battery when I left got his job.’

‘Hard cheese! And that’s why you were a fool, eh?’

‘Just so. I should have been drawing a decent little pension by now if I’d ha’ stuck it.’

‘Ha, there it is! The almighty dollar again.’

'Can't do without it, sir.'

'True. And how came you to join the flying service?'

'There you are, sir. Well, it was this way. The war hadn't been on very long when I saw plain enough that the Old Country was the only one that would be able to stand up to Fritz to the end, and that we should have to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for Europe again, as we did when old Boney was doing the "smash-up-the-world" stunt. So I says to my missis, "I ain't going to wait till they fetch me; I'll join up." My old battery was in India, and I wasn't going to serve in any other after the Gray Battery; so I talked the matter over with a chum of mine, who knew the ropes. He said the R.F.C. was the thing. All beer, skittles, and halfpence, nice cushy jobs, and so on.'

'And you've proved him to be a prophet, eh?'

'Yes—a false one. There's no beer here; they don't play skittles; and when the missis's allowance is stopped from my pay, there's no chance of saving enough to retire on.'

'And do you like the flying service, sergeant?'

'Bah! I'd almost as soon be a footslogger. We don't do no flying, and thank goodness we don't, after what I've seen. Terrior-firmus'—

'Meaning?'

'Good old mother earth—is good enough for me. I'll face any odds on my own flat

feet, or I'll ride anything on four legs; but fly—not for Joseph. If it wasn't for the major, who's got a fondness for me, I'd be off to the guns again to-morrow.'

'Still hankering after the Right and Pride, and so on, eh?'

'And proud to be so, sir. The British Horse Artillery are the only gunners who ever charged a cavalry regiment, and broke 'em, too. You've heard of Norman Ramsay, I dare say?'

'No; we don't study English history in the States;' and Nat winked at Billy and Douglas.

'More's the pity, sir; it's fine reading, some of it. You'd have learnt that until the Boer War the Horse Gunners never lost a gun, and that those we did lose at Sanna's Post we afterwards recaptured.'

'You've lost some to the Boche, though.'

'We haven't finished with Fritz yet. He got us unprepared, but he won't keep many of our guns after the war. L. Battery set an example that our boys will follow.'

'Ha! Were there any Horse Gunners with the British Army that George Washington whacked, I wonder?'

'There were not, sir. Had there been, the United States would be under the Union-Jack to-day, and not under the Stars-and-Stripes.'

At this retort Nat laughed loudly, and slapping his leg, declared that the sergeant was just the cutest old soldier he had ever met.

By that time they had reached the harbour, and the lorry drove up to the aeroplane, over which a sentry was still stolidly mounting guard.

‘Behold the old guard!’ laughed Nat. ‘He dies, but never deserts his post.’

‘Or his comrade,’ added Sergeant Norman.

The American, intent upon the business in hand, did not accept the challenge to enter into another competition of wits with the sergeant, but clambered out of the lorry, and went in search of the ‘brass hat’ who had given the receipt.

Douglas, however, thought it was high time he took the management of the affair into his own hands, and the staff-officer being found, he himself gave a receipt for the aeroplane, which was duly loaded up and safely landed at the aerodrome.

The mechanics very soon had it in hand, when it was found to be but little the worse for its immersion, thanks to the prompt measures taken by Billy and Douglas directly it had been hoisted aboard the transport.

In the afternoon the two subs. made a short flight in it, and Major Corcoran expressed himself very well satisfied with the machine.

The major was a man who worked hard; he loved work, and kept at it from morning till night; and those under him had to do the same. Billy and Douglas did not grumble, but Nat made remarks about it.

‘I want to get up to the front,’ he said,

‘and don’t want to spend all my time messing about here.’

But ‘Corky,’ as he was called by the juniors, had a keen eye for a good airman, and in the three subs. he knew he had three very valuable fliers, and was in no hurry to part with them.

The American was as good as his word; there was nothing possible to be done with an aeroplane that he could not do; looping, gliding, planing, spirals—he performed all with perfect ease; and he would fly, too, in weather that many an older pilot would not have cared to face.

After seeing him in the air once or twice Douglas developed a great respect for him as a flier, and they would discuss by the hour the merits and demerits of certain makes of machine, air-navigation, principles of mechanical flight, airship theories, gliding angles, engine-power, dopes, and the thousand and one things of interest to airmen. Still, Douglas never concealed from Billy that he did not share that personal liking for the American that his friend had.

‘He’s a fine mechanic and a finished flier,’ he said; ‘but somehow his manner is not just what I like. He’s a deal too conceited.’

‘That’s only his manner.’

‘And he does not in my eye fit the bill as a British officer. He’s too free and easy.’

‘Well, he’s an American officer, and his ways are at least amusing.’

Sergeant Norman, too, whose great passion was that the British Army was the finest in

the world, the Royal Horse Artillery the finest branch of the service, the Gray Battery the finest unit, and Sergeant Norman the smartest soldier of that unit, did not altogether relish the American's flippant manner and chaffing remarks.

'These Yankees ain't no class, sir,' he confided once to Billy. 'They're all swank. We shall see how he'll do his bit when the "Archies" are cracking round him and the Taubes are buzzing about his ears.'

'I'm not quite sure yet how I shall like it myself,' laughed Billy; 'so I'll say nothing about it.'

There was plenty of work to be done, testing machines, making flights up to General Headquarters, finishing the training of flying officers, and so on, and time passed quickly. Then Major Corcoran had to go up to the front, and was away several weeks, his place being taken by a happy-go-lucky captain, under whom every one had a very much easier time.

The officers spent a great deal of each day and all their evenings in Dieppe, and from this fact sprang an adventure which had far-reaching effects on our principal characters.

CHAPTER IX.

NAT BEHAVES STRANGELY.

IN spite of the war, Dieppe was a very lively town. Troops were always arriving and departing, the officers were well received by the inhabitants, shops did a good trade, hotels were full, and there was a certain amount of gaiety and pleasure. Of this last Billy and his constant companions took their share, and soon knew every one who was anybody in Dieppe.

There were people of all the allied and neutral nations, British, French, and Americans, Portuguese, Swiss, and Spaniards, besides Dutchmen and Danes.

One man was particularly popular; he was on the best of terms with all the natives, made much of the allied officers, entertained largely, spent lavishly, and was generally voted 'a jolly good sort.'

He was a Russian by nationality, named Boris Roloff; a big, broad-shouldered man, with closely cropped gray hair, long moustaches, and a short gray beard. He dressed exceedingly well, drove his own motor, a big, powerful machine, and rode exceptionally fine horses. He had a large staff of servants, men of various nations; was a bachelor; and lived in a large house known as the Maison Duprez.

Any officer of rank making a stay of any

length was sure of an invitation to dine from Monsieur Roloff, as he was styled, and crowds of officers of junior rank were amongst his visitors. His cuisine was excellent, and his wines beyond reproach. He spoke French perfectly, but besides his native Russian, that was his only language.

Billy had once or twice seen him driving through the streets of Dieppe, and had wondered who the jovial-looking, well-to-do man was.

Happening one afternoon to be with the identical 'brass hat,' Lieutenant Gower, whom Nat had tackled so successfully on their first arrival, and seeing Monsieur Roloff drive past, Billy asked who he was.

'What! don't you know Roloff—"Roly," as our fellows call him? I thought every one in Dieppe knew him. He keeps the best table in the town, and seems to me to run half the place.'

'He isn't French, is he?'

'No; Russian, and a very decent fellow, too. By the way, I'm dining there to-night; are you doing anything, or will you come too?'

'Rather cool, isn't it, to go without an invite?'

'Under ordinary circumstances it would be; but with him it doesn't matter. He keeps open house, and bids his friends bring whom they like. The Maison Duprez is a sort of "Liberty Hall," and one drops in there just as one pleases.'

'Well, I'm doing nothing this evening, but

I wouldn't go without my chums, M'Leod and Brownrigge.'

'Bring them too; the more the merrier. I tell you what; we'll dine at the "Rose d'Or," and drop in there for a cigar afterwards.'

'But I thought you were dining there.'

'Oh, it is a general invitation; I go or I stop away just as I please. I tell you, Roly's place is "Liberty Hall." It's rare fun; bring your friends, and we'll go.'

When Billy mentioned the affair to Nat later in the day, the American jumped at the idea. 'You've solved a problem for me,' he said. 'I've wanted to know more of Monsieur Roloff for some days; he interests me.'

'In what way?'

'I just feel I want to know him, sonny; he appeals to me. I like his horses and his car; he's worth knowing.'

Beyond this Nat would say nothing, and, putting it down as a whim of the American's, Billy said no more.

Douglas expressed himself ready to come. 'There might be some music,' he said, 'and I'm just pining for the sound of a piano—providing we don't have any of that modern Russian stuff, that is; for, except Rubinstein, the Russians don't possess a good musician. Their Rachmaninoffs, and Rebikoffs, and Moussorgskys can be described as George Grossmith used to describe German wines—"They give the greatest pain inside."'

Billy laughed. 'Infidel!' he said. 'You haven't heard Rachmaninoff's great prelude.'

‘I have, my boy, and I know the original. It’s a crib—a barefaced crib; the theme is taken note for note from a concerto of Hummel or Spohr, I forget which.’

‘Well, I sha’n’t argue. We’ll go, anyway; and I’ll ask Monsieur Roloff to give us some Russian trepaks, mazureks, or other weird dances.’

‘Add some *vodka* to drink, and I’ll cut you for ever.’

Billy and his friends dined together as arranged, and at about eight o’clock found themselves entering the *Maison Duprez*.

It had been, before the war, a very fine house, but it now showed certain signs of the times. The square green boxes containing shrubs that stood in front of the house and on the steps were badly in want of a coat of paint, and were crumbling away; the green shutters to the windows were broken in places; while the blinds and curtains had a faded and neglected appearance.

Lieutenant Gower and the three pilots entered the house, and were soon mixing with a merry crowd of people, whose one idea seemed to be to amuse themselves.

The young officers strolled into the large *salon*, and there they found naval and military officers, French, British, Belgian, and even a solitary Portuguese, the showy French uniforms presenting a striking contrast to the more sober dress of the British and the Belgians. The possibility that had been hinted at—some music—was fulfilled. There was a grand

piano in one corner, but the music was not Russian. A young Frenchman sat at the instrument, and one or two junior officers were singing in unison some Parisian *chanson* of pre-war days, one of those ridiculous nothings in which the French seem to find so much humour.

Off the *salon* were one or two smaller rooms, and in these cards, chess, and even dominoes were being played.

Walking about among his guests, a big cigar in his mouth, a genial smile upon his face, was the host, Monsieur Roloff. He knew everybody, seemed to have something confidential to chat about with everybody, and by the civilians present, most of whom were men of importance and sported a button of some colour or other on the lapels of their coats, he was frequently button-holed for a few minutes' intimate conversation, which was often concluded by expressive nods, gestures, and smiles, or by a few whispered words.

Presently Monsieur Roloff caught sight of Lieutenant Gower. 'Ha! my dear captain,' he exclaimed—it was really wonderful how ignorant he seemed of British rank badges, for he generally promoted the officers a step when speaking to them—'ha! my dear captain, you have neglected us lately. What is the latest news from your marvellous intelligence department?'

'Nothing, my dear monsieur; absolutely nothing.'

'Ha! you gentlemen of the staff, you are

so close; you know everything, and say nothing. Yet it is right. There are many—what shall we say—people with long ears about, eh, captain?’

‘Yes, the spy business is undoubtedly a nuisance,’ said Lieutenant Gower.

‘Hush, captain! spy is an ugly word. You know we never use it here. Let us say “secret service agents;”’ and Monsieur Roloff laughed jovially.

‘The same thing with another name, eh?’

‘Precisely. But who are your friends? They are new-comers here, are they not?’

‘Yes; they have only recently come over. May I introduce them? Lieutenants M’Leod and Granville of the flying service, Monsieur Roloff. But where’s Brownrigge?’

Lieutenant Gower looked round, but the American had entirely disappeared.

‘He was here a moment or so ago,’ said Billy.

‘Oh, he’s always erratic,’ muttered M’Leod. ‘I expect he’s off on some sudden whim.’

Monsieur Roloff extended his hand cordially. ‘And so you belong to that glorious and wonderful branch, the air service. Ha! you are wonderful fellows—Warneford and Bishop, and poor Ball and Robinson, and those great Frenchmen, Guynemer and young Charpentier. *Mon Dieu!* what men!’

This sounded a bit too much like gush for prosaic Douglas, who made a step backward.

Monsieur Roloff offered his cigarette-case. ‘I see a friend I must say a few words to,’ he

said a moment or so later, as he slipped the case back into his pocket. 'I must have a talk with you by-and-by. Will you join me over a liqueur and coffee in half-an-hour?' and he went off to speak to a Belgian officer.

'Funny ass!' growled Douglas to Billy *sotto voce*.

'Oh, he's all right,' said Gower, who had overheard the remark. 'He's a topping chap when you know him, and he'll do any favour to oblige. He's keen on the war, too, and does a lot of good in fostering the patriotism of the townspeople.'

'But what has become of Nat?' asked Billy.

'Let's look for him,' replied Douglas; and they wandered round, being much amused and interested by all they saw.

At the back of the house was a large garden, with flower-beds, statuary, and, partly surrounded by acacia-trees, a fair-sized summer-house. The summer-house was lit with electric light, and contained two tables, some lounge-chairs, and a small book-case; while hanging on the walls were some good pictures.

There were several people inside talking and smoking, and Billy and his companions joined them for a few minutes, as it was cooler there than in the house.

While they were there Nat came in, and Billy cried out to him, 'Hullo, young fellow! where have you been?'

'Don't speak to me now,' whispered Nat hurriedly. 'Pretend I am only a casual acquaintance, and whatever I do, back me up

in it, no matter how ridiculous it may seem to you. I will explain later.'

Before any answer could be made or any question asked he was off, and Douglas turned to his companions. 'What mad trick is he up to now?' he asked. 'I wish he would remember he's an officer attached to our army.'

'I'll bet he knows what he's doing,' said Billy, who was always ready to take his part. 'Let's follow him, and, without pretending to do so, watch his antics.'

They re-entered the house, and saw Nat talking loudly to several French and Belgian officers, and drinking with one and another.

'I don't think we need waste any time in watching him,' said Douglas. 'It's clear what he's doing. He's talking big and drinking more than is good for him, for a very little always makes him most excited.'

They moved away, and Monsieur Roloff, seeing them, came up. 'Ah! here you are,' he cried. 'I've been hearing all sorts of things about you. I'm told you are the gallant officers who sank a German U-boat, and saved that transport so pluckily.'

Douglas looked annoyed, and wondered who had been talking. He answered very briefly.

But Monsieur Roloff pressed the point, extolling their skill. 'You English—you English,' he said, wagging a fat forefinger. 'You perform the most wonderful deeds, that would earn you our Cross of St George or the French

Croix de Guerre, and then you are too modest to speak of your deeds.'

'You exaggerate, monsieur, I can assure you.'

'But you must have had a splendid machine. I have heard it is of a new and wonderfully improved pattern, and I rejoice, for anything that will help our glorious cause is food for congratulation. Tell me all about it.'

'The machine was just an ordinary Bristol Scout,' replied Douglas.

'But how armed? Had she not some new and powerful guns?'

'You must ask my friend here; he knows more about the guns than I do.'

Billy, thus drawn into the conversation, taking his cue from Douglas, said there was nothing special about either aeroplane or gun, and that the whole incident was not worth mentioning.

'Don't you believe him, Monsieur Roloff,' said a rather unsteady voice behind him. 'It was a top-hole machine, and has got the bulge on anything old Fritz has got. And my friends here are the best pilots in the service, and each of them will get the V.C. for the job. My!'—and Nat chuckled in a way that suggested he had been imbibing freely—'you should just have seen the way they dropped those bombs on the old tin-fish. And when the Huns came squealing upon the deck, the way Granville here mowed 'em down with his machine-gun would have tickled you to death, monsieur.'

Douglas would have made an angry remark at such outrageous conduct, but Nat, lurching forward, trod heavily upon his toe.

'Sorry, old chap,' he cried aloud; then added two words softly, 'Keep quiet.'

Douglas, though very quick-tempered, mastered his anger and turned away; but Billy, convinced that Nat was playing some deep game, had kept his eyes fixed on Monsieur Roloff.

When Nat spoke of Huns being shot down on the submarine's deck, he thought he saw a gleam of anger for a moment in Monsieur Roloff's eyes, but almost before it was seen it had passed, and the Russian laughed loudly.

'Ah! the brutes; they were caught for once, were they?'

'You bet they were; they got it in the neck fine.'

'You saw it?'

'I was on the transport—ha! ha! And it's no good M'Leod saying the machine he was in isn't something extra special. I know it is, and could tell you a thing or two about it that would astonish you.'

'Is that so?'

'True as gospel, monsieur. I know the ropes, I can assure you, and I could tell you a few things about what we are doing on the other side the Atlantic.'

'Ha! monsieur is an American?'

'All the time. Nathaniel Brownrigge, U.S.A. Army, champion Stars-and-Stripes wagger of Fifth Avenue. But dear old poppa

was Ludwig Braunrieg of Leipzig; only, that spelling is unpopular just now, so I altered it. Funny, isn't it?' and Nat gave a knowing laugh.

One or two Frenchmen who had overheard the conversation looked disgustedly at the American, and turned their backs on him, as did Douglas.

Nat seemed in nowise disconcerted, and continued to talk to Monsieur Roloff until that gentleman appeared to tire of the American's somewhat bombastic conversation, and went off with one of the civil dignitaries.

Billy was completely puzzled, and, as it was getting near the time to depart, asked Nat if he was ready.

'Not by a long way, boy. You go on. Nat Brownrigge's all right; he's on a jolly, and is going to see it out.'

Billy would have remained and endeavoured to keep Nat from any further exhibition, but his friends persuaded him against it.

'Look here, Billy,' said Douglas; 'this sort of thing is not our style. It may be considered good form in the American Army, but I'm not going to mix up with it; neither are you.'

'I quite agree,' said Gower; 'it's beyond a joke.'

So Billy left with his friends, and in due course found himself in his tent. He was awakened some time later by hearing some one shouting outside, and to his surprise recognised Nat's voice.

'Here's "the Gnat" come home,' he heard. 'Rah for the Stars-and-Stripes! I'm going to fight some one before I turn in. Come out, some of you gol' darned Britishers, and put your fists up.'

'I say, this is a bit thick,' said Billy to Douglas. 'Brownrigge's letting himself go to-night, and no mistake.'

'Let him alone,' growled Douglas. 'He isn't worth talking about.'

Nat kept shouting not very complimentary things, and inviting any Britisher to stand before him just for ten seconds.

Billy went to the tent door to remonstrate with the American at the very moment that Sergeant Norman, in shirt, socks, and breeches, duly stepped up to Brownrigge.

'Look here, sir,' he said; 'you're making uncomplimentary remarks about the British nation. Are you going to take them back?'

'Not on my life, my boy; and I'm delighted to find there's at least one amongst you with spirit enough to take up my remarks.'

'Go to bed, sir!'

'No; I'm going to fight.'

'Do you persist?'

'Yes; put your fists up.'

Norman not only put them up, but before Billy could interfere, he shot out his left, caught the American on the point of the chin, and laid him on his back.

Brownrigge got up, but did not again assume a fighting posture.

'Had enough?' asked Norman.

'Quite! Many thanks. Good-night, sergeant.'

'Good-night, sir!' And without another word Sergeant Norman walked off, while the American entered his tent, and without making another sound, turned into bed.

CHAPTER X.

NAT GROWS MORE MYSTERIOUS.

THE next morning Nat appeared quite unconcerned, and went about his duties as usual. He seemed as fresh as a daisy, and whatever his condition might have been the night before, it had apparently no detrimental effect upon him. His chin showed a slight discoloration left by Sergeant Norman's knuckles, but on meeting that worthy, Nat returned his salute, wished him good-morning cheerily, and slipped five francs into his hand.

'Of all the rum chaps,' soliloquised the sergeant as he dropped the money into his breeches-pocket, 'I reckon Lieutenant Brownrigge is the rummest. Here I knock him down, and, instead of handing me out a court-martial, he tips me five francs! Well, if that's the fashion in his old U-nited States Army, as he calls it, he can have a dollar's worth as often as he likes;' and Norman went over to the sergeants' mess to spread the news, and give his fellow-sergeants his opinion on the matter.

The result was that Brownrigge was written down as a 'very rum character, but a bit of a sport.'

To Billy and Douglas Nat made no mention of the previous evening. Douglas rather

avoided him, but Billy watched him closely. He was, frankly, puzzled.

In the afternoon, there being nothing particular doing, Nat was sitting on an upturned bucket, a green cigar between his lips, his elbows resting on his knees, his head supported on the palms of his hands.

Billy and Douglas were resting outside their tent.

'Brownrigge looks as if he were trying to solve the riddle of the universe,' said Billy.

'He's more probably thinking what a donkey he made of himself last night,' said Douglas dryly.

'His pose is dramatic. If I had the skill of a Bairnsfather, I would sketch him, and call it "America cogitating on the Conquest of the Hun."'

'Only make him more conceited. He's a queer chap. He's getting an unenviable reputation for wildness, too; the men talk about him.'

Billy made no answer, but went into his tent, emerging a minute later with a writing-block and a lead-pencil. He was very clever at sketching, and in ten minutes had made a really striking picture of the American. He showed it to Douglas, who laughed heartily.

'By Jove, Billy! if I had your talent,' he said, 'I'd enter into competition with Bairnsfather. When the war's over, caricaturing ought to be your line.'

Nat heard his brother-subs. laughing, and getting up, walked across to them. 'Well,

boys,' he said, 'what's tickled your fancies? If it's a joke, let me in on it, for a laugh is as good as a meal.'

'We were laughing at your woe-begone attitude,' answered Billy.

'And remarking on the reputation for wildness you are earning,' added Douglas.

'Am I? Shucks for that bit of news.'

'You seem pleased.'

'As a Bowery barmaid with a new ten-dollar hat.'

'Whence those thoughtful wrinkles on that massive brow?' asked Billy.

'I'm up against something that I can't solve yet. I'm bunkered, frazzled, horns-woggled, spraddled, bunched'——

Billy put his fingers in his ears. 'Spare us!' he cried, 'and translate. My knowledge of American is limited.'

'In plain English, then, I am up against a puzzle that's turning my blood to water; that's silvering my hair, destroying my digestion, shattering my nerves, and turning me into a hopping, raving lunatic.'

'Good heavens, man! you're in a bad way,' smiled Billy.

'I'm in the worst way. I'm losing my self-respect; I feel that I'm slipping away from myself; I've lost my anchor; my planes are twisted; my thinking-box has bu'st.'

Billy really began to wonder what had gone wrong with the American, and he made no reply for a minute.

Nat threw away the stump of his cigar, took

another from his case, bit off the end, lit it, and said, 'In all my life I've always flattered myself that once I'd met a man and heard his name, his face and his name were on my memory "for keeps."'

'Well?'

'Now I have met a man that I'll swear I've met before, and I can't fix either him or his name.'

'As long as it's no worse than that, you need not worry yourself to death about it; some day you'll remember.'

Nat turned round swiftly, and his face was quite grave, while a keen look flashed into his eyes. 'Some day,' he said, 'may be too late. Suppose that on the fact of my remembering that man's name and identity the lives of a thousand men, perhaps ten or twenty thousand, depended! What then?'

The deadly earnestness of the young American struck both his hearers, and Billy, standing up, dropped the sketch he had just made.

As it lay on the ground Nat looked at it indifferently. Suddenly he pounced upon it.

'Say, Billy!' he cried, 'did you do this?'

'Yes.'

'Jumping rattlesnakes! it's great. It's me to a capital T. Why, you're a Gibson, a Kirchner!'

'You overwhelm me, Nat. You make me bashful;' and Billy pretended to giggle and hide his face. But Nat was in no joking mood.

'Billy,' he continued, 'could you draw a face from memory?'

'I have done such a thing,' replied Billy, remembering some half-dozen sketches of Lucy Hastings that were amongst his baggage.

'Do you remember Monsieur Roloff's features sufficiently to reproduce them on paper?'

'What a funny request! Do you want to frame him, and hang him over your bed?'

'Suppose I wanted to hang him over the branch of a tree?'

The subs. looked in surprise at Nat, who immediately spoke again. 'Look here, boys,' he said; 'I can see through a brick wall as far as a blind mule. I know you think I'm mad, and made a fool of myself last night. Don't you believe it! I was never cooler or more in earnest in my life. Now, tell me candidly what you thought of my conduct. Had you been strangers to me, what opinion would you have formed?'

Billy made no reply; but Douglas, on Nat pressing for a candid opinion, replied, 'I should have said you were an empty-headed, conceited American, who had drunk more wine than was good for him, and who was boasting of knowledge he might or might not possess.'

'And you, Billy?'

'I confess I should have thought the same.'

'Then I made good! If I deceived you, I'm darned well sure I deceived every one else, except perhaps one man.'

‘And who was he?’

‘Monsieur Roloff.’

‘What has he got to do with all this?’

‘Get to work on his phiz, Billy. Give me the best that is in you. I’m going away for an hour, for I don’t want to see your work until it’s finished. Put your back into it, and draw as you never drew before;’ and with these words he walked off.

Douglas looked at Billy. ‘What do you make of it?’ asked the former.

‘I don’t know; but I begin to believe there’s a great deal more in Brownrigge than we imagined. I’m going to try to do as he asked me.’

CHAPTER XI.

A STARTLING CONFIDENCE.

ABOUT an hour later Douglas and Nat were examining two or three sketches which Billy had made of Monsieur Roloff.

‘My, they’re great!’ cried Nat. ‘This one has got him to a hair of his eyebrow.’

He spent a long time holding it at different distances, covering the hair, then the mouth, then the nose with his thumb, and racking his brains as to where he had seen the man before.

Suddenly he asked Billy, ‘Could you rubber out that beard, and draw him with a firm chin?’

‘I dare say I could;’ and Billy got to work.

‘Great Jee-hoshaphat! That’s done it! It was the beard that was foxing me. Now, my young Rubens, just draw a regulation Boche helmet on the head—a squat thing with a big spike. You know the sort.’

Billy did as he was requested, whereupon Nat gave a joyful jump, cracked his fingers, and exclaimed, ‘By Christopher, I’ve fixed him! I say, you boys, we’re up against a big thing. Hustle on your caps, and come with me away to some lonely spot where we can talk.—Bring your pencil efforts, Billy; we’re going to hold a big pow-wow.’

They started off together, Nat, with his

head down, leading the way. He did not speak a word, and Billy and Douglas, equally silent, followed him.

Truth to tell, they did not quite know what to make of their companion, as they could not guess what was the discovery he thought he had made; and they walked for a good twenty minutes before, having arrived at a secluded spot on the banks of a little stream, Nat sat down, and asking Billy for the sketch, looked intently at it. Then, taking a pencil from his pocket, he wrote a name under the sketch, and returned it.

The subs. looked at the name, and read, 'Colonel Emil Vogt.'

Billy looked at Douglas, who in turn looked at Nat.

'What does that mean?' asked M'Leod, pointing to the name.

'It means that our friend, Monsieur Roloff, Russian gentleman, is in reality Colonel Vogt, Prussian spy,' answered Nat in quiet tones.

'Are you certain?'

'Dead sure! You can bet every dime you're possessed of that I'm right. I've no longer any doubt of the man. What I've got to find out now is how to fix him.'

'Hadn't you better tell us all you know of this matter, and then perhaps we may be able to judge how—er'—and Billy paused.

'How likely I am to be right, eh?' said Nat. 'Anyway, your desire for information is quite natural, and it was to satisfy your curiosity that I brought you here. I know

when I can trust a man, and I'm going to trust you two. We're all three going to be in this with our coats off, and we've got to work together. We have a slim customer to deal with, and if I know anything of British ways, we're not going to get any assistance from those on top.

'That's true enough, and if we make a mess of things we're going to create trouble for ourselves,' agreed Douglas.

'Every time! But Nat Brownrigge isn't going to make any mess of this.'

'What do you found your suspicions of this man upon?' asked Douglas.

'Just this. When first I clapped eyes on Monsieur Roloff I experienced a sort of uncanny feeling that he and I had met before. When I heard him talk and watched him, his eyes and voice were decidedly familiar, and I began to turn over in my mind where I had seen him; but for the life of me I could not remember. I thought with all my might, and every minute the conviction grew upon me that I had met him somewhere, *and that he was a German!* So that I might watch him more closely, I separated myself from you fellows, and pretended to be by myself. Then I decided how I would play my hand. The scatter-brained Yankee that you read about in the European papers, but seldom meet, was the idea, and you know how I carried it out. I deceived even you.'

'You did entirely,' said Douglas.

'Then I possibly took in M. Roloff, as we

will continue to call him, for we have a very dangerous man to deal with, and we can't be too careful about mentioning names.'

'How do you know Monsieur Roloff is not what he pretends to be?' asked Billy.

'In other words, you mean how do I know he is Colonel Vogt?' whispered Nat.

'Exactly.'

'In this way. When I was at Harvard I spent a good deal of my time in Boston, which is just a mile away. There were a good many Germans living there, and with some of them and their families I got on terms of intimacy. You know it's a funny thing that while the original emigrants generally remain very patriotic, a great deal more so, I expect, than when they were living in the Fatherland, their American-born sons are often very decidedly pro-American, and sometimes decidedly anti-German, especially in those cases where the mothers are American. Now, Kaiser Bill knows this, and spares no pains to get these young American-born Germans into the Pan-German party, and through the States regular campaigns are made by specially selected German agents, for there is a very strong German party in America—a much stronger party, in fact, than the Irish-American party, of which you Britishers hear so much.'

'Too much,' murmured Douglas.

'Well, while I was at Harvard a new German gymnasium was opened in Boston, and all the Herr Schmidts and their Fraus

and the Hänschens and Liesschens went to a grand entertainment, at which there was much eating and drinking and talking. The German ambassador came down, there was a sprinkling of naval and military officers, and much singing of "*Deutschland über Alles*," and the usual hot air.

'This opening ceremony was to be kept very select, admission being by tickets only, and these were difficult to get. I should not have got one but for an accident. A young German named Lincke, who had but little sympathy with the Pan-German party, slipped in the street the night before the opening of the gymnasium and sprained his ankle. Next day, chancing to call upon him, I found him in bed, and conversation turning upon the coming chin-wagging at the new gymnasium, he gave me his ticket, and said it would be a spree for me to go and impersonate him. I did so, and much astonished some of my German acquaintances by appearing amongst them that evening. The feeding and feasting were great, and then came the speech-making. I tell you, free and easy-going as we are in the States, some of the speeches made me stare. It was all very cleverly put, but underlying the whole thing was the fact that the Germans were out for world conquest, that they were waiting for "The Day," that they reckoned on America's help, but that if it came to the other thing, they were also ready. All true sons of the Fatherland were to keep their ears open, always to keep in

touch with the Fatherland, to be ready to open their purses, and in all things to do as they were told. In return they would receive the benefit of the "Kultur" they would help to spread.

'Now, among the speakers was our friend Colonel Vogt, in brass buttons, spurs, and spiked helmet all complete, a typical Prussian soldier; and he made a very able speech.

'Of course, in those days we all looked upon the thing as a sort of comic opera business, German sword-rattling, bombast; but events have proved that we were wrong.'

'Very true; we all underestimated the Prussian menace,' said Billy.

'And you can swear to this Colonel Vogt?'

asked Douglas.

'Absolutely. I saw him twice after the gymnasium business, and I can positively swear to him. The beard and his civilian clothes puzzled me at first, but now I've fixed him. And the whole thing is clear as mud. Here he is, doing the genial, getting all sorts of information from allied officers, and civilians as well. The matter now explains itself. We can understand his actions easily, and we know how very good the information is that Germany has of all the Allies' plans.'

'It is a dangerous game to play,' mused Billy.

'But danger does not deter Germany's agents. They think they are working in a righteous cause, and, to give the devil his due,

many of them are quite ready to die, so long as by doing so they serve the Fatherland.'

'And what do you propose to do now?' asked Douglas.

'I'm going to worm myself into Monsieur Roloff's confidence. I'm going to pit my wits against his cunning, and when I've got him in my power I'm going to snap him.'

'A dangerous game!' again said Billy.

'All the more alluring. Now, are you boys going to stand in with me in this game?'

Both Billy and Douglas declared their readiness to do so.

'Then leave the details to me. All I ask is that you do as I tell you, and that, no matter what you may think, you will trust me.'

'One moment, though,' said the ever-cautious Douglas. 'Is there any truth in your statement that your father was a German?'

'Not the slightest,' laughed Nat. 'It was a white lie. My stock is good old British, established in America for four generations. I know a family of Germans named Braunrieg, but they are no connections of mine.'

'Then we are with you to the death,' said Billy, and the three shook hands on the bargain.

CHAPTER XII.

NAT EXPLAINS HIS PLANS.

DURING the next week Nat spent all his spare time in Dieppe. He was a constant visitor at the Maison Duprez; was 'hail, fellow! well met,' with all he saw there; and, rumour said, had developed a fondness for card-playing, at which he lost a good deal of money.

Monsieur Roloff and he appeared to be just on the usual affable terms, like the others; but Nat, in the secrecy of his own tent, acknowledged to Douglas and Billy that a particularly good understanding existed between them.

'He's my meat, sure enough,' he said, 'and I've wiped his eye properly. I've told him some wonderful things about what is going on in England, and some simply marvellous yarns about what we're doing on the other side of the Atlantic. It's quite wonderful what a lot he knows, and it's a lick where he gets some of his information from. At the same time, like all Germans, he's clumsy when he gets up against some one smarter than himself'—

'Like you?' grinned Billy.

'Like your humble,' agreed Nat; 'and I shall have him as safe as a rat in a trap.'

'How are you going to do it?'

'That I sha'n't tell you until the last

minute. I can rely upon your help, and that is all I want to know at the moment. In the meantime, I am keeping my own counsel, playing 'possum, because a secret is no longer a secret when it's known to more than one person.'

'That's true,' agreed Douglas, 'and what we don't know, we can't talk about. Then, if anything goes wrong, you'll not be able to say it was through us.'

Three days more passed, and then one night Nat returned to the aerodrome in a state of some excitement. 'Hi there, boys!' he shouted; 'here's "the Gnat" come home again, but he's not fighting to-night. He's going to his tent quietly.'

Five minutes later Billy and Douglas were in the privacy of Nat's tent, the three sitting round an upturned box, on which stood a lighted lantern. Nat confided his plans to his friends, and told them what he wanted them to do on the following evening. For a couple of hours they discussed the matter in low whispers, and Billy and Douglas expressed themselves quite satisfied with the scheme.

'It ought to succeed,' said Douglas, 'and if you haven't made a hideous mistake, and, when we've bagged him, can prove what you have told us, our Russian friend will find himself bowled out.'

'I can't help succeeding,' said Nat with the greatest confidence. 'My part is practically done; if you fellows play up to me, Colonel V. is as good as shot.'

'It will, of course, be necessary to get permission from the captain for Norman to accompany us,' said Billy.

'I shall tell him all in the morning,' said Nat.

'And Gower supplies the men?'

'Yes; and he'll see that our friend is safely stowed away when we've bagged him. Of course, we have to reckon with the civil authorities, as, Roloff being a civilian, we have to be careful that we don't offend the dignity of the good people of Dieppe.'

'Right-o!' said Billy. 'And now I vote we'd better turn in, for if we carry out Nat's programme, we shall have a busy time to-morrow night.'

The next afternoon it was general gossip in the town that Monsieur Roloff had been taken unwell in the morning, had seen a doctor, been sent to bed, and ordered absolute quiet for a couple of days. The doors of the Maison Duprez were closed, servants informed callers that their master was ill and could see no one, and messages were left hoping for monsieur's speedy recovery.

Arriving singly and at different times, Billy, Douglas, Nat, Lieutenant Gower, and Sergeant Norman forgathered at the 'Rose d'Or,' where in a private room they ate, drank, and conversed in low tones. Later they were joined by Lieutenant La Touche of the French gendarmerie, who after a short talk took his departure.

At nine o'clock, when it was quite dark,

Billy and his friends, arriving at intervals of about ten minutes, reached the house standing next to the Maison Duprez, where they were noiselessly admitted by Lieutenant La Touche, the house being entirely in his possession.

Nat was not of the party, his part taking him to the Maison Duprez itself, which he was to reach at 10 P.M.

When Billy and Douglas, the last two to be admitted by La Touche, entered the house next to that of Monsieur Roloff, they were ushered into a large room on the ground floor, the shutters of which were up and the curtains drawn, so as to shut out every vestige of light. In this room were Lieutenant Gower and four non-commissioned officers of a British regiment, all armed with revolvers, several gendarmes, and Sergeant Norman. All being assembled, Lieutenant Gower gave the word, the lights were extinguished, and the whole of them, leaving the room, went into the garden, which ran alongside that of the Maison Duprez.

In the garden were two light, strong ladders, and Billy taking one, while Douglas took the other, they all crept silently down to the end of the garden in single file, led by La Touche.

The night was dark, the moon being only a few days old, yet there was just sufficient light for them to see where they were treading. Having arrived at the end of the garden, Billy reared his ladder against the wall, and silently mounted. For fully five minutes he

strained eye and ear; then silently descending, he took half-a-dozen thick sacks from Norman, with which he carefully covered the iron spikes which topped the wall. Next, the second light ladder was passed up to him, and that he very gently lowered over into the adjoining garden, then crossed the wall and descended. In spite of himself, he felt a little nervous when he stood in the garden of the Maison Duprez, and made sure he had ready to his hand the automatic pistol which had been his uncle's parting gift.

He was not long alone. One by one nine silent figures ascended one ladder, crossed the wall, and descended the other. Before long the whole of them stood under the shadow of the wall.

'So far, good!' whispered La Touche. 'Now, all take hands as agreed, follow me, step as lightly as cats, and for your lives let no man utter a sound.'

CHAPTER XIII.

A FIGHT AND A FLIGHT.

FOLLOWING the instructions of La Touche, they crossed the garden and concealed themselves amongst the trees which partly surrounded the summer-house already mentioned. There the men were left, and La Touche, Billy, and Douglas crept up to the back of the summer-house, where, through a window screened only with a thin lace curtain, they could command a view of the interior.

The lights were lit, a silver coffee-pot, with cups and cream-jug, stood on the table beside a box of cigarettes, while a tiny spirit-lamp flickered with a blue light. The place was quite empty, but chairs were placed by the table as though visitors were expected.

Presently voices, speaking in low tones, were heard, and coming silently over the velvet turf two figures were dimly seen. They entered the summer-house, and the door was shut behind them.

The watchers could see quite plainly all that was taking place inside, and could also hear what was said. Indeed, Monsieur Roloff was apparently so unsuspecting that any one could possibly overlook or overhear him that no precautions were taken.

The pseudo-Russian, clad in a loose, light dressing-gown, was one of the men who had

entered the summer-house; the other was Nat.

No sooner was the door shut than Billy and Douglas slipped noiselessly round to the front of the summer-house, and halting close beside the long French windows, stood with eyes and ears alert.

'It's perfectly true what you say,' Nat was exclaiming; 'but I don't buy any pigs in pokes. I am laying my cards on the table, and showing you my game. You get all I promised, and I want the money now.'

'But my note to—no matter where—will be just as good. You take the machine, which you say has now arrived, and the first time you fly in it, you lose your way and land in the German lines. You are taken prisoner, and—you are kindly cared for. You live like a prince in Berlin until the war is over, and then twenty thousand marks are placed to your account in any bank you like to name in Berlin.'

'That sounds very well, but it's not quite good enough. What's simpler, when you've got the machine and the papers, which I have here—and Nat touched his breast-pocket—what's simpler, when I am in German hands, than to get me put into some military fortress, and—just forget all about me? I dare not open my mouth, and am, in fact, helpless.'

'You have my word.'

'H'm! the word of a Russian does not go very far in Berlin,' said Nat dryly.

'I can give you a letter.'

“A scrap of paper,” my dear monsieur! The world has not forgotten Belgium yet.’

Monsieur Roloff’s eyes gleamed balefully. ‘You are a hard bargainer,’ he sneered. ‘All you Yankees are traders.’

‘And proud of it.’

Monsieur Roloff poured out a cup of coffee and pushed it across the table to Nat. ‘Let us drink,’ he said; ‘we can talk over a cigarette.’

Nat took a cigarette and lit it, but he left the coffee untouched. ‘I have no time to spare,’ he said. ‘I have to get back before suspicion is aroused. Now, look at these papers;’ and he handed Monsieur Roloff some folded papers which he took from his pocket.

His companion glanced at them. ‘They seem all right, but I also am cautious. I am not going to commit myself until I am satisfied that the information they contain is correct.’

‘Then the deal’s off,’ said Nat, and he rose to go.

‘Wait,’ snarled Monsieur Roloff. ‘Do you not realise that you have placed yourself entirely in my power? Don’t you see that if I were to call for the police, have you arrested, and accuse you of trying to sell to me valuable information on account of Germany, you would be shot to-morrow?’

‘Oh dear, no! I have arranged for all that. It would be your word against mine, and I have taken steps to make sure that my word shall be believed.’

Monsieur Roloff rose to his feet. 'What steps have you taken?' he hissed.

'That is the one card I did not lay upon the table.'

Monsieur Roloff strode up and down the room twice; then, facing Nat, exclaimed, 'What do you want?'

'An order on any French bank for twenty thousand francs, and I'll take the risk of the difference on the rate of exchange between the mark and the franc,' replied Nat, smiling sweetly.

'And if I refuse?'

'Then I inform against you.'

'Bah! What could you say?'

'Well, I imagine I could say a good many things that might interest some people in Dieppe.'

'As what, for instance?'

'Oh, say that I just mentioned that Colonel Emil Vogt of the German Secret Service was one and the same with Monsieur Roloff, the highly respected Russian of the Maison Duprez.'

Nat had suddenly changed his speech from French to German, and the effect of his words was electrical.

Monsieur Roloff went pale as death, and with blanched face stood staring at Nat. 'You—you dog! You spy!' he hissed.

'The same to you, with compliments.'

Monsieur Roloff's hand shot under his dressing-gown, reappearing in a moment clutching a long glittering blade.

'That won't do, colonel,' said Nat cheerfully. 'Drop it, or I shall drop you;' and he covered Monsieur Roloff with an automatic pistol.

The so-called Russian stared at it a moment or two in silence; then, letting the dagger fall with a clatter to the floor, he cried out in a loud voice, 'Betrayed!' and fell back into his chair, covering his face with his hands.

Nat, momentarily off his guard, lowered the muzzle of his pistol, and gazed at the man before him. 'The game's up,' he said; 'you had best surrender yourself quietly.'

Even as he spoke there came a rapid rush of feet, a big burly figure leapt from behind a screen in a dark corner of the room, and, hurling himself upon Nat, seized him by the arms, which he wrenched behind his prisoner.

Monsieur Roloff rose from his chair, a look of vindictive cruelty upon his heavy features. He laughed evilly. 'Ha! ha! my American bantam; so you sought to measure your strength against mine, did you; to pit your wit against mine, eh?' and picking up his knife, he stepped closer to Nat. 'Hold him firmly, Blum,' he said. 'There's plenty of room in the old vault beneath the house for him, eh? We won't make a mess here, will we?'

Blum chuckled sardonically.

'It will be another mystery for those fools,' went on Monsieur Roloff. '"Daring American Aviator Missing." Ho! ho! I wonder if they'll ever find his bones, eh, Blum?'

Nat gave a shrill whistle, and in a moment pandemonium seemed to reign. The door was thrown open, and Billy and Douglas rushed in. Billy sprang at Blum, and caught him a straight left-hander fairly between the eyes, which landed him on his back, dragging down Nat with him. Douglas confronted Monsieur Roloff, and presenting his pistol at his chest, cried, 'Surrender yourself, or I fire!'

With the quickness of lightning Roloff seized a chair and hurled it at Douglas, who staggered back. The spy rushed towards the door, but Nat, who had freed himself from the clutches of Blum, leapt before him, and presented his pistol at his head. 'Not so fast, colonel,' he said.

Furiously the German hurled himself at Nat, who fired, but somehow missed.

Meanwhile Billy and Blum were struggling like two mastiffs, rolling over and over on the floor. Roloff placed a whistle to his lips and blew a loud blast, but the response was hardly what he expected.

La Touche, Gower, Norman, and half-a-dozen British soldiers and French gendarmes came tumbling in at the door, and in an instant Roloff and the ruffian Blum were seized.

'Monsieur,' said La Touche with great politeness, 'I regret the necessity, but you are my prisoner.'

'By whose authority do you dare lay hands on me?'

'By that of the prefect of police, monsieur.'

‘You will regret this, La Touche. You know I am a Russian subject. My ambassador will demand an explanation for this outrage.’

La Touche shrugged his shoulders. ‘Monsieur will not blame me; I but obey my orders.’

‘But you are in league with these—these ruffians;’ and Roloff glared at Billy and his friends.

‘I obey orders, monsieur.’

‘But I tell you it is madness. Fetch your prefect here; I will explain.’

‘My orders are explicit. I take you to the prefect, also this—gentleman,’ and La Touche pointed to the surly Blum.

In response to Monsieur Roloff’s whistle, a number of his servants had come rushing towards the summer-house. They probably had weapons concealed upon them, but at sight of the British and French they kept them out of sight. In tones of well-assumed surprise they demanded the reason of what they saw.

‘All will be explained in due course,’ said La Touche politely.—‘Now, monsieur, if you are ready.’

‘But I am ill. I cannot leave the house,’ urged Roloff.

‘Every care will be taken of monsieur,’ said the French officer; ‘he will be comfortably lodged, and a medical man shall wait upon him.’

He led the way across the garden and through the house. His men, with Roloff and Blum firmly secured, followed. In the

street were two police cars; in these the prisoners were placed, and La Touche, Billy, Douglas, Nat, and the escort followed.

‘To the prefect’s,’ said La Touche to the chauffeur, and away they sped.

There had been but little noise. Less than an hour had elapsed since the time they had entered the house next to the Maison Duprez. No alarm had been given, and the inhabitants of Dieppe took no notice of the two cars as they sped towards the police headquarters. No blood had been spilt, and no one was any the worse for the adventure.

Monsieur Roloff did not speak a word, but Nat whistled softly to himself as they glided through the darkened streets.

La Touche took charge of the prisoners, and on arriving at the town prison, Nat’s work was over for the night. Well satisfied with the result, he and his brother-sub., having wished Gower good-night, returned to camp, and after a brief interview with the squadron commander, turned into bed.

At nine o’clock the next morning they all three went to call upon the prefect of police, as arranged with Lieutenant La Touche on the night before.

Arrived there, they met La Touche coming down the steps. They hailed him in friendly tones, and the young Frenchman saluted them punctiliously. Alighting from their car, the three subs. shook him heartily by the hand.

‘None the worse for our last evening’s adventure?’ asked Nat.

‘No, monsieur; I am what you English call “veree feet.”’

‘That’s good,’ said Nat, laughing; ‘but why that serious frown?’

‘I am afraid I have disappointing news for you.’

The gravity of La Touche impressed his hearers.

‘I hope our little plot hasn’t miscarried,’ said Douglas. ‘Has Monsieur Roloff proved that he is really a Russian philanthropist, and put us all in a fix?’

‘Not at all; he has proved that he is Colonel Vogt, a German spy.’

‘Then everything is all right,’ said Nat.

‘On the contrary, monsieur, everything is all wrong.’

‘How is that?’ asked the subs. in one breath.

‘Colonel Vogt has escaped.’

‘Has what?’

‘Escaped—flown!’

Nat uttered an angry exclamation. ‘Have your fellows let him slip through your fingers?’

‘Messieurs, my men are blameless.’

‘For Heaven’s sake, tell us what has happened!’ cried Billy.

‘With pleasure, but not here. Meet me in ten minutes’ time at the “Rose d’Or.”’

The subs. got back into their car, drove to the ‘Rose d’Or,’ and in exactly ten minutes La Touche joined them.

‘Now for the answer to your riddle,’ said Nat.

‘Monsieur, it is very simple. I handed over

Colonel Vogt to the prefect of police last night. The German adopted a highly indignant tone, and was closeted alone with the prefect for half-an-hour. I was dismissed, and went to my quarters. Afterwards I heard that the prefect telephoned to an official of Dieppe and a British officer who was in the town, and who knew Colonel Vogt well—as “Monsieur Roloff,” of course. These two gentlemen were quite convinced that Monsieur Roloff had been wrongfully arrested, that a mistake had been made, in fact, and they released him to go to the Maison Duprez, on his promising to remain there until this morning, when they would call upon him to explain matters. Colonel Vogt departed, but my men remained in his house. This morning one of them arrived at the prefecture and announced that Monsieur Roloff had departed in the night; how, no one knows, except that his car has gone. His study grate was full of charred papers which he had burnt; his safe was empty; some of his servants have disappeared; the others know nothing.’

Nat uttered a very angry exclamation. ‘Do you mean to tell me that your people and ours allowed themselves to be hoodwinked like this?’

‘Monsieur,’ said La Touche simply, ‘they were convinced a mistake had been made.’

‘And so there had; we ought to have shot the man ourselves,’ said Nat bitterly.

‘Information has been telegraphed round,’ said La Touche. ‘He may be recaptured.’

‘Bah! he’s too slippery. And after all our deep-laid plans, too!’

‘Something may be done,’ suggested Billy.

‘Something *will* be done,’ interrupted Nat savagely. ‘Your officer will be promoted, and your official,’ turning to La Touche, ‘will get another bit of coloured ribbon to hang in his button-hole.’

La Touche shrugged his shoulders, and lit a cigarette.

‘What of that man Blum?’ asked Douglas.

‘Ah, I was forgetting him,’ said La Touche. ‘He was found dead in his cell this morning, a small empty phial still clutched in his right hand. He had poisoned himself.’

‘That vindicates us,’ said Nat. ‘Well, boys, there’s nothing more doing here. No need to call on the prefect. I’m for camp! Who’s coming?’

The three shook hands with La Touche, got into their car, and returned to the aerodrome. On the journey not a word was said. On reaching camp they sought out their squadron commander, and reported what had happened. The captain took a deep draw at his cigarette, inhaled the smoke, looked at the three subs., then said, ‘Well, I’m—blessed!’

‘Exactly!’ said Nat; ‘and we expect to beat Germany, the most unscrupulous, cold-blooded, scheming, treacherous’—

‘Exactly!’ said the captain. ‘And now, boys, let’s get to work. We’ve a lot to do to-day.’

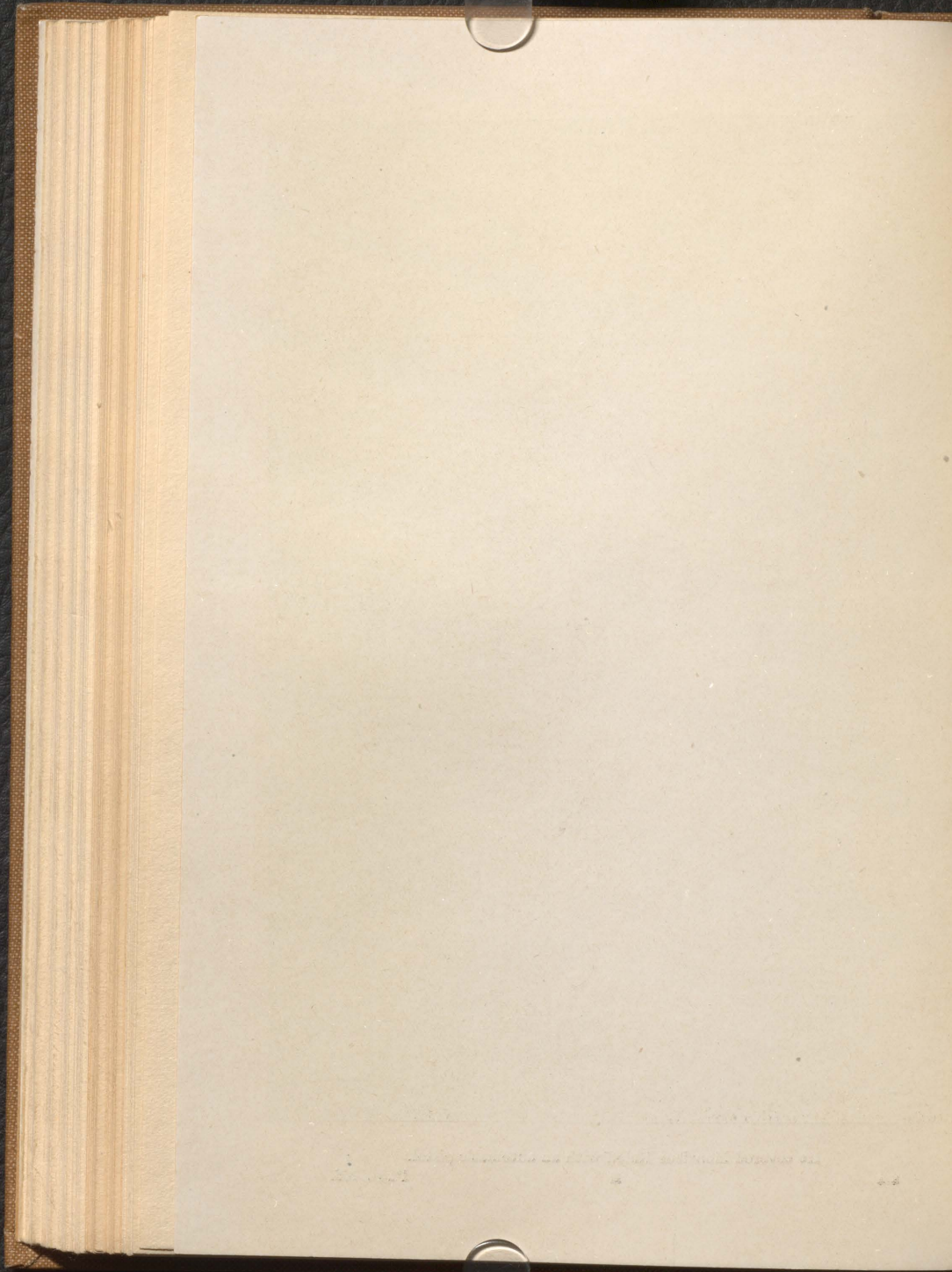


He covered Monsieur Roloff with an automatic pistol.

K.A.

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CHAPTER XIV.

DOING A SHOOT.

A WEEK after the fiasco of Colonel Vogt, Major Corcoran returned to Dieppe. He was in high good-humour; his zeal and activity had been brought to the notice of headquarters, and he had been selected to take a squadron to work with the Canadians. He had returned to Dieppe to hand over permanently to Captain Richards, and this was only the work of a day.

It was anticipated that certain pilots would be selected to go with 'Corky,' and there was a good deal of conjecture as to who would be the 'lucky' ones. All speculation was settled during the afternoon by the major himself, who had up to 'office' all those he intended taking, and after grumbling at them in a general way, and pointing out to each one real or imaginary faults, warned them to be in readiness to move on the next day but one.

Among those so warned were Billy, Douglas, and Nat, much to their delight, and they immediately set about collecting together their traps.

'Funny thing,' said Billy, 'how the major always seems, according to his own making out, to burden himself up with the biggest donkeys in the squadron.'

'Yes,' answered Nat slyly; 'and if each of us

were asked separately, I'll bet in his heart he thinks, not counting himself, that those chosen are just the pick of the bunch.'

'Which shows that the major believes more in exhortative admonition than adulatory exhortation,' said Douglas.

'Good heavens, Douglas!' cried Billy, 'give me brandy ere thy flow of unintelligible words stuns me.'

'Sure, young man,' said Nat. 'It ain't playing the game fairly to pitch the ball before the player's ready. Next time you're going to fire a lexicon at us, give us due warning to take cover.'

So it came about that on the third day after Major Corcoran's return, the subs. found themselves at Canadian headquarters, in sound of the great guns roaring their everlasting chorus in front of them; in the midst of all the turmoil that exists at the back of the front—the railway lines, the lorries, the transport animals, the wounded men, the resting men, the mountains of material, from bootlaces to ten-inch shells, the rutted roads, and, most eloquent of all, the ruin and desolation created by the Hun.

To Douglas these things had not the charm of novelty; he had known them all before; but still he was glad to be amongst them once more. The job had to be done, and every man working whole-heartedly would hasten the end. Billy and Nat were openly enthusiastic. They were like hounds on the leash, straining and tugging, eager to be up and

away to try their strength against the Boche over that country a few miles in front of them.

It was on the second morning after their arrival that Douglas came whistling along towards Billy, who was busy with the adjustment of a Lewis gun.

'Billy, my boy, we're going to have a look at the Boche lines this morning,' he said. 'We're going to "do a shoot."'

Now Billy knew that 'doing a shoot' was the shop term for A.O., and A.O. meant artillery observing, usually abbreviated into art.-obs. So he turned to his friend and said, 'Right-o, Dug!' for art.-obs. is not a bad job.

Together they went off to the battery, and made the acquaintance of Lieutenant Emmett, of the Canadian artillery.

'Are you the good angels who are going to spot for us to-day?' asked the gunner.

'We have that pleasure,' answered Billy.

'Put it there, then,' said the Canadian, a lad no older than Douglas, and he held out a hand the grip of which made one wince.

Billy and Douglas at once took to Emmett, with his clean, well-turned limbs, his deep chest, bronzed complexion, and steadfast gray eyes. To look on Dick Emmett was to know you were looking on a man, one who would stand by you to the death in a tight corner, a man who would be a staunch friend, or a dangerous enemy.

'We've been a bit handicapped over our spotters lately,' he said. 'We've been very

short of machines in this sector, and though the fellows have done their best, they haven't had a chance. And old Fritz is getting a bit too pressing in his attentions. He's got a big gun hidden away somewhere over there, and it's causing us a lot of damage. I've ranged up and down in the hopes of getting him, but every day he gives us his "hymn of hate," and I mean to stop his game, even if I have to crawl through the Boche lines and do him in with a bomb.'

'Ha!' said Douglas; 'this is interesting. In which direction does this big gun lie?'

'Come with me,' said Emmett; and the three went off to the observation post behind the battery.

All had powerful glasses, and Emmett explained the country.

'You see that small wood on the hill-side about two miles away?' he said.

'Yes.'

'Then away on your right front that ruined village?'

'Yes.'

'Well, between the wood and the village the road drops, and exactly what's behind there I do not know; but our artillery friend has his gun somewhere behind the ridge, and he's got the range of all the surrounding country to a yard.'

'H'm!'

'He's a blot upon the landscape, and must be removed,' said Emmett.

'Just so.'

‘Of course, our objective this morning is that ruined village. We’ve got reason to believe the Boche has sneaked troops up there during the night, and we think it only right to let him know that we are aware he is there!’

‘Quite so.’

‘And that’s the official morning’s work?’

‘Yes.’

‘But when I saw your faces I recognised at once I had enthusiasts to deal with. I can tell a flying-man—a *real* flying-man, I mean—with one look. And so, if you can just keep one eye open for my gunner as well as on Fritz’s funk-hole, Dick Emmett’s going to be much obliged to you.’

Billy and Douglas laughed. ‘We will see what can be done,’ they said, and after arranging signals and so on, went off to get their ‘bus.’

There were two other aeroplanes going up, and before they ascended the three pilots went over to the commander of the Canadian battery to get final instructions. On the way back again they made for Emmett’s guns.

‘I say,’ said Billy, ‘my friend and I have just been talking over the matter of that gun, and we’re going to try to locate it.’

‘That’s just gorgeous,’ replied Emmett. ‘That Boche beast has annoyed me for weeks; I must draw level with him, or I shall burst with wrath.’

‘Keep calm a little longer. One can see a great deal from an aeroplane.’

‘But how shall I know if you spot him?’

‘If you see us loop the loop, you will know we are just over your man,’ said Billy.

Emmett looked with wide-open eyes at the two airmen. ‘My!’ he said; ‘you’re pretty cool. Looping at all is a pretty ticklish job, I should think; but right over the Boche lines! No, my boys, not on your lives! I’d sooner never bag that Boche than you should run such a risk.’

‘That’s all right. Keep your eyes on our machine; it’s a Bristol Fighter.’

Ten minutes later Billy and Douglas were seated in their machine, a very fast, compactly built ‘bus,’ armed with a machine-gun which fired through a deflector propeller and was worked by the pilot, and one which fired right, left, or rear, worked by the observer. It was a fine sight which opened out as they began to climb. Great heaps of stones, clusters of tents, miles of railway along which trains puffed, then the batteries and the line of British trenches.

Higher, higher yet, over the shell-pitted ‘No Man’s Land,’ then the irregular line of German trenches, and away beyond that the same sort of activity that reigned behind the British lines.

Puffs of white smoke curled lazily upwards from the batteries, and bursts of black smoke showed where the shells exploded.

Picking up his bearings, Douglas bore away for his objective, and presently had the wood well below him. A smoke-ball intimated to the battery that he was ready; then he circled

round slowly, while Billy, as observer, and therefore *pro tem.* master of the machine, fixed his glasses to his eyes, and began his work.

A puff of smoke away back at the battery was followed by a 'plonk' somewhere below; then a cloud of black earth a hundred or so yards to the left of the ruined village showed where the shell had fallen. The result was signalled, and the second shell fell about a hundred yards to the right; a bracket was established, and the shells flew first over the village, and then plump, plump, among the ruins.

It was exciting work, and Billy waxed quite enthusiastic. But they were not to be left quite in peace; anti-aircraft guns paid unpleasant attention to the young aviators, and Douglas had to keep constantly swerving and ducking and zigzagging to escape the flying shrapnel.

Presently a message came up to observe on the wood to the right, and that was well plastered, the Boche replying heavily from his batteries.

A couple of hours had passed when both Douglas and Billy became aware that they were being fired at by a big-calibre gun. They heard nothing, but the wind caused by the rush of a great shell every now and then swept by and made the machine swerve.

'Our friend!' shouted Billy.

'Yes. I'm going down to look for him,' answered Douglas grimly, and getting behind

the ridge Emmett had pointed out, he made a daring circular dive to within five hundred yards of the earth. As he was doing so he saw a flash, apparently from the centre of a harmless-looking hay-rick, and a deafening report rang out.

Instantly Douglas checked his descent, brought his machine to a level, and dashed away over the Boche rear, rising as he went, and being heavily fired at from a score of guns.

Rising three thousand or more feet, he returned to the ridge. 'Locate that hay-rick!' he shouted to Billy.

'Right-o!' and Billy, with his powerful glasses glued to his eyes, guided Douglas until he declared they were right above it.

Douglas deliberately looped the loop three times, then turned to make for his own lines. They were not to be allowed to get off with impunity, however. A Fokker and two scouts, enraged at the insolence of the Britisher, came rushing out to punish him. Douglas gave Billy a warning shout, and the latter swung round his gun. The Germans opened fire long before they got into range, all the while trying to get over the British machine. But Douglas kept well on a level; then, suddenly rushing in, emptied a drum at the Fokker, turned, and Billy let fly at one of the scouts. His stream of bullets was well aimed; they cut away the struts of one of the scout's planes, which came toppling down on the pilot; the machine slipped over on its side,

then turned nose downward, and crashed to earth.

Douglas dashed at the Fokker, and a hot fusillade was exchanged, Billy firing at the second scout. Suddenly the latter was seen to be on fire, and it descended at once, on which the Fokker turned tail and fled. Douglas, whose blood was up, would have liked to pursue him, but it was against orders, and he returned to the British lines, where he made a fine descent.

‘Not a bad morning’s work, Billy,’ he said. ‘Let’s go over to the battery, and see what’s going on there.’

They did so, and found Emmett beaming with delight.

‘I say, you fellows did finely,’ he said. ‘I’ll bet we gave old Fritz a gruelling, and—I’ve spotted the position of our Boche gunner exactly. To-morrow we’ll have a surprise for him, or my name’s not Dick Emmett.’

‘I hope it will come off,’ said Billy.

‘Bet your life! But, I say, the way you did that looping stunt was just too great for words.’

CHAPTER XV.

OLIVER EXPOUNDS AN IDEA.

IT appeared that the Boche gunner about whom Dick Emmett held such very decided opinions was in the habit of sending over four or five shells each morning about seven o'clock. Many a time had Emmett, glass to his eyes, waited for those shells, scanning the German line in order to discover the whereabouts of the gun, but he had never succeeded. It was, therefore, in jubilant mood that, having laid every gun in his battery with his own hand, he waited contentedly for Fritz to begin.

With true German punctuality, a few minutes after seven the scream of a big shell was heard, and it burst with a roar about a hundred yards off.

Hardly had the noise of the explosion died away than four Canadian guns replied with a crash, and for ten minutes they were fired as rapidly as they could be loaded. A second shell had come shrieking across from the German lines, but after that all was silent. It was about an hour later that Billy and Douglas came along to inquire how things were going.

Emmett explained with glee. 'I'd worked out the range to a yard,' he said, 'and I laid my guns so as to cover the ground for twenty yards around. The Boche only fired twice;

he was either pipped or got the wind up. I'd give something to be able to see behind that ridge.'

'We'll soon see what's happened,' replied Billy, 'so possess your soul in patience until we return.'

That morning the boys went up spotting in single-seater Sopwiths, each armed with a Lewis gun. They circled up, and soon got over the German lines, where they were heavily fired at. A big British battleplane came humming along towards them, put a bomb or two down, and then engaged and drove off an Aviatik.

Billy and Douglas made for the scene of their previous day's encounter. Below them they saw smoke and what looked like a considerable crowd. Acting on a preconcerted signal, they spiralled down about a couple of hundred yards apart. As they descended they could see that the smoke was proceeding from the rick, which had been fired. All around it were a number of men, and these were engaged about a gun of heavy calibre which a direct hit had completely overturned. It had been very cleverly camouflaged in the hay-rick, and the Boche no doubt attributed its destruction to a mere lucky shot.

So busy were the Germans that at first they did not notice the two aeroplanes descending with the greatest audacity towards them, and when some one shouted out a warning they ran to take shelter from the expected bombs. But no bombs fell; instead the aeroplanes

continued to descend, the great red, white, and blue rings on their underplanes becoming plainer and plainer.

The Boche thought the flying-men must be in trouble, and were descending to give themselves up. Many seized rifles, for it had happened before that when Allied airmen had been forced to descend, they had burnt their machines, and then, revolver in hand, had preferred to sell their lives dearly rather than trust themselves to the tender treatment administered in German prisons. So the Boche seized his weapons, and waited until the foremost aeroplane was no more than a hundred yards above him. Billy circled once, taking in all the details; then, depressing his gun, he let the enemy have a drum. Rap-rap-rap, and the bullets cut into the crowd below, scattering death right and left. The Boche, panic-stricken for a moment, fled. Then as Billy flew away Douglas came circling, and the rap-rap-rap of his machine-gun took up the concert.

Realising at last what the move of those dare-devil aviators really was, the enemy opened fire on them from a score of rifles, and bullets whistled and cut through the planes. But unless the petrol-tank is pierced or the pilot hit, an aeroplane can stand a lot of firing at, and once more Billy and Douglas circled round, and each gave their enemies another drum from their Lewis guns. Then, when the situation was getting what Douglas afterwards described as 'decidedly interesting,' and

a couple of 'Archies' had taken up the duel, Billy and Douglas shot away, and climbing rapidly, regained their own lines.

After making a very pretty descent, they charmed Emmett with the news that his troublesome gunner would annoy him no more—at least, not with the same gun.

After that Billy and Douglas went on with their morning's work, which was very similar to that of the day before.

And so several days passed, each having its full meed of work. Nat had been on stunts of his own, except on one occasion, when, on his going on a photo-taking expedition, Billy and Douglas accompanied him as escort in a big fighting-plane.

The three of them were sitting one day in their billet after a hard and exciting time, when a mechanic came in with a letter, which he handed to Billy, saying a cyclist had just brought it.

'Hallo!' said Billy; 'what's this? Official, eh? Why, yes, it's Oliver's fist, as I live! Excuse me, you chaps;' and tearing open the envelope, he took out a letter, which ran as follows:

'D.H.Q.

'DEAR BILLY,—I have only just found out the particular part of the line you are in, and, as luck would have it, we are quite close together. I am dying to see you, and to learn how all at home were looking when you left them. Of course, they always say in their letters they are all right, but you can tell

me the latest news at first hand. And, dear old Billy, I am just longing to see you, and to know what you are doing, how you like your job, and so on.

‘The first time you have an off-day, come along over. Any one will tell you where to find me. I have heard some wonderful tales of you and your pilot sinking a submarine, but nothing official has ever been reported. I shall want to know all about it when I see you.

‘I have a little scheme in my head I want to ask you about, too, so hurry up. If you can manage to get a night’s leave, do so. I can put you up. Much love.—Your affect. cousin,

OLIVER HASTINGS.’

‘It’s from Oliver, Douglas,’ cried Billy delightedly. ‘He wants us to go over and hunt him up.’

The ‘us’ was certainly rather a stretch of the imagination, but Billy had no idea of going anywhere without his chum, and read an invitation for two into his cousin’s note.

‘I should like to see him,’ said Douglas.

‘You’d be delighted with him,’ declared Billy, to whom his cousin was a hero of heroes. ‘He’s the bravest, coolest, best-hearted, and most modest chap in France.’

‘Say, he’s just the boy I should like to know, then,’ said Nat with a whimsical look on his face. ‘I’m out to find the young hero of this world-war, and your cousin ought to be in the running for the cup.’

‘You may laugh, Nat; but wait until you’ve met my cousin. You’ll be the first to admit that he deserves all I’ve said of him.’

‘And if I agree with what you have said, I’m sure going to tell you so.’

Two days later Billy and Douglas were free from all duty for twenty-four hours, and borrowing a car belonging to one of their brother-officers, they set out in tip-top spirits for Divisional Headquarters.

Arrived there, they had no difficulty in finding Captain Hastings’s quarters, and as the car drew up outside, Oliver himself came striding out to greet his visitors. ‘This is a treat, Billy,’ he cried.

‘My word! you’re looking quite a man, and in tip-top form, too;’ and Oliver Hastings, looking a little older, a little broader, and with an air about him that betokened more of the experienced man than when we last saw him, gripped his cousin’s hand with great fervour.

‘This is my chum, Douglas M’Leod,’ said Billy; and Oliver having shaken hands with him, they all three entered the house, where for an hour their tongues were very busy.

Then followed an excellent dinner, after which one or two friends dropped in, and the house in which Oliver resided possessing a piano, a musical evening was spent, much to the satisfaction of Douglas.

Early hours is the rule in camp, and the visitors having toddled off to their various quarters, Billy, Douglas, and Oliver drew

their chairs round the stove, and, lighting their pipes, settled down to a cheery chat.

‘I say, Oliver, you chaps on the staff know how to take care of yourselves,’ said Billy, looking round admiringly at the comfortable room.

‘We have our compensations,’ said Oliver with a smile; ‘but we have our worries, too, as all of us have just now.’

‘Well, they won’t be on the score of quarters or grub,’ said Billy.

‘No; those are all right. But it’s really lucky you two fellows dropping in to-day, for I can consult you on an idea which I’ve had for some time. Perhaps you can help me.’

‘To do what?’

‘To pay a visit to a place ten miles behind the German lines.’

‘That’s easy enough,’ said Douglas.

‘But I want to land there.’

‘That’s also quite easy.’

‘But I want to come back as well.’

‘Ah, “there’s the rub!” as Shakespeare says. Either Billy or I will engage to land you behind the Boche lines; but coming back is another matter.—Eh, Billy?’

‘Rather so!’

‘You mean, of course, going over by aeroplane?’ said Oliver.

‘Yes.’

‘Ah! I have an idea on which I will ask your opinion later; but first I will tell you my little story, and what I should like to do.’

‘Fire away!’ said Billy, and Oliver began.

‘After what you told me to-day about Colonel Vogt, you won’t be surprised to hear from me that spies are the very curse of this campaign. They are everywhere, and some of our best-laid plans go astray because of them. They get hold of news in the most wonderful and alarming ways. They are here posing as British officers, as Belgians, as Frenchmen; in fact, you can trust nobody. We had a very glaring case the other day. Fortunately we nabbed the gentleman at last, but he had managed to pass a good deal of information over the lines before he was caught.’

‘We always were so jolly unsuspecting,’ said Billy.

‘And we pay for it. However, the other day, among some prisoners we captured was a man who had lived in London for a good many years. He happened to be in Germany on the outbreak of war, and was promptly put into the army. I dare say he openly expressed views which did not please his officers and non-coms., and he was pretty badly used. He was a shrewd fellow, however, and managed to pick up a good bit of information. Then one day he saw a chance, and promptly walked into our lines and gave himself up.

‘Having no sympathy with Pan-German views, and possibly wishing to curry favour with us, he gave us a lot of useful information.’

‘Was it true, do you think,’ asked cautious ‘Douglas, ‘or was he purposely sent over to sell us a pup?’

‘Just what we suspected at first, so we made inquiries at home, and found that he really was who and what he said he was. Some of the things about the enemy which he told us we have also proved, and it is probable that the man is really anxious to get a bit of his own back on his countrymen.’

‘H’m! a nice sort of fellow; a renegade,’ sniffed Billy.

‘Well, if you put it that way, he is,’ agreed Oliver. ‘But he says he renounced Germany when he left it, many years ago, and considers himself an Englishman.’

‘And what does all this lead to?’ asked Billy.

‘Just this. We have reason to expect that the enemy is meditating a surprise attack either upon us or upon the French. We have organised several little trench-raids with the sole view of capturing prisoners in the hope of getting information, but so far we have drawn a blank. The men we have captured either know nothing or will not speak. Now, we are very anxious indeed to get news, and from our renegade friend we have learnt that at a certain château, about ten miles behind the front that you come from, certain officers of the high command are in the habit of meeting, and that very important plans are laid there. Our aviators have satisfied themselves that there is such a

château as the man describes, situated as he says, and our prisoner was very exact in his details, as he several times mounted sentry there. Indeed, it was while there that, by keeping his eyes and ears open, he learnt a good bit of what he told us.'

'From which you deduce?' asked Billy.

'The fact that I mean to visit that château in the hopes of picking up a few crumbs of intelligence. In other words, I intend to try to defeat the Boche at his own game.'

Billy and Douglas stared in open-mouthed astonishment at Oliver.

'But, man,' said Billy, 'it's impossible! How do you mean to get there? To fly?'

'Exactly; and that's why I wanted to see you.'

'But an aeroplane would be spotted, and you'd be shot to pieces!'

'I didn't say anything about an aeroplane.'

'Expound your riddle.'

'First promise me absolute secrecy.'

The two subs. promised.

'Very well, then, this is my idea. We have here a small airship, a sort of land "Blimp," quite a harmless kind of thing, but useful for mild reconnaissances.'

'I know the sort of thing,' said Douglas. 'Quite useless for such a stunt.'

'Wait. My idea is to get across the Boche lines in that, *escorted by two fighting-planes which would lead the enemy on a wrong scent.*'

'And then?'

'To descend—in disguise, of course—find

the château, spy out the land, and see what can be learnt.'

Billy wiped his brow. 'It's suicide,' he said.

'Not at all! It's a daring idea, but such ideas succeed on account of their very daring. I think Vivian Drummond and I undertook some more risky jobs in the early days of the campaign.'

'What you two could do, I should think we ought to be able to manage,' said Douglas, shutting his square jaws with a snap.

'I'm sure of it, and I want your help.'

'But how do you propose to land in the Boche lines?'

'There is a thick wood close to the château. I mean to choose my night, make for that wood, anchor the airship, and descend by means of a basket lowered by a winch. My escape, if I manage it, will be by the same means.'

'By Jove!' said Billy, 'it would be a glorious stunt; but, candidly, I'm afraid.'

'If I go, though, you'll be willing to come with me?'

Billy looked at Douglas. 'I'm on,' said the latter.

'And I, too,' agreed Billy, and the three shook hands. 'There's one thing, though, I should suggest. There's an American we're chummy with in our flight—that same Brown-rigge I've spoken of. He's cram-full of ideas; it wouldn't be a bad thing to get him in on a job like this.'

‘Ha! I like Americans. They’re good men in a tight corner. They come from a modern country, and have modern ideas. But do not mention a word to him until I’ve seen him. I like to judge men for myself.’

‘Very well.’

‘To-morrow we’ll have a look at the Blimp, and you shall give me your advice on the scheme.’

‘Right-o!’

‘And now it’s getting late; we’d better turn in. After a night’s sleep we shall be able to judge better of the pros and cons of our suggested adventure.’

CHAPTER XVI.

OVER THE ENEMY LINES.

THE next morning Billy, his cousin, and Douglas inspected the airship in which it was proposed to cross the Boche lines. It was a pretty little thing with a rigid aluminium body, beneath which was a car capable of holding six men, or even seven. It was of the pusher type, being driven by a propeller fixed at the end of the car. The three made a trial-trip in it, and Douglas and Billy expressed themselves as highly pleased with the way in which the machine answered its elevators and rudders. It would ascend or descend easily, but was not intended to rest upon the ground.

After the trial-trip the three had an interview with the divisional commander, and he said some very pleasant things about Oliver.

‘I shall come over to your base with you fellows,’ said the latter. ‘I want to see your American friend.’

Accordingly they all motored back together, and waited until Nat, who had been out on a reconnaissance flight, came in.

‘Hallo, boys!’ he cried in his hearty way; ‘fed up with the brass hats already?’

‘By no means,’ replied Billy; ‘and see, we’ve brought one back with us. He’s anxious to know you.’

‘The honour’s mine,’ said Nat, noticing the

row of ribbons on Oliver's breast. 'I see we have here the real thing.'

'You've heard me speak of my cousin, Captain Hastings, V.C.'

'By Jupiter! do I really see a V.C.? I am pleased to meet you, sir.'

The ceremony of introduction having been performed, all walked off together.

'I wonder *we* don't start some sort of Victoria Cross business,' said Nat. 'It's a great idea. A real decoration that dollar kings or brass-band soldiers can't lay hands on. If Teddy Roosevelt had got a finger in the pie, I'll bet he'd have started a stars and stripes or double eagle cross. Something that the boys would have gone for bald-headed.'

'While you're serving with us the cross is open to you,' said Oliver.

'Not on your life. I'm not on any honour-hunting stunts; the game's too dangerous. If I come out of this chemozzle with a whole skin and all my limbs, I'm sure satisfied.'

All laughed at Nat's words, for Billy and Douglas at least knew what a dare-devil he really was.

They dined comfortably, Oliver and Nat doing most of the talking. When the meal was over and pipes were produced, Oliver whispered to Billy, 'I like your American friend; he's got brains. I'm going to take him into our confidence, and ask his advice.'

'You won't go far wrong, I think.'

Oliver then repeated to Nat what he had told the others.

The American listened very attentively, his face glowing with animation. 'I say, cap,' he exclaimed, 'this is real good of you to let me in on this business. You pay me a compliment, and, by gosh! I'm in it with both feet.'

'What about your—er—caution?' laughed Oliver. 'You know you're not on any honour-hunting stunts.'

'Caution my grandmother! I'm a sport first, last, and all the time. I'm on this like a bee on a honeysuckle, and here's my hand on it.'

'Well, I shall be jolly glad of your help;' and they fell to talking of details.

With his characteristic thoroughness, Nat asked a variety of questions, and obtained permission to go back with Douglas to have a look at the airship. He carefully weighed all the pros and cons, and for two days afterwards talked of little else to his two chums. He seemed to have taken charge of the whole idea, and thought of every possible contingency. 'Norman's the man we must take with us,' he said one evening. 'He's the man to gamble on in a tight corner.'

'But he won't leave the ground. He's said so a dozen times.'

'Bah! I'll talk him over. I know my man;' and next morning Nat began on the sergeant. Without giving him any information that would betray their intention, he explained what he wanted him to do, and by some means or other enlisted the worthy sergeant's

help. He had also made some improvements in the airship's engines, so that they worked almost noiselessly, and at last all was ready for the attempt.

Of course, Major Corcoran had to be taken into their confidence; and then, a suitable night having arrived, it was decided to put the matter to the test.

All three of the subs. had flown over the field of operations several times, and were well acquainted with the château, the wood behind it, and the country around.

All being ready, Oliver, Billy, Douglas, Nat, Norman, and a mechanic clambered into the gondola of the airship. They were all provided with German caps and greatcoats, but underneath wore their British uniforms. There was a slight moon, only sufficient to steer by, but the night was hazy—just the weather needed.

At a given signal two battleplanes went up, and ascending to ten thousand feet, made straight over the German lines. The airship followed at a very much lower altitude and some distance behind, and headed straight for the objective. They had not gone far over the German lines before search-lights began to flash and a heavy anti-aircraft fire was opened. The noise of the battleplanes could be distinctly heard, and the enemy, thinking it was a raid starting to bomb positions in rear of the German lines, concentrated all their attention on the big machines. They dodged about to avoid the search-lights, which pursued them

relentlessly, and in the noise the little airship, whose silvery body was almost invisible in the faint moonlight, entirely escaped observation.

The big planes led the Germans away from the real objective, and Billy, peering over the side, saw that at present they had not been noticed.

They were further favoured by some fleecy clouds, which entirely effaced the moon's rays, and to the delight of all on the airship they presently saw beneath them the dark blur of the wood.

'By Jove! we are in luck's way,' said Oliver. 'It's time we began to think about descending.'

This they did, manœuvring so as to keep on one side of the wood.

'What about dropping a grapnel?' asked Nat.

'Just what I was thinking,' said Billy. 'But if there are any troops in the wood we shall give ourselves away.'

'Nevertheless, the risk will have to be run;' and a grapnel was presently lowered, which, clutching on to the trunk of a tree, effectually anchored them. The engine had been almost stopped for some time, and there had been little way on the airship, which, being held by the grapnel, swayed gently to and fro, pretty well invisible above the tree-tops.

'Now for the real business,' said Nat, dropping the basket over the side of the gondola. 'I propose making the descent and seeing how the land lies.'

'Pardon me,' exclaimed Oliver; 'as this is my idea, the post of honour belongs to me. I'll go down first.'

There was some demur to this, but Oliver was adamant. As the basket would hold four, at last he agreed to take Billy with him.

The fine steel wire was carefully adjusted over the pulley, and everything was ready for lowering. It was a ticklish job getting from the gondola into the basket, but, Nat superintending the operations, it was accomplished without accident.

Another idea of Nat's had been a telephone, so that those in the basket could keep in touch with their friends in the airship. A mouth-piece was hung round Oliver's neck, and a long length of flexible cord unwound itself as the basket descended. Everything being in readiness, the signal was given, the winch began slowly to revolve, and very gently the basket was lowered. Down, down they went until they were only just over the tops of the trees. Oliver then telephoned up to the airship to stop lowering, otherwise they would have been lodged in the branches. A few moments' consideration showed them that the airship must move slightly to its right, so as to allow the basket to fall clear of the trees, and a message over the telephone caused this to be done. The basket set up a rather dangerous pendulum-like swing, but Oliver phoned up to those in the airship to lower quickly, and in a minute the basket touched ground.

Oliver and Billy stepped quickly out, each, pistol in hand, listening for any sound. All was silent, however, and breathing a sigh of relief, they telephoned for the basket to be drawn up and for the others to descend.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE WOODS.

IN five minutes' time four resolute men stood in the wood, ready to carry out their dangerous mission. A short whispered conversation decided their next move.

As previously arranged, Sergeant Norman was to be left behind beside the basket. He was armed with two automatic pistols. His instructions were to listen for any sound; if an enemy approached, and he was in any danger of capture, he was to ascend to the airship, but to wait about in order to lower the basket for the others. If anything happened to them, he was to get back to the airship and make for the British lines. If all went well, he was to wait until the officers returned. If they wanted to attract his attention, three notes on a whistle, one long and two short, were to be the signal. If they experienced any difficulty in locating him, he was to signal with a powerful electric torch with which he was provided.

The sergeant did not altogether relish the part assigned to him. 'This here being in reserve ain't exactly my style,' he grumbled. 'The right of the line! The first to advance! The van of the battle! That's the way of the R.H.A.'

'Yours is the post of honour, sergeant,' said Oliver tactfully. 'Remember, the success

of this undertaking depends absolutely on you. No matter how much luck we have, if you aren't here to secure our retreat, we're done.'

'That may be, sir; but the artillery ought to serve in front.'

'As artillery you should. But remember you are now in command of the rear-guard, which in a retreat is the post of honour. The motto of your regiment is "*Ubique*" ("Everywhere"), and your duty now is here. Besides, your ignorance of German may lead you into difficulties.'

'Very well, sir; I'll do my best.'

'Then we go with a light heart;' and the four officers stole gently away.

They knew the general direction of the château, and consulting his compass, Oliver led the way. The wood was very dense, and the four proceeded with great care.

They had gone about half a mile, advancing in single file and with the caution of Red Indians, when the crunching of a heavy step fell upon their ears. Instantly they all pulled up, and, hiding behind the trunk of a tree, listened. It became evident that those approaching were at least two in number, and as they drew nearer they were heard talking.

'You say, Eckhardt, that you heard a curious, whirring sound?'

'I did, Herr Captain. It sounded something like an aeroplane, but much softer.'

'And it was here, over the woods, you say?'

'It seemed to me so, Herr Captain.'

'It was those aeroplanes, I expect. Those cursed British are always over our lines.'

'It may have been; but it did not sound quite like an aeroplane.'

'Well, you fool, why didn't you make sure? I can't stop here any longer talking to you. I shall be late, and General Pappenheim is not one to be kept waiting. Go on, and keep your eyes and ears open. Report to me at the château if you find anything.'

'Yes, Herr Captain.'

'We must capture these two,' whispered Oliver. 'No shooting! Two take the soldier, the other two the captain.' As he spoke he scuffled his foot, and instantly the two Germans stood still.

'Hark! what was that?' cried the officer.

'I heard nothing, Herr Captain.'

'Because you're a deaf fool. Follow me!' and the four behind the tree heard the rasp of a sword being drawn.

The footsteps approached the trunk behind which Oliver and his companions were hiding. The Germans came right up to the tree, and then halted.

'The sounds must have come from the other direction,' said the captain, and they turned to walk away.

'Now!' whispered Oliver, and four figures glided from behind the tree.

Two forms could be seen dimly in front of them. With a rush the four flung themselves upon them. Oliver and Billy tackled the officer, Nat and Douglas the sergeant. Billy

saw the steely glint of the naked sword, and seized the hand that gripped it; Oliver threw his left arm round the captain's neck, and forcing back his head, choked the exclamation of surprise or fear that rose to his lips. Wrenching the sword from his grasp, Billy dropped it on the ground, and then clapped his hand over the captain's mouth.

But the German was a big and powerful man, and struggled violently. It was as much as both Oliver and Billy could do to hold him. Billy took his hand from the man's mouth and tried to seize him by the throat.

'Here, Eckhardt,' shouted the captain, 'stab these fellows. I am attacked.'

Billy got a hold of his throat, and choked any further utterance. Oliver wrenched back his arms; then, remembering a jiu-jitsu trick, gave him a kick behind the knee and brought him to the ground, when he promptly knelt upon his back.

'Put your pistol to his head, Billy,' he said; and in another moment the Herr Captain felt a cold steel ring pressed to his temple.

'Utter a sound,' said Oliver in German, 'and it will be your last.'

The captain was silent.

'Unbuckle his belt,' said Oliver to Billy, 'and strap his wrists with it while I hold them.'

In two minutes the captain was helpless.

'Now, keep him quiet with your pistol while I see how the others are doing.'

Nat and Douglas had their man equally

silent and docile, and Oliver laughed softly. 'Now we'll have a little talk,' he said. 'What is your officer's name, Eckhardt?'

'Captain von Romberg,' answered the man.

'And where was he going?'

'To the château.'

'The Château de Montpellier?'

'Yes.'

'Right. Keep him safe,' said Oliver, and he returned to the captive German officer.

'Good-evening, Captain von Romberg,' he said politely. 'I am sorry to have been obliged to use you rather roughly, but it is the fortune of war.'

'Who are you, and where did you come from?'

'That I regret I cannot tell you. I want you, rather, to answer my questions. What business was taking you to the Château de Montpellier?'

'I refuse to answer.'

'Reflect a moment. You are alone, entirely in our power. I do not want to be harsh, but—I must have an answer.'

'Do your worst! I defy you.'

'Allow me to say that is foolish, Herr Captain. You can do yourself no good by being obstinate, and you may do yourself harm. Now, what is going on at the château to-night?'

'I will not say.'

'Then I must ask General Pappenheim,' said Oliver.

'Who are you?' again asked the German.

‘Are you some cursed Saxon or Bavarian traitor? But no! I heard you speaking in English. There is treachery somewhere.’

‘Ah, you would be surprised, perhaps, to hear that the wood is full of English troops, and that the château is surrounded.’

‘*Du lieber Himmel!*’ cried Captain von Romberg. ‘You lie. It cannot be;’ and he attempted to struggle to his feet.

The cold ring of Billy’s pistol pressed against his forehead brought him back to his own predicament.

‘Keep calm,’ said Oliver.

‘Shoot me, you devils!’ shouted the captain; then, raising his voice, he cried, ‘Help! Treachery! Help!’

In an instant Oliver threw himself upon the German, choked his further utterance, and cried to Billy. ‘We must bind and gag him. We shall get nothing from this stiff-necked Prussian;’ and with his own handkerchief they gagged him, fastening his legs with his sash.

‘Now we must search his pockets,’ said Oliver; and with a dexterity worthy of London pickpockets, they took all the papers from the prisoner’s pockets.

‘We’ll just examine these, and then have a chat with our friend Eckhardt,’ said Oliver.

By the light of an electric torch the papers taken from Von Romberg were examined. There were letters from his home in Prussia, photographs, cuttings from papers, and so on. These were all glanced at, then given to Billy to replace in the German’s pocket. The only

two papers of any value were a regimental order dated that day and an official letter bidding him attend at the Staff-Direction Office that evening at 10 P.M.

‘This is our ticket, Billy,’ said Oliver. ‘Staff-Direction Office and the Château de Montpellier are one and the same, I take it. We must push on, or we shall be late.’

They went over to Nat, who had Eckhardt in charge. The soldier was very much more docile than his officer; in fact, by the light of Oliver’s torch he looked in a very decided fright.

Oliver immediately questioned him, and elicited the information that he had been passing through the wood when he met Captain von Romberg, who was a staff-officer.

‘And what were you talking to him about when you passed near us?’ asked Oliver.

The man admitted that he had been telling his officer about certain strange noises he had heard, and being further questioned, replied in so much the same words that he had used to his superior that Oliver and the rest were inclined to believe him.

‘You know, of course, that you are entirely in our hands?’ asked Oliver.

‘Yes.’

‘And that we could shoot you, and no one would be the wiser?’

‘Ye-es.’

‘Do you want to be shot?’

‘*Lieber Gott!* No, sir. I have a wife and four children.’

'Then, if you want to see them again, you will do as I order you.'

'Yes, sir; yes.'

'Lead us by the nearest way to the Château de Montpellier.'

'Yes.'

'And if there is any side or back entrance, show it to us.'

'Yes, sir.'

'There is a password, of course.'

'Yes; it is "Sedan."'

'Is there not a private word for the château?'

'I believe there is; but I do not know it.'

'Can you get it?'

'No, sir. If I asked I should be arrested; and if I were even suspected I should be shot. I cannot take you close to the château, or I shall be discovered.'

'Nevertheless, my friend, you'll have to,' said Oliver coolly.

'It means death.'

'And it also means death to refuse to do as we tell you. Now choose, to be shot now, or do as you are bidden, when we will take you prisoner, and you will be sent to England and be carefully fed up and pampered until the end of the war.'

'England!' gasped Eckhardt. 'I do not want to go to England.'

Nat had been listening impatiently to the foregoing conversation, and he apparently thought it was time to join in. He drew his pistol coolly and pressed it against his prisoner's

ribs. 'Now, look here, Fritz,' he said. 'We're losing time jawing to you. Do as you're told, or—bang!—your time's up, and you'll be cold meat.'

The studied callousness of these words struck home to the German. He looked at Nat's clear-cut features and shining gray eyes. He recognised his master, and was beaten. A cold sweat stood out on his face.

'But'—— he began.

'Yes or no? I'll count three, then fire. One—two'——

'Wait! I will do what you want.'

'That's the talk!—Now, on to the château, isn't it, cap.?' to Oliver.

'Yes; though I wish we could get the password.'

'This Romberg person knows it; doesn't he?'

'He must.'

'Then I'll darned soon get it out of him. I'll try a Red-Indian trick on him.'

'No, Brownrigge. I couldn't allow violence to be used towards an unarmed prisoner.'

'Bah! Do you think he'd be squeamish if the positions were reversed?'

'I'm afraid that's an argument that I can't allow.'

'Just as you like, but I can tell you you're fighting these Germans at a disadvantage if you hold those views. They're out to win by fair means or foul, and they don't care much which they have to employ.'

An idea struck Oliver, and he took from his

pocket Von Romberg's letter ordering him to attend the meeting. 'Read that,' he said to Nat.

Nat did so. 'It's the goods, right enough,' he said.

'Did you notice this word at the top left-hand corner?' placing his finger on it.

'*Heimlichkeit*—secrecy—that's so; to be kept private, naturally.'

'Quite so; but the Germans use another word for that purpose. Private or confidential communications are marked *Vertraulich*.'

'That is so, now you come to mention it.'

'Then may not this word *Heimlichkeit* be the password for to-night?'

'Great snakes! I believe you're right. It may be the "open sesame."'

'We'll try it, at any rate; we may bluff through.'

Eckhardt was then ordered to walk on, and ten minutes brought the adventurous party to the edge of the wood. The outline of the château could be seen dimly, and the party halted.

'Now, Billy,' said Oliver, 'just press your pistol against this fellow's ribs, and if he attempts any treachery, shoot him.' Then to Eckhardt, 'Lead us to the gate you spoke of, and, as you value your life, do not speak or make any attempt to escape.'

Eckhardt nodded his head, and led the way. In five minutes they were under the château walls, and a small door, heavily barred, was visible.

‘This is the entrance,’ he said quietly; ‘there is a bell on the right-hand side.’

‘Good!—Now, Billy, you stay here while we take Eckhardt back, and leave him in the shadow of the woods. We must bind and gag him, for we must take no chances.’

Billy felt his mouth getting dry when he was left alone. Right behind the German lines, in the very middle, possibly, of a division, at the headquarters of the staff, it was indeed a perilous position. His hands were in his great-coat-pockets, and he nervously gripped his pistol.

‘Anyway,’ he thought, ‘if I’m discovered, I’ll account for a Boche or two before I’m done in.’

In ten minutes his companions were back again, and his spirits rose when he felt himself in company.

‘Now for it,’ whispered Oliver, and he boldly rang the bell.

The four stood close together, their hearts beating rather wildly, but determination reigned in every breast. The adventure was well begun; they would see it through!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CHÂTEAU DÉ MONTPELLIER.

THE gate was promptly opened, and the four passed quickly in. A sentry, armed with rifle and bayonet, stood inside.

‘The password, gentlemen?’

‘*Heimlichkeit*,’ answered Oliver boldly.

‘And your name, please?’

‘Captain von Romberg,’ answered Oliver.

‘But these others?’

‘Are friends of mine.’

‘Pardon, Herr Captain; but none can pass who are not summoned.’

‘These will pass,’ said Oliver, stepping close to the man, and looking him straight in the eyes.

The sentry stepped back, then gave a startled cry. ‘You are not Captain von Romberg,’ he gasped, and hitched his rifle up.

‘Silence him!’ hissed Oliver; and Billy caught him a stunning blow between the eyes, which felled him to the ground. Instantly the four threw themselves upon him, and he was bound and gagged.

‘Roll him away into the darkness,’ said Oliver; and in five minutes from the time of their entering all was again silent.

‘M’Leod,’ said Oliver, ‘you are about that fellow’s size. Pop on his helmet, take his rifle, and stand sentry on the gate. You

must secure our retreat. In case of alarm, fire your rifle.'

Like a good soldier, Douglas did as he was bidden without demur.

Oliver looked at his watch. 'Quarter past ten,' he said; 'we are late. Come on!'

They crossed the garden and entered the house. A sergeant met them in the passage.

'Show us to the council-room; we are late.'

The man led the way along a well-lit passage, opened a green-baize covered door, and stood at attention.

Oliver and his two companions stepped quickly in and shut the door.

'You are late, Capain von Romberg,' rasped a disagreeable voice. 'What is the meaning of it?'

'I was delayed, general,' answered Oliver, and stepped up to the table.

The sight that met the gaze of the three intruders was as follows: A round table, on which were several maps and a number of papers, stood in the middle of the room. On the side opposite the door sat a gray-bearded, fierce-looking man, with upturned moustache and a bristling beard. He wore the Iron Cross and several other orders, and on his hooked nose was a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez. On one side of him sat a bull-necked, red-faced, typical Prussian officer, a colonel by his badges; and on the other was a tall, thin, dissipated-looking cavalry officer in hussar uniform. Sitting with his back to the new-comers was a civilian secretary, busily

writing. This man did not look up, but went on with his work, the scratching of his pen being the only sound audible.

Hardly had Oliver spoken than General Pappenheim—for he it was—jumped to his feet. ‘Bones of the devil!’ he roared. ‘Who are you? What does this foolery mean?’

‘It means that you are our prisoners, and if one of you moves or cries out, that moment will be his last.’

Oliver drew a pistol from each pocket as he spoke, and pointed one at the general and the other at the colonel. Nat, with a grim smile, covered the hussar, and Billy the secretary. The general fell back into his chair, his face a ghastly colour, his lower jaw hanging.

‘Pick up all the papers and maps,’ said Oliver to Billy, ‘and put them into your pockets.’

Billy had begun to do so, when the general, looking up, happened to catch sight of a marble bust of the Kaiser over the door. The sight restored his courage. ‘Up, Klitz! Up, Stamm! Cut these fellows down, or we are ruined!’ he cried.

The two officers rose, and the Prussian colonel drew his sword. Instantly Nat, pointing his pistol straight between the man’s eyes, cried, ‘Raise that carving-knife, and I’ll blow your brains out!’

The colonel stood, his sword in his right hand, his left resting on the back of his chair. The general, the hussar, and the secretary remained quite still, while Billy gathered up the papers.

The first move came from the secretary. He slid out his hand to an electric bell-push which stood on the table before him. As he pressed it a loud ring was heard. No sooner had he done this than he slid under the table. Nat, grasping the significance of the act, jumped to the door and shot home the brass bolt.

The moment that the Prussian colonel no longer found himself covered by Nat's threatening pistol he swung up his sword and made a cut at Billy, who was still gathering up papers. The latter, however, had glanced up on hearing the bell, and seeing the flash of the blade, leapt backwards, and so avoided the cut. He lurched against the hussar, who, seeing his chance, flung his arms round Billy, and tried to hold him while the colonel ran him through. But Billy was like an eel; he wriggled and heaved, and getting his right leg behind the hussar's knee, pitched him on to the floor, where they rolled over, struggling like two wild cats.

The Prussian colonel ran round the table to settle the matter with his sword, and seeing Billy for a moment uppermost, lunged fiercely. At that identical moment the hussar managed to swing himself from under the young airman, and gripped his throat just as the Prussian's sword-point shot down. It took the hussar under the arm, and with a hideous sound, half-scream, half-laugh, he relaxed his grip and slid backwards.

Oliver, the moment the Prussian colonel

had attacked Billy, stepped forward, pistol in hand. He was loath to fire, as he feared the report would bring a dozen men rushing to the spot. He was just about to take the risk, however, when the Prussian accidentally ran his brother-officer through. Instantly changing his mind, he raised his arm, and brought the butt-end of his pistol down with all his might on the colonel's head. He gave a sort of bull-like snort and fell upon the body of the hussar, whose blood was making a dark stain on the carpet.

Nat had swung round just as the general had drawn a pistol and taken aim at Oliver. Without a moment's hesitation the American fired, and the general fell back with a bullet in his chest.

'By Jove! you've done it,' said Oliver. 'Quick! Help me to search the general's pockets.'

A couple of papers were found upon him, and these Oliver took. 'Now to escape!' he cried.

'What about the civilian?' panted Billy.

'True! I had forgotten him. Shove away the table!'

In an instant the secretary, pale and shivering, was discovered.

'Shall I shoot the miserable little beast?' asked Nat.

'No! No more noise! Here, give me a sheet of blotting-paper.'

In ten seconds this was rolled into a ball and stuffed into the secretary's mouth, while his

hands were bound behind his back with his own pocket-handkerchief.

‘What shall we do with him now?’ asked Billy.

‘I’ve got it! Off with the table-cover!’

The heavy green cloth was pulled from the table and spread on the floor; the hapless secretary was bundled in, the four corners were tied up, and he was harmless until released.

A knocking was now heard at the door, and Oliver cried, ‘Leave all to me!’ He took the key from the lock, drew back the bolt, and opened the door.

A sergeant stood without. ‘You rang, sir,’ he said.

‘Come in,’ commanded Oliver.

The man did so unsuspectingly, whereupon Oliver’s pistol-butt fell with a crash on his head, and as the man dropped, stunned, the three adventurers slipped outside, locked the door, and went off down the passage, Oliver taking the key with him.

They met another non-commissioned officer with two men hurrying towards the council-room.

‘A man has shot at the general,’ said Oliver. ‘Run out to the front of the château and see that he does not escape that way; we will see to the back.’

The man paused, then obeyed; and Oliver and his companions ran along the passage, left the house, and joined Douglas, who was on tenterhooks of suspense.

‘Come!’ cried Oliver, and they slipped

through the garden gate, locking that behind them. Running at top speed, they made for the wood, which they reached safely. A loud cry behind them told them something had been discovered. They ran on at full speed, trying to keep in the direction in which they thought the airship was.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN EERIE FLIGHT.

IN ten minutes they stopped to try to find out where they were. 'It was about here where we captured Romberg,' said Oliver, and he threw the rays of his electric torch right and left. No sign, however, could be seen of the German. Either they had mistaken the spot, or he had disappeared.

'Due right from here should take us to our flying-boat,' said Nat; and they raced on, Douglas still wearing the German helmet, and carrying the rifle.

In another ten minutes they halted, looked about to right, to left, and on ahead, but no sign of Norman or of the airship could be descried.

'Hang it! we must hail him,' said Oliver; and placing a whistle to his lips, he gave the signal—one long and two short blasts. This was repeated three times; then the flash of a torch was seen almost in their rear.

They had evidently passed their objective, and hastily retraced their steps. As they ran along they thought they distinguished other footsteps; then they heard a voice say in German, 'Hasten, or they will slip through our fingers!'

Almost at the same moment a pistol, rapidly discharged, broke the silence of the night.

'Come on, boys!' shouted Oliver. 'Concealment is now useless.'

They raced forward, and heard Norman calling out, 'This way; I'm hard pressed.'

In three seconds they were all in the midst of a hand-to-hand fight in the dim moonlight.

Captain von Romberg had somehow managed to escape from his bonds, and with about half-a-dozen soldiers was attacking Norman, who had so far held them at bay.

The four new arrivals poured in a rapid fire, and four soldiers fell, while two dashed away. Von Romberg still fought, crying out to his men to come back. Suddenly he caught sight of the basket.

'Ha! A balloon!' he cried, and darted off.

'After him!' cried Oliver. 'He will give the whole thing away.'

The four dashed forward, and the German, no coward, fearing he might be stabbed from behind, turned to face his foes. He struck at Nat with his sword; but Douglas, swinging round his rifle-butt, beat the weapon from his grasp, and next moment stretched him senseless on the ground.

'Pick him up! We must take him with us,' said Oliver.

Billy and Nat lifted the senseless body and bore it back to the basket, into which it was toppled.

'Now, M'Leod, in you get, and take this chap up to the airship. Then let down the basket quickly, for this wood will be too hot to hold us in a few minutes.'

Douglas demurred, saying he had been out of the fighting at the château; but Oliver commanded him, and in he got with the prisoner, Norman taking his rifle.

They telephoned to the airship, and in a few seconds up went the basket.

It was eerie work for the four left below, waiting for the return of the basket, for they expected to be attacked again at any moment.

'Hush!' suddenly whispered Billy; 'I hear footsteps;' and, sure enough, the tramp of many feet could be heard rapidly approaching.

'Signal up for them to lower the basket quickly, or we're done!' cried Oliver.

Nat did as requested, and each of them saw that his pistols were fully loaded.

Norman examined the German rifle. 'Magazine full,' he said with a half-laugh. 'Funny for old Fritz to be put out with his own medicine.'

'Silence!' whispered Oliver.

'Right, sir! Steady on parade! All correct, waiting for the word! I've been longing for a decent bang at the square-heads.'

A rush of feet, and a score of Germans ran forward with a guttural cry.

The pistols barked, and above them rang out the sharp report of Norman's rifle. The Boches staggered, advanced again, only to be met by a withering volley; on which, they opened fire themselves.

'Take cover behind the trees,' said Oliver.

A sharp fusillade of some minutes was maintained; then the Britishers ceased firing in

order to reload. The enemy thought they had expended their ammunition, and again advanced, whereupon Oliver and the rest leapt to their feet, and again poured in a withering fire. But the enemy closed, and Billy fell. A German swung up his rifle to give him the *coup de grâce*.

'Hold on, you sausage-eating barber!' cried Norman, and the butt of his rifle fell on the man's head. Then the ex-artilleryman seemed to run 'berserk.' His blood was up. 'Come on, you mongrels!' he roared. 'Come on; you haven't got Belgian peasants to slaughter now.'

He smote right and left with his rifle, smashing heads, arms, anything that his deadly weapon fell upon.

A big fellow made a lunge at him with his bayonet, but staggered back with his jaw broken. His helmet fell off. Norman dashed forward, picked it up, and put it on his own head.

'Now, knock that off!' he cried, and ran at the Germans. They, however, seemed stricken with terror. They turned tail and bolted.

Meanwhile Billy, severely bruised on the shoulder, staggered to his feet. Something came swinging above their heads.

'The basket!' cried Nat. 'In with you before the Boches come back!'

He lifted Billy in, and he and Oliver followed.

'Now, Norman!' shouted Hastings.

'Not me! I'm not going to run from these swine.'

‘Come on, you dashed lunatic!’ cried Nat. ‘What’s the good of chucking away your life?’

But Norman stood still; whereupon Oliver said quietly, ‘Sergeant Norman, get into the basket instantly, or I’ll report you for insubordination in face of the enemy.’

Norman approached, and was unceremoniously seized and dragged in by Nat and Oliver.

‘All right!’ telephoned Hastings, and the basket began to ascend. There was a ‘whir-r’ from aloft, and in a minute they were above the trees.

The basket swung to and fro in a terrifying manner, and the dark form of the airship could be dimly seen above them. Cries came up from below, and a sputter of musketry rang out, while bullets hummed around.

‘Not pleasant,’ said Oliver quietly. ‘Why doesn’t M’Leod wind us up?’ he said presently. ‘Good Lord! he’s off top speed, and we’re hanging and swinging a couple of hundred feet below.’

‘And he’s right, too! He’ll get us out of that warm spot first,’ said Nat.

It was a terrible position to be in, spinning and swinging in space, and they had to cling to the sides of the basket to avoid being thrown out.

The firing from below grew heavier, and the position of those in the basket was momentarily more dangerous. They crouched down as near the bottom of the basket as they could.

Suddenly, boom! boom! boom! three terrific reports below them; then the firing ceased.

‘By Jove, they were bombs!’ said Nat.

‘And from our friends above, I should say. M’Leod has saved the situation, I fancy,’ said Oliver.

The swing on the basket grew less pronounced, and it was noticed that the outline of the airship was growing more distinct.

‘We’re going up,’ said Nat; and, sure enough, they were. In another couple of minutes they were on a level with the gondola of the airship.

‘All safe?’ asked Douglas in anxious tones as he peered over.

‘All as right as trivets!’ replied Nat.

‘Thankful for that! I wouldn’t go through another such ten minutes for a fortune. I had no time to heave you up, so I sent the old ship up and off.’

‘And you did the correct thing, my boy,’ said Nat.

‘It was the mechanic who worked it. I couldn’t have done it.’

In a minute or so they were all in the gondola, and then they headed for their own lines at the best speed they could make. Anti-aircraft guns, however, began to bark below, and shells flew screaming by. Searchlights were endeavouring to pick them up, too, and their danger increased.

‘One direct hit, and good-bye to everything,’ muttered Douglas.

The firing grew heavier, and everything de-

pended on keeping the airship out of the rays of the search-lights. The mechanic dodged to and fro, and manœuvred the ship in a marvelous fashion; but discovery was only a matter of minutes, when there came the faint whir of propellers, and then—bang! bang! bang!—bombs fell below them again.

The British fighting-planes had been circling about, and, guided by the flashes of the guns, returned to the rescue of the airship. The Germans directed their fire at the aeroplanes, and the airship sped for home. Heavily fired at, they crossed the German lines, and presently were over their own. A British search-light was flashing its signal, and making for it, the airship began to descend. The aerodrome was flooded with light, and the descent was safely made.

‘I think I’ll keep this helmet,’ said Norman as he stood once more on firm ground.

‘And, by gum, you deserve it!’ said Nat, wringing the sergeant’s hand. ‘If you did such deeds in your old muff head-dress as in this Boche helmet, you ought to wear a general’s cocked hat.’

‘I reckon a civilian billycock will do me all right as soon as the war’s over, sir.’

‘Now, boys, I must leave you,’ said Oliver, shaking hands with all his friends. ‘I must get off to headquarters, and take Mr Von Romberg and all those interesting papers you’ve got, Billy. You’ll hear from me in the morning.’

CHAPTER XX.

IN DISTINGUISHED COMPANY.

BILLY and his three companions required no rocking to get to sleep. The mental strain they had passed through was more wearing than bodily fatigue, and they thankfully threw themselves on their beds for the few hours that remained before daybreak. They were astir again soon after dawn, when Billy found that his shoulder, which had received a heavy blow from a rifle-butt, was extremely painful and swollen. Douglas insisted upon Billy seeing the divisional surgeon at once, and Nat backed up Douglas in his advice.

‘You can’t afford to neglect blows like this, Billy,’ said Nat. ‘You don’t want to be crocked for the rest of the campaign, and neglected bruises lead to all sorts of trouble. Come along, young fellow; Mac and I will see you up to old Sawbones together.’

The surgeon administered a dressing of arnica, and telling Billy to carry his arm in a sling for a day or so, ordered him for light duty only, and on no account to do any flying.

‘Confound it! Now I’m in the clutches of old pills and poultices, goodness knows how long he’ll keep me under his thumb!’ grumbled Billy. ‘A day’s rest would have put me all right without any fuss.’

He made up his mind to be very disagreeable about the whole thing, and was sitting in his tent sulking—and, if the truth must be told, trying to alleviate the pain in his shoulder—when some one entered with a cheery, ‘Hallo, Billy! is your shoulder as bad as all that?’ Looking up, Billy saw that his visitor was Oliver.

He immediately brightened up, and making light of his hurt, inquired the news.

‘The very best! The papers we collared were most important; the maps are priceless. We know now exactly what the Boche hoped to do; and since he is aware that we have found out his little game, he will, of course, abandon it, and have to invent something new. That will take time, which is just what we want.’

‘I’m glad we didn’t have our trouble for nothing.’

‘Rather not! It’s a bit of the most important news we’ve found out yet. And if Fritz had carried out his programme in its entirety, he would have had us in a tight corner, for it was something we did not at all expect.’

‘Then I guess our friend Pappenheim will be feeling pretty sick.’

‘Unless he’s “gone west.” If Brownrigge didn’t wound him mortally, it’s just possible the old man finished the job himself, for the Kaiser doesn’t tolerate failures.’

‘And if we were a bit keener in that way it might be just as well.’

‘Hush, Billy! For Heaven’s sake be care-

ful!' said Oliver, assuming a look of horror. 'Such sentiments'—and he held up his hands in well-simulated horror. 'Besides, I'm the bearer of a message to you, M'Leod, and Brownrigge. We expect a "distinguished personage"—shall we say?—to-morrow, and you are bidden, with your friends, to dine at headquarters, in recognition of the very important services rendered last night.'

'No, really?' asked Billy, his eyes kindling.

'Fact, my boy. And, let me tell you, the general is no end bucked, and will put in a jolly good report about you three. You've made a good start, and, if you have any luck, ought to do well.'

Douglas and Nat took the invitation very coolly, but nevertheless they were careful to look their smartest when they set out for Divisional Headquarters next afternoon in the car which Oliver had sent.

There Oliver met them, and they were introduced to the general, who praised them in very warm terms.

A number of other staff-officers who were up at headquarters also took the opportunity of making the acquaintance of the young airmen.

'Do tell us all about it,' said one. 'We've heard all sorts of fancy tales, and we don't know whether they're true or not. We've tried to pump Hastings, but he's as close as an oyster. Says he had little to do with the affair, which was managed entirely by you Flying Corps men.'

The three modestly outlined their adventure, giving no details and mentioning only results.

Later they went off in a motor with Oliver.

‘Whither now?’ asked Billy.

‘Headquarters billets.’

‘Where are they?’

‘Can’t say. I simply follow the car in front.’

‘Don’t you know where the general’s billet is?’ asked Billy in surprise.

‘My dear innocent, he has several, and he uses them indiscriminately. If he always stuck to one place, the Boche would bomb him every night.’

‘Ha! I see; spies, of course.’

‘As usual.’

Headquarters for the night being reached, the flying-officers found themselves in what had once been a very fine old château, and presently they entered the dining-room. To their surprise, talking to the divisional general, they saw a distinguished soldier, whom they all recognised.

‘By James, it’s Sir Douglas himself!’ whispered Billy.

And so it was. The Commander-in-Chief was making one of his flying visits, and being informed of Oliver’s little adventure, had expressed a wish to see the officers who had been engaged in it.

Standing beside Sir Douglas was a slight, boyish figure in staff dress. He was talking

in quiet tones to the Commander-in-Chief and the general, apparently more intent on listening than talking.

‘By Jove! H.R.H. is here,’ whispered Oliver. ‘We are indeed honoured by an invitation to-night.’

‘H.R.H.,’ said Nat with a frown. ‘Who or what on earth is that?’

‘The heir to the throne of the British Empire,’ replied Oliver in low tones.

‘Great Cæsar’s ghost! Where?’ asked Nat, his eager manner betraying his excitement.

‘There, beside Sir Douglas.’

‘What! that boyish, amiable-looking youngster. I thought he was the newest importation from the Old Country.’

‘You’d have been nearer the mark if you’d thought he was the highest; certainly in rank he is.’

Nat was tremendously interested in the Prince, and hardly took his eyes off him. Presently the general beckoned to Oliver, who in a minute came back, saying to the flying-officers, ‘The general wants to present you to the Prince and the Commander-in-Chief. Pull yourselves together.’

Nat turned positively pale, and entirely lost that air of self-possession which usually distinguished him. He had but a very dim idea of the commendatory words with which the general introduced him and the others.

‘You officers rendered a very important and valuable service,’ said Sir Douglas. ‘When I was a young subaltern we thought our branch

was the eyes and ears of the service, but the cavalry must now give way to the air service. Nothing can be hidden from you, and you perform deeds that cavalry could never dream of, as witness your exploit of the other night.' He shook hands very heartily with the officers, and noticing Nat's badge, continued: 'I am exceedingly pleased to know that an American took part in that dashing little exploit. It is a good omen for the future.'

They were then introduced to the Prince, and Nat stood as though uncertain what to do. His Royal Highness, however, settled the point by warmly shaking hands with the three of them, and saying to Nat that the entry of America into the war had assured the victory to the Allies.

'I hope so, Prince,' stammered Nat. 'We're in the war in earnest, and we mean to see the Stars and Stripes waving alongside the old Union-Jack in Berlin.'

'I am sure I trust you may,' replied the Prince, smiling; and then they sat down to dinner, just a plain three-course affair, during which Sir Douglas and the Prince joined in the general conversation, and chatted freely with the pilots about their exploit.

A cigar after dinner was all that was indulged in, after which the rising of the Prince gave the signal to break up.

'My secretary has your names, gentlemen,' said Sir Douglas as he shook hands with the pilots. 'I shall not forget the service you have rendered.'

When the four were alone again, Nat was silent, meditatively puffing at his cigar.

‘You seem very thoughtful, Nat,’ said Billy. ‘What are you thinking of?’

‘I was wondering how it must feel to know that you were born to rule the greatest Empire in the world.’

‘I suppose one gets accustomed to the idea.’

‘Seems so! That young Prince appeared as unconcerned as though he would never be head of anything greater than a booking-office on a backwoods branch railway.’

Billy and the others laughed.

‘What did you expect he would be like?’ asked Oliver.

‘I don’t know. Perhaps I thought of a brass band and a gold crown; anyway, not of a very quiet and retiring—gentleman;’ and Nat uttered the last word very thoughtfully.

‘You’re a good republican, I suppose, and above all this veneration and so on for crowned heads.’

‘I’m a good republican, you bet,’ said Nat; ‘but as long as I live I shall be proud to feel that this right hand of mine has been gripped by the Prince of Wales, who, I’ll stake my life, is a white man right through.’

CHAPTER XXI.

FOLLOW MY LEADER.

A FEW days later Billy and his two friends were closeted with Major Corcoran.

'You understand?' the major was saying. 'We want that aerodrome "strafed" so that they won't forget the lesson in a hurry, and any other little attentions you can pay them will be welcome. They've been getting a deal too assertive lately, and it's got to be stopped. Besides, the moon is almost at the full, and you know what that means for—our friends in London.'

Billy, with recollections of that first morning raid on London, shuddered, and knowing that London and the eastern counties had been raided several times since then, determined that, spite of his still stiff shoulder, he would do his best to destroy any German raiders they might come across. Their final instructions received, the three pilots went off to see to their machines, and to make their own private arrangements.

Billy, Douglas, and Nat decided to keep together and to work in unison. There would be others in the flight, under the command of a flight-commander, but a certain amount of latitude must always be allowed to individuals on such occasions. So that they should all three be able to recognise one

another's machines, each fastened a small red pennant on the top plane.

The flight started in perfect order, and soon crossed the German lines. Anti-aircraft fire was opened on them, but they kept contemptuously on without breaking their formation, and no damage was done.

Presently a couple of German scouts appeared out of the haze, for by that time they were well up above the clouds. Immediately two British machines shot out of the formation towards them, and a fight was soon in progress. The machines swooped and wheeled, firing at one another with their machine-guns. A couple more German machines joined in, and Douglas, who had been elected leader, went at the Germans, Billy and Nat following him. The nine machines were soon swooping and diving, pancaking and spiralling, and before long a German machine was seen to turn completely over and fall crashing to the ground. Upon that another German immediately began to descend, and two of the British machines followed, dropping bombs as they did so.

Douglas had other views, and being free of the Germans, left the fight and followed the main body. They were bound for the aerodrome, and some half-hour later they sighted it. The leading machines circled round, then, taking careful aim, dropped their bombs. Good bursts were observed, and great confusion was caused. Douglas kept circling, but dropped no bombs, his friends

copying his tactics. When the other planes disappeared, Douglas descended lower and lower until every object in the aerodrome could be plainly seen. Then, seeing a long line of aeroplanes drawn up ready to start, Douglas loosed two bombs; Billy and Nat did likewise, and in a minute most of the aeroplanes were shapeless heaps of burning material, being practically blown to pieces. Descending yet lower, Douglas made for the aeroplane-sheds, and dropped his bombs with splendid effect. Crowds of mechanics, seizing rifles, began firing at the reckless airmen; but Douglas, descending yet lower, flew across the aerodrome, sweeping right and left with his machine-gun. His friends backed him up splendidly, whereupon an anti-aircraft gun, coming tardily into action, opened fire. Billy, seeing by the flash where it was located, managed to drop a bomb directly on it. Then a couple of aeroplanes, determined to drive off those terrible British raiders, rose to the attack. The three British planes accepted the challenge, rose above them, and a few well-directed bombs sent them crashing in flames to the ground.

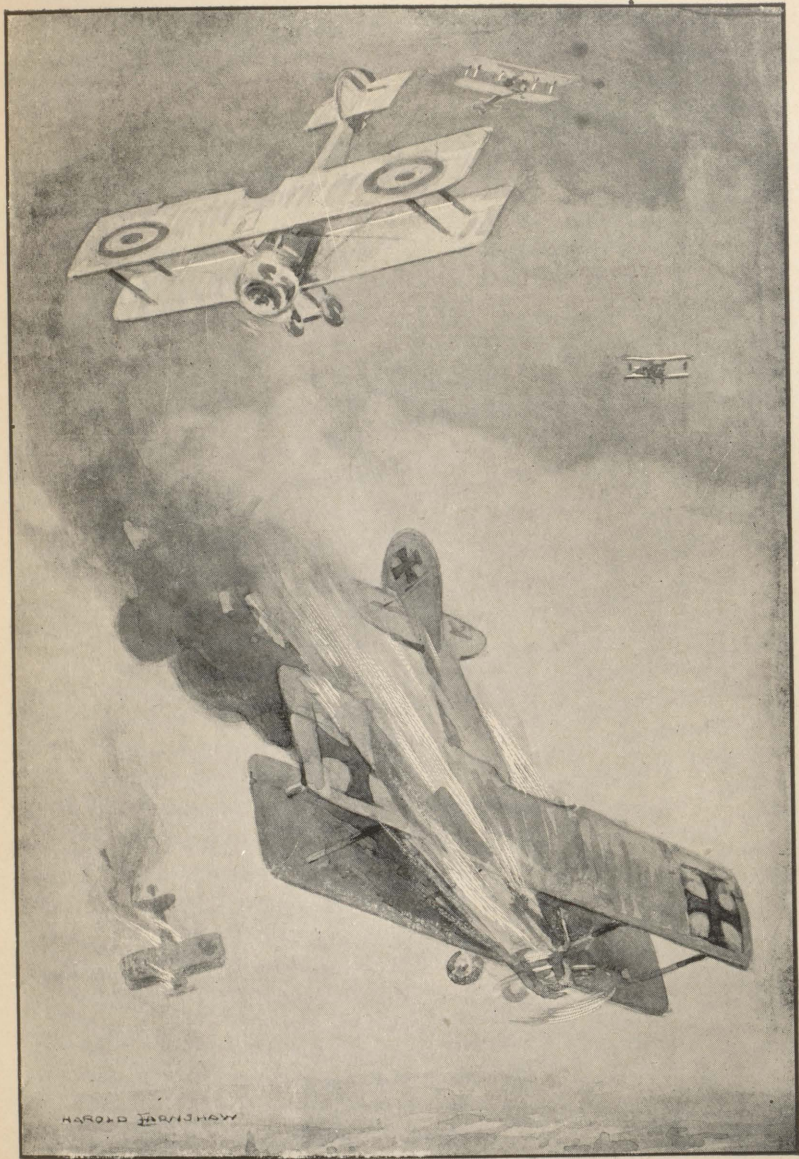
Something little short of a panic then seized the German airmen, and they dashed into the sheds. Douglas swooped down almost on to their roofs, and, followed by Billy and Nat, flew round the aerodrome, firing into the sheds, the tents, and various buildings. Then, climbing once more, they dropped a shower of bombs, and as the aero-

drome was left behind, it was seen to be on fire in several places.

Having put a few miles between himself and the aerodrome, Douglas waved his hand joyously to his two companions, who ranged themselves one on each side of him.

They were flying fairly low when a body of men were seen moving along the white road beneath them. Swooping down, Douglas saw that a battalion of infantry were marching in column of route, and passing over the whole length of them, he peppered them with machine-gun fire, his two companions following his lead. Though heavily fired at in return, the only damage they sustained was to their planes, and besides the trail of dead and wounded they left behind them, the battalion was thrown into utter confusion.

With a 'whir' the aeroplanes swept on out of danger, and turning, the three pilots thought it was time to return to their own lines, well satisfied with their morning's work. But there was still more for them to do. Far beneath them Douglas noticed the smoke of a locomotive engine, and again descending, he saw from the marks on the carriages that it was a troop-train. Douglas and Nat went along one side of the train, from the rear to the engine, and Billy went along the other, and they swept it with machine-gun fire. Then, passing it, they drove on, Douglas well in advance. Suddenly he slackened his speed, and began to circle. Billy, doing the same, saw that they were



A few well-directed bombs sent them crashing in flames to the ground.

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above a river, over which the railroad passed. He instantly divined Douglas's intention, and waited for him to open the ball. This he did by swooping down and dropping a bomb at the bridge. He missed; but Billy and Nat were more fortunate, and one direct hit was the result. The troop-train would either be derailed, or, if pulled up in time, would be delayed a good many hours. At any rate, their object had been attained, and the British pilots went on their way rejoicing.

They had not been allowed to carry out their programme with impunity. They had been often and heavily fired at, but those in an attacking aeroplane see nothing, and hear little, of firing from the ground, and, unless heavily shelled, pay scant heed to it. Not infrequently the first intimation of their danger is the collapse of their machine, and their own fall, generally to death.

No accidents, however, happened to Douglas and his companions, and, full of satisfaction, they headed for home. But they were not to be allowed to escape without a fight for it. The telegraph had borne news of their doings, and well over the German lines a whole squadron of Boche planes appeared to be coming to meet them.

Several other planes of the British flight were approaching, some from the British lines, while two, having, like Billy and his friends, attained their objective, were returning to their base.

Soon machine-guns began to spit viciously,

and the aeroplanes were manœuvring vigorously for position.

Billy saw that Douglas was mounting to get into the clouds, and remembering the compact of the three to keep together, he did likewise. He was soon in a dense white cloud, but the machine took a list, and he had great difficulty in keeping it on a level keel. Driving along through the billowy clouds, he suddenly shot into the blue, when he found he was travelling upside-down, a not uncommon experience when a plane is above the clouds.

Righting his machine, he kept on till, in a gap below, he suddenly saw two red-nosed 'albatrosses' almost immediately beneath him. Without an instant's hesitation he made a splendid nose-dive, and as he flashed past gave one of the German machines a full drum of lead. Instantly the machine burst into flames, and turning turtle, went crashing to the ground, colliding in its descent with another German machine, an Aviatik, and taking it down too.

Billy then turned his attention to the second albatross, which had been firing at him for some seconds, riddling his planes and hitting the fuselage. Seeing the British machine coming towards him, he turned and made off, whereupon Billy devoted his attention to the main battle. The firing from the ground 'Archies' had ceased, as there was danger of the Germans hitting their own machines.

Just away on his right two British machines

were attacking a Gotha, which was putting up a stiff fight.

Billy immediately joined in, and noticed that one of the British machines flew a little red streamer, so that it was either Douglas's or Nat's.

The Gotha, worried by the three smaller machines, dropped suddenly, then zigzagged off, having clearly had enough of it.

Another British machine was seen to be in difficulties, and Billy went to its assistance. And so the fight went on, getting always nearer to the British lines. The firing was incessant, and the machines dived, spiralled, or mounted like so many immense birds.

Gradually the Germans were beaten off, until only two albatrosses were flying. One of these was driven down out of control, whereupon Billy came swooping up to the remaining one at the same instant that another machine attacked it on the other side. Neither of the British airmen could fire for fear of hitting his own countryman; and so for half a mile the three machines swept along. Then the pilot of the German machine was seen standing up with his hands above his head.

For a moment Billy did not take the man's meaning; then it suddenly dawned upon him that the fellow was surrendering. He waved his arm to the German, signalling that he should go straight on, keeping him covered with his machine-gun the while.

The German obeyed, and the two British

machines closed in. Evidently the whole occurrence had been watched from the ground and resented, for black fleecy puffs around showed they were being fired at.

Billy motioned the German to increase his speed, and sent a couple of bullets across his rudder to hurry him. They made a spurt, and in five minutes were over the British lines and in safety. Dropping down to a couple of thousand feet, Billy soon took his bearings, and heading for the Canadian lines, in a quarter of an hour had made a good landing, the German coming down just in front of him.

Jumping from his machine, Billy hurried over to the German, exclaiming, 'You are my prisoner. Surrender!'

The German pilot and his observer quietly handed over their revolvers, just as Douglas, who was in the other British plane, came hurrying up.

'Well done, Billy!' he said. 'This is the first time I've heard of a capture in mid-air.'

'We're in luck, old man,' said Billy; and the Germans, being handed over, were immediately marched off.

Billy and Douglas were examining the albatross, which, though riddled in the planes, was otherwise undamaged, when Nat came bounding forward.

'Say, boys, what a glorious stunt!' he cried in his usual hearty way, shaking hands vigorously with his friends. 'All our machines have returned safely, and we've just given the Boche the reverse of heaven. The sight of

those chaps scooting round their aerodrome while we peppered 'em simply tickled me to death.'

'I fancy the place will want the local fire brigade pretty badly,' grinned Douglas.

'The scrap-heap would be more useful, I think,' said Billy. 'Anyway, it's not a bad morning's work. And now let us report to Corky and get up to the mess, for I'm simply ravenous.'

'And I'm dying for a smoke,' said Nat.

Major Corcoran was highly pleased, and complimented his subs. Leaving him examining the captured German albatross, the three subs. went off to refresh themselves, very well satisfied with their morning's work.

CHAPTER XXII.

BILLY HEARS BAD NEWS.

THE morning after the raid over the German lines Billy was free for a few hours, and he decided to run over to see his old battalion, having heard the day before that it was in rest billets close beside the Canadians.

Billy soon found it, and though there were few left among either officers or men whom he knew, he spent a very pleasant couple of hours.

On his return to his own lines he saw Sergeant Norman, who came striding quickly towards him. 'There has been a staff-officer down here for some time, very anxious to see you, sir,' he said. 'He stayed as long as he could, and then left a note for you. I said I would tell you when I saw you, and have left the note in your quarters.'

'A staff-officer to see me!' said Billy. 'It must have been Captain Hastings.'

'No, it wasn't, sir,' replied Norman, turning away his head.

'But I don't know any other staff-officer—at least, not so well that he'd come over here to see me. Who was he, and what did he want?'

'I think it was Captain Webber, sir; and I fancy he wanted to see you about Captain Hastings.'

‘See me about Captain Hastings! Why, what’s the matter? What do you mean? Surely nothing’s happened to him.’

‘I couldn’t say, sir; but perhaps the letter will explain.’

‘Yes, yes, of course!’ and, full of foreboding, Billy hastened on.

He reached his quarters, and found a letter addressed to him. Rapidly tearing open the envelope, he took out a sheet of foolscap.

‘DEAR MR GRANVILLE,’ it began, ‘I ran over this morning in the hope of seeing you. I am afraid I have unpleasant news. Your cousin, Captain Hastings’—a mist seemed to come before Billy’s eyes, and for a moment he could read no more. A dread that Oliver was dead seized him. Plucking up his courage, he read on—‘Your cousin, Captain Hastings, has unfortunately been reported missing, and, despite all inquiries, no news of him can be gathered. It was deemed necessary to try to find out what enemy troops held the trenches in front of a certain portion of our line, and Captain Hastings was entrusted with the arrangements. A small raid was organised with the object of making this discovery, and it was perfectly successful. Captain Hastings, however, instead of waiting in our front-line trenches to ascertain the result of the raid, accompanied the raiders, and the officer in command of the party reports that he does not remember seeing him after they reached the enemy’s trench. He did not return, and

nothing has since been heard of him. We hope he may be a prisoner, but as there was some rather severe fighting, he may perhaps have met a worse fate.

‘His people have been wired to. If you can find an hour to run over to headquarters, I shall be glad to give you all particulars, as I know what good friends you two were.—Yours very truly,
FRANK WEBBER.’

Billy read this letter over twice before the full meaning of it dawned upon him. Missing! The grim significance of the word rushed upon him. Dead, or wounded and a prisoner! The latter alternative was almost as bad as the former. He knew the scant attention wounded Britons got at the hands of the Huns. Or perhaps Oliver, badly maimed, was lying out in some shell-hole; but more probably his dead body was lying in a hastily dug hole with some German dead. He would hardly have fallen into Boche hands unwounded.

Billy's thoughts went out to his uncle, the general, for Oliver was the apple of his eye. His aunt, Lucy, Marjory, Vivian Drummond—what would their feelings be on the receipt of the news? Oh, if it had only been he, how gladly he would have laid down his life for that of his cousin, just at the beginning of what had promised to be such a glorious career!

Full of the most dismal misgivings, he sought out Douglas, and showed him the letter.

Douglas saw the gravity of the case, but strove to cheer his friend up. 'Your cousin is no child at this game,' he said. 'While there's life there's hope. Missing is not—necessarily killed. Depend upon it, Oliver would not be killed without a fight for it. In the absence of positive news to the contrary, we must hope for the best.'

'Yes,' said Billy gloomily; 'but we know what "missing" generally means. Killed, but body not recovered!'

'Let's go and see Webber; perhaps we shall get more news.'

An hour later they were at headquarters, and had found Captain Webber, whom both knew by sight.

'It's a bad business, Granville,' said that officer, 'and I am afraid I can add but little to the information I gave in my letter. From the officer who led the raiding-party I have learnt that Hastings insisted upon going with the men. They reached the Boche front-line trench, but the alarm was given, and they had a toughish scrap. They secured a prisoner or two, and had to make the best of their way back under a heavy machine-gun fire. When they got back to our trenches Hastings was missing.'

'And his people have been informed?'

'Yes; the general wired them this morning.'

Billy hung his head in despair. 'Poor old Oliver! Poor chap!' he said. 'It's a bad business.'

They saw the general, who was sympathy

itself. 'Hastings was a fine fellow,' he said, 'and was one of my best officers. He may turn up yet. He's had some wonderful escapes, and has as many lives as a cat. Let us hope for the best.'

Billy and Douglas returned to their own quarters, and there they found Nat, who was very sorry to hear the bad news.

For an hour they sat silent; then Nat said, 'I've got an idea, boys. There's not much in it, but we may get some information.'

'What's your plan?' asked Billy eagerly.

'Simply that a chosen little party of us go over to the same part of the Boche lines to-night, collar a German officer, and get out of him whether an English staff-officer was taken by their men or'—— and Nat paused.

'Or killed,' said Billy. 'It's worth trying, anyhow, and I'm on.'

'And I,' said Douglas.

'Let's go and see the major, and get permission.'

Major Corcoran, however, was unwilling to risk three of his best officers on so risky a business. 'You can go if you like, Granville,' he said, 'and you can take one man. That is all I can do.'

They left the major's presence.

'I shall accompany you, Billy,' said Nat. 'I'm off duty to-night, and shall take French leave to visit the Boche lines.'

'And so will I,' said Douglas. 'If we don't come back, it won't matter to us. If we do, no one need be any the wiser.'

'The question is, what man shall we take?'
'Norman, by all means,' said Nat. 'He's worth a dozen.'

Sergeant Norman was taken into their confidence, and at once agreed. 'Anything like a scrap I'm on for,' he said. 'Things are pretty dull. I'm out to kill Huns, and I don't care how it's done.'

Preparations were soon made. Nat sat down to write, and was busy for some time.

'You seem to have a lot of correspondence,' said Douglas. 'You must have a good many American lady friends.'

'Sure; but this letter is to my dad, in case I don't come back.'

'He'll know the news soon enough if anything happens to you.'

'Just so; but he wouldn't know what I want to tell him. I don't know whether I ever mentioned it, but my pop is pretty well off. In case any accident should happen to Norman and me, I've just asked him to allow Mrs Norman five hundred dollars a year. I reckon Norman's worth it.'

'By Jove, you are a brick!' said Billy, seizing his hand.

'I'm leading her husband into what we can't deny is a risky business, and the least we can do is to look after her. To have to live only on her pension would mean a pretty hard struggle.'

About eleven o'clock that night our three friends, with Norman, stood in the salient of an advanced British trench, the one from

which Oliver had started the night before. With them was Lieutenant Walsh, who had commanded the previous party, and six reliable men, all volunteers. They were armed with revolvers and bombs, and were all ready for the word which was to take them over to the Boche trenches.

It was a pitch-dark night. The moon would not rise for an hour, which was reckoned ample time to do all they had to do. Silently, all being ready, they clambered over the parapet and approached their own wire. This they managed to pass without any mishap; then on all fours they began their crawl toward the Boche trenches. Ten minutes took them to a shell-hole, into which they crept; then Billy, who had an electric torch, flashed it round, and found they were all there.

'So far, good!' he said. 'If we have the same fortune all through we shall be lucky.'

After remaining for a few minutes, they crept out, Billy and Nat leading. They had proceeded for some distance in silence, when unmistakable sounds of activity were heard in front of them. Acting under Billy's directions, they threw themselves flat on the ground, while he himself crawled forward to find out, if possible, what was the meaning of the noise.

It was quite clear to Billy that some one was moving about on their immediate front. He returned to his friends, and after a few moments' consultation it was decided that Billy and Nat should go forward, while

Douglas should take the rest of the men away to the left, where all seemed silent.

Billy and Nat crept very silently until they reached the German wire. By that time it was evident from the sounds in front that the Germans were repairing their defences. They were working with feverish haste, for they knew that at any moment a hot fusillade from a British machine-gun might salute them.

Voices were heard speaking, and Billy and Nat, lying prone on the ground, strained their ears to listen.

'Just our luck to have to mend the cursed wire that they got broken,' grumbled some one.

'I dare say the pigs broke it themselves, just to cause us unnecessary work,' said a second man with a rather high-pitched voice.

'No grumbling there! Hurry on, or we shall have the moon up, and those cursed English will be firing at us before we've finished.'

'We'll never get through with the job before the moon's up, sergeant,' said he of the high voice. 'Had we not better report to the Herr Captain and get help?'

'You know as well as I do, Schwartz, that Captain Ritter is not one to listen to such talk.'

'No; but I know the Herr Captain is asleep in the dug-out, dead-drunk. Lieutenant Münster is there, and he will listen.'

'He might. Anyhow, there's no harm in

trying, and I shall be glad to get finished with this job. Go to the lieutenant, but speak as if you had expected to find the captain. Report that Sergeant Mann says the wire is more seriously damaged than was supposed, and that we want more wire and additional help.'

'Very good, sergeant.'

'And just hurry up. We haven't any time to lose.'

Almost before Sergeant Mann had finished speaking, Billy and Nat, as though seized with the same idea, crept quietly off, going in the direction of the German trench. Both were afraid that the man addressed as Schwartz might run into the little party of raiders, and so betray the whole thing.

They hadn't got very far before the blundering steps of Schwartz were heard behind them, and Nat, taking Billy by the hand, dragged him down on to the ground.

'We must collar this fellow,' he whispered, 'and we must do it without raising an alarm.'

Schwartz plodded on, and kicked against some inequality in the ground. He half-stumbled, cursed under his breath, and was going on again just as two shadowy figures rose behind him. One clapped a pair of hands over his mouth; the other seized him from behind round the throat and whispered in his ear, 'Make a sound or move an inch, and I'll stab you to the heart!'

The threat of being stabbed in the dark is always more horrible than the threat of being

shot, and the big frame of Schwartz trembled in the grasp of his captors. He was gagged and secured, and then carried to where Douglas and the rest were waiting, up against the German wire, hidden from sight in a shell-hole.

Very few words sufficed to explain matters, and Billy continued: 'I've got an idea. I will go over to the Boche trench, pretending to be Schwartz. You, Douglas, with the others, must get between the Germans repairing their wire and their trench. There can't be many men left behind in the trench, so keep out those fellows who are wiring for a quarter of an hour, and our business will be done.'

'I'll come with you,' said Nat. 'Our German will pass anywhere.'

'But you'll want a man or two in case you are discovered. We must then all bundle into the trench, and do what we can to get hold of some officer.'

'Very well, then; we'll all advance quietly, but Nat and I will make the first venture.'

Away they went, and passed the German wire without difficulty. Billy and Nat then made for the trench, and calmly climbed the parapet. They had hardly dropped to the ground when a man cried out, 'Hallo! who's there?'

'Schwartz, come back with a message for the Herr Captain.'

'He's asleep, and you'd better not wake him.'

‘The sergeant knows that. I’m going to speak to Lieutenant Münster.’

He was passing along, followed by Nat, when the German grew suspicious.

‘Hallo! who’s this? Why, you’re’—
A vice-like grip seized him by the throat, a pistol was pressed against his temple, and Nat’s steely tones were heard. ‘Speak again, and I’ll scatter your brains! Lead us to the lieutenant’s dug-out, and I’ll spare you.’

The German gasped like a fish just landed. He went mechanically forward a few steps, then halted. ‘It is here,’ he said.

Billy used his electric torch, saw a door at the top of a flight of steps, made sure that he had a couple of Mill’s bombs in his tunic-pocket, then, pistol in hand, slowly descended the steps. Entering the dug-out by a door, Billy gazed cautiously around him. The place was unpleasantly warm, being heated by a stove in one corner, by the side of which, stretched on a low camp-bed, was an officer asleep. Seated at a table was another officer; he was smoking a choice cigar and looking at some illustrated paper. The dug-out was quite comfortably furnished, containing several easy-chairs; while on the walls were some very fine pictures, in all probability looted from houses in the neighbourhood.

Billy took all this in at a glance; then he coughed slightly to arrest the attention of the officer who was reading, for his entrance had been unnoticed.

The German looked up, and his mouth

slightly opened when he saw Billy. The officer had very thin gingery hair, a long, pointed nose, and a receding chin. He was clean-shaven, and wore rimless pince-nez.

He stared in absolute amazement at Billy, who had him covered with his pistol.

‘Lieutenant Münster, I think,’ he said coolly.

‘Who—who the devil are you?’ asked the German.

‘That does not matter. I am here to ask you a few questions, which, if you are wise, you will answer. If your answers are satisfactory, all will be well; if not, you may find yourself in a rather awkward predicament.’

Lieutenant Münster glanced at the figure asleep by the stove.

‘Do not trouble to awaken your companion; you can answer all I want. And should there be any sign of treachery, I shall just drop this’—here Billy carelessly took a Mill’s bomb from his pocket—‘and, heigh-ho! there will be no more dug-out and no more Lieutenant Münster.’

‘What has happened? Have you rushed our trenches? I have heard nothing.’

‘Your trenches, or part of them, are for the time being in our hands. Now, answer my questions quickly, for time presses. Last night some of our men made a raid on this part of your line and took some prisoners. A friend of mine, who was of the party, did not return to our trenches. Was he captured by your men?’

‘Last night, you say?’

‘Yes.’

‘I cannot tell you.’

‘How? What do you mean?’

‘I was not here last night; we relieved the 185th Saxon Infantry only this evening. I heard there had been a raid, but I know nothing further.’

‘Will you swear this?’

‘On the honour of a German officer.’

‘H’m!’ said Billy dryly; ‘I wonder how much that is worth.’

The lieutenant stretched up his long neck, and tried to look impressive. ‘Sir,’ he said, ‘I belong to the Prussian Fusilier Guards. We are gentlemen.’

‘Prussian gentlemen, perhaps; but I am afraid our ideas of honour may not be on the same level. Are there any of the Saxon regiment left in the trenches?’

‘None.’

‘Would it be possible for you to find out if any English staff-officer was captured last night, and send word over to our trenches?’

‘I might be able to do so under a flag of truce; that is, if it would be respected.’

‘You need have no fear on that score.’

‘Yet you questioned my honour.’

What reply Billy would have made it is impossible to say, for at that moment a sputtering rifle-fire broke out, and Nat called down, ‘Look out, Billy! The alarm’s raised.’

Lieutenant Münster jumped to his feet, but Billy motioned him back to his chair.

'Stay where you are,' he said threateningly. 'I shall remain at the top of the steps. If you endeavour to come out, I shall drop a bomb down here.'

The lieutenant sank back in his chair, and Billy sprang up the steps. At the top he saw Nat.

'The Boches have found our fellows,' he said. 'There's a scrap on.'

The Germans were pouring out of their dug-outs, and were firing blindly into the darkness. For Billy and Nat to rejoin their own men was a dangerous task; to remain where they were was to court certain death or capture.

Billy rose to the occasion. 'Where is your prisoner, Nat?' he asked.

'I had to stun him; he began to get uneasy,' replied Nat calmly.

'Did he give the alarm?'

'No.'

'Right! Follow me;' and Billy ran along the trench in the darkness. 'Cease firing! Cease firing!' he shouted. 'You are shooting at our own men. Sergeant Mann is out there with a wiring-party.'

The audacity of the command succeeded. The firing ceased.

'Now, Nat!' cried Billy; and from a dark embrasure he climbed over the top of the parapet, and ran toward the spot whence came the firing. In a couple of minutes they reached a body of men. 'Is that you, Douglas?' he shouted.

'Yes. Are you all right?'

'Quite! Get the men together! We must toddle back to our own lines.'

'Let's give 'em a taste of our quality first,' said Norman, who had been grazed by a bullet.

'No, no!'

At that instant the Germans under Mann opened fire again, and simultaneously a machine-gun from the German trench began to pour forth lead.

'Lie down!' cried Billy, and every man did so. The German machine-gun continued to sweep the ground, and yells from Mann's men showed that the German ammunition was not wasted.

'What fun!' chuckled Nat; 'they're peppering their own men.'

The Germans evidently found this out, for suddenly the firing ceased.

'Now for a rush to our own lines!' cried Billy. 'All together!'

They started up, and made a dash. Several Germans whom they ran against were shot down, and they were through the German wire, when a couple of Verey flares went up. They were just at that moment by a shell-hole, into which they all jumped, while a perfect hail of lead from the Germans swept the ground above them. The flares went down, and again Billy and his companions started. Again the flares, but at the third attempt they reached their own lines, their clothes, hands, and faces torn and covered with mud, yet all

safe, and only one or two flesh-wounds amongst them.

They congratulated one another on their escape, but Billy and Douglas were sad. Their attempt had led to nothing; no news of Oliver had been discovered.

Thanking the officer and his men for the kind aid they had lent, the airmen returned to their own lines, and Billy sat far into the night writing to his uncle all he knew.

He never sent the letter, however, for next morning he received a telegram from his uncle: 'Spare no pains to discover truth about Oliver. Am following this telegram. All deeply grieved. HASTINGS.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

A BOMBING EXPEDITION.

THREE days later Sir William Hastings, Oliver's father, was sitting with Billy and Douglas in their quarters. No news of Oliver had been received, and it was a very sad trio that discussed the matter.

'I should not grieve so deeply if we only knew what had become of the poor boy,' said Sir William. 'If he had died leading a party "over the top," or had given his life for that of a fellow-creature, pride would have mingled with my sorrow; but this awful uncertainty about being missing is terribly hard to bear. He might be dead, wounded, or a prisoner, and we are absolutely helpless to learn anything or do anything.'

'It is terrible, uncle,' said Billy; 'but I cannot believe that dear old Oliver is dead. I feel that we must have known it, had it been so.'

'Sometimes I feel the same; at others I am certain he is dead. My poor, poor boy!' and the stern old soldier covered his face with his hand. Only for a few moments did he give way, however; he quickly pulled himself together, and though the corners of his mouth twitched, he controlled his voice. 'I can never thank you two enough for what you've done,' he said. 'If it had been possible to find out anything, you would have accomplished it.'

‘Don’t speak of that, uncle. My anxiety is second only to your own.’

‘I know it, my boy; I know it;’ and the general wrung his nephew’s hand.

In a day or two he had to return to England, and it was with a heavy heart that he took leave of his nephew, knowing the distressing news he had to take home with him.

After he was gone life went on much the same with the flying-men, and Billy, Douglas, and Nat were almost every day in the air, observing, bombing, or fighting enemy aeroplanes. Weeks passed, and Billy, in the excitement of his surroundings, began to forget the sad fate of his cousin Oliver.

The persistent manner in which the Germans bombed English towns, especially London, without any pretence of doing anything except killing unoffending civilians, had at last roused the nation, and reprisals were decided upon and ordered. One or two expeditions had been organised with more or less success, and at last a big raid was arranged.

Billy, Douglas, and Nat were included in the flight that was to undertake the trip, and a town well across the Rhine was chosen as their objective. The place was known to all the pilots, and they had little doubt of finding the town and giving a good account of themselves.

The night chosen was an almost moonless one, but still and starlit. Their objective was Frankfort, a good four hundred miles out

and home, without counting any divergencies which would be sure to be necessary.

‘Depend upon it, the Boche won’t let us raid his beautiful Fatherland without disputing the point,’ said Nat. ‘We shall have to fight our way out and home, you can bet, and we’d better be prepared for a few surprises in the way of anti-aircraft defences.’

‘I expect we shall get a warm reception,’ said Billy.

‘And to come down will probably put “paid” to our accounts,’ continued Nat. ‘It won’t be coffee and cigarettes; and if we escape a broken neck, it will mean rigorous imprisonment or a bayonet through us, and no one the wiser.’

‘We’d better keep up in the air, then,’ said practical Douglas, a proposition with which all agreed.

The machines were tested with the greatest care. Controls, engines, bomb-droppers, all underwent a thorough inspection; petrol-tanks were filled to their brim.

Each man wore an extra woollen jumper, thick socks under his high boots, and mittens under his fur-lined gauntlets.

The fact that a raid was in prospect had been carefully concealed; otherwise the news would have been sure to reach the Germans. None but the airmen knew anything of the matter, and it was only just before they started that their destination was imparted to them. A little crowd of pilots crowded round those chosen for the task, and when all

was ready there was a silent handshake and a muttered 'Good luck, old chap!' Then the pilots climbed into their machines.

Billy and Douglas were in a two-seater Sopwith, while Nat was in a Bristol Scout, both first-class machines.

The word being given, the propellers were swung, there was a cheery cry of 'Contact!' and one after the other these ominous 'night-birds' started off to avenge the murder of defenceless British women and children.

Six thousand feet was to be their altitude, and they began to climb at once. Each British machine was furnished with tail and head lights, which could be switched on or off at will, so that in case of attack by hostile aeroplanes they would be able to distinguish one another. Every pilot was supplied with excellent maps, had studied the contour of the country, and had got by heart the various landmarks they were likely to see on their journey.

The necessary altitude being reached, the machines turned east, and sped away on their journey. Over the German lines they were heard and heavily fired at, but in the darkness they were not seen, and the shells went wide of their mark. Still, the pilots knew that their departure was known to the enemy, and that the news would be flashed to the principal towns on the Rhine, for Fritz leaves little to chance.

On, on through the dark night they flew, the keen air rushing by, screaming amongst

struts and wires. Having got away from the firing, the machines flew at top speed, being again heavily fired at on several occasions.

Billy and Nat had arranged their route. They meant to keep with the main flight across Luxemburg, until Treves, the first of their objectives, was reached. The dropping of bombs on the station and munition-factories there was to be the signal for them to follow the course of the Moselle for some fifty miles, then to turn east, pick up the Rhine, and follow it and the Main to Frankfort. All went well, and some hour and a half's flight brought them to Treves.

Standing on the banks of the river, surrounded by wooded hills, the town was easily recognised, especially as it was well lighted, for the people felt perfectly safe. The outline of the railway station and the dark shape of the cathedral were plainly visible. The noise of the machines having alarmed the inhabitants, lights were quickly extinguished, and a heavy anti-aircraft fire opened, while machines came up to meet the raiders.

But the British machines were not to be frightened from their purpose by noise, and circling the town once, twice, they descended to a convenient height, and began to loose their bombs.

Bang! crash! flash! bang! crash! boom! The effect was terrible. Fires sprang up, and it was seen that the railway station had sustained several direct hits.

Flash! boom! flash! boom! The bombs

continued to fall, giving the Germans some taste of what they inflict on open British towns.

Douglas and Nat had wheeled round, and were watching the effect of the bombardment, when suddenly they became aware that a German, having got above them, was letting rip with his machine-gun. Immediately Douglas made for him, but the German turned and fled from over the town. Douglas followed, and getting a good position, gave him a drum from his machine-gun, on which the German dived to earth. On Douglas circling again, and signalling for Nat, some very heavy firing was again directed at them. Nat answering the signal, away went Douglas, and picking up the silvery sheen of the river, distinctly seen in the starlight, off they flew, and in less than an hour the much-vaunted Rhine lay beneath them. The glare of Coblenz was visible away to their left, and Douglas knew he had only to follow the course of the river and its tributary until Frankfort was reached.

He was familiar with the general trend of the river's course. At the first great twist he knew he was over Boppard; next St Goarshausen was recognised—spots well known to all three pilots in peace-time. Then came the turn at Bingen; later the noble bridge at Mayence; and then, turning up the Main, the pilots knew that the next big town was their objective—Frankfort.

CHAPTER XXIV.

NAT TO THE RESCUE.

FRANKFORT was reached, but news of the raiders' approach had been given, and they were met by a heavy fire. Shells flew and screamed around them, the bursts being particularly good. It was at once evident that the bombing of the town would be attended with great danger, but orders had to be carried out, and the machines circled the town once to pick out their objectives, for, unlike German aviators, the British were anxious to obtain their military results with as little danger to the civilian population as possible.

Search-lights flashed from many points in the town, and the firing grew heavier and heavier. Not heeding this, Douglas descended until the railway station and the bridge over the Main could be descried; then, taking careful aim, he dropped his bombs. As he did so he felt the machine give a kind of stagger, but throwing a hasty glance round, he could discern nothing wrong, and again ascended.

Another machine, which he recognised as Nat's, also dropped its bombs, and the two swept away north of the town. The other machines, dropping their bombs from a greater height, had already turned westward again, and were making their way back.

Having cleared the town, Douglas took his bearings by the stars, and turned the head of his machine homeward. As he did so, he became aware of a diminution in speed, and a general tendency of the machine to side-slip.

For a minute he kept her up to the wind ; then the engine distinctly slowed down, and Douglas speedily realised that one of his planes was damaged and his petrol-tank was pierced. He bawled out the news to Billy, who saw that what his friend said was only too true.

The engine almost stopped, and the position of the aviators became a truly terrible one. In the centre of a hostile country, close to a town which had been bombed, and in which the inhabitants would be bitterly vindictive, they were obliged to come down, and the very greatest skill was necessary to prevent the machine dashing down out of control, and smashing itself and all within. Not that Douglas cared much, for he felt that he would rather break his neck than fall a prisoner into German hands. But then he had Billy's life in his keeping as well as his own, and, full of that genuine British characteristic of 'playing the game,' he determined to try to make a safe landing. It was his duty, and, after all, while there is life there is hope ; so, nerving himself, he gripped his control-stick, and planing away from the town, made for the ground.

Fortunately they had already got some

miles from Frankfort, but were over wooded country. Had it only been open, a landing might have been safely effected; to land amongst the trees meant disaster. The engine having entirely stopped, they came down quite noiselessly, and the stars gave sufficient light to render large objects dimly visible.

Suddenly an opening appeared among the trees, and heading for it, Douglas gained the ground, which they reached with a bump that shook them almost senseless for a few minutes. Recovering, Billy jumped out, and taking a sip from the brandy-flask he carried in case of accidents, he turned to his companion. 'Are you all right, Douglas?' he asked.

'As right as I am likely to be for some time,' answered Douglas. 'We're in a fix, Billy, and no mistake.'

'It's no worse than we anticipated in case of anything going wrong.'

'I'm afraid it is. I always intended returning safely to our lines, or staying dead in the German ones. Being a prisoner never entered into my calculations.'

'We're not prisoners yet, my boy. My cousin Oliver passed right across a great part of Germany at the commencement of the war, and came through safely. We're out in the open country here; we may escape.'

'We'll have a try, anyway;' and Douglas jumped out.

In a couple of minutes they had removed from the machine a few things which they required; then Douglas said, 'They sha'n't

have the bus, anyway. We'll burn that.' He set a match to one of the petrol-soaked wings, and in a few seconds the machine was in a blaze; in five minutes all that remained of it was a heap of almost red-hot metal.

'So far, good,' said Douglas. 'Now, let us see where we are.'

They looked around, and saw that they were on a small sandy patch in the middle of thick woods. In the very faint light nothing but trees were visible, and no noise disturbed the silence of the night. Wait, though! What was that? The faint whir of a propeller; then a hum, getting rapidly louder. Suddenly they saw an aeroplane above them. It circled once, twice; then, magnificently handled, it landed, and after running round the sandy patch, came to a dead-stop.

'Hallo!' shouted a voice; 'any one here?'

'By Jove, it's Nat!' cried Billy in delight, and running forward, he and Douglas gripped the American warmly by the hand.

'What's the matter?' asked Douglas. 'Is your bus crocked, too?'

'Not a bit of it, my boy.'

'Then what brings you here?'

'I was just behind you, and noticed that you were in difficulties. I saw you go down, and directly afterwards spotted the blaze, when I knew that, for one reason or another, your machine was on fire, so I just dropped down to see to things.'

'By Jove, you *are* a brick!' cried Billy.

'We'll talk about that when we get out

of this, which we'd better lose no time in doing. It ain't exactly healthy for us here.'

'But how are we going to get out of it?' asked Billy.

'We must try to hop off in my machine. My observer, poor fellow! was hit in the head by a piece of shell, and has "gone west." You two must squeeze into his place.'

The three looked at Nat's observer, who was quite dead.

'I don't like leaving the poor fellow here,' said Billy.

'Nor I,' agreed Nat; 'but it's our duty to save our own lives if we can.'

'That is so,' said Douglas; 'though I wish we could get the poor chap under ground.'

They lifted him out of the machine, and reverently laid him on the ground under a tree, covering him with his coat.

Then Nat went round the open space to see what room there was to rise in. 'It will be a tightish job,' he muttered on his return. 'We may do it, or we may break our necks.'

'Either is preferable to being taken prisoner,' said Billy.

'I quite agree,' cried Douglas.

Nat stood looking around him as well as the very dim light allowed. 'Well, boys, we'll make the attempt,' he said. 'No time to lose. We may get a bunch of Huns on us any moment.'

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when several soldiers, armed with rifles and

bayonets, rushed from amongst the trees and demanded their surrender.

In an instant the three pilots darted back into the shadow, and Nat cried out to the Germans, 'Don't you worry about surrendering. We're desperate men, and if any of you attempt to lay hands upon us you'll rue it.'

'Shoot them down!' cried one of the soldiers.

Half-a-dozen shots rang out, and these were answered by a fusillade from the pistols of the pilots.

There were cries of pain and surprise from the Germans, and Billy, in a burst of excitement, yelled out, 'Let's charge the bounders!' and suiting the action to the word, he dashed at them, being followed by Nat and Douglas.

It was a mad action, and ought to have resulted in the wounding or capture of all three, but its very madness saved the situation. The Germans, elderly Landsturm men, were seized with panic, and taking to their heels, fled.

'Now, boys, the bus!' cried Nat, who could not help laughing at the sudden discomfiture of the enemy. Running round in the shadow of the trees, they made for the aeroplane.

Never was a propeller so quickly swung; never did pilots or observers so quickly scramble in. Nat was at the engine, and before Billy and Douglas had squeezed themselves in the rear seat they were on the move. They had not gone a dozen yards, however,

before a volley of musketry burst out, and a dark crowd of figures, yelling loudly, came rushing towards them.

Nat, firing through the propeller, gave them a burst of machine-gun fire, which must have done terrible execution. The yells ceased; nothing was heard but the roar of the propeller. They made a circle of the open patch, then rose, higher, higher, another half-circle. The planes hit against a branch here and there; then the level of the tree-tops was reached; they actually brushed against them, and as a volley of bullets again buzzed about their ears they shot away above the wood.

Billy and Douglas could not resist a cheer as they dashed away, but Nat made no sound. They went faster and ever faster, rising all the while, but the machine wobbled a good bit. The two in the rear seat attributed it to some injury that the machine had received, and yelled out to Nat that if they came to a favourable spot they had better descend again, and see if it was anything they could rectify; but to this he made no answer. They flew on and on, and the forest was left behind. They were over hilly or rocky ground, and to Billy and Douglas it seemed as though they were falling again. But they both had absolute confidence in Nat's skill, and a good many miles were covered. It was then clear that they were over high ground, and that it would be better to ascend still higher; but Nat kept straight on.

Douglas crawled half-out of his seat to get

nearer Nat, and yelled loudly that they should ascend ; but Nat made no answer, and Douglas, getting a glimpse of their companion's face, saw it set, while his eyes were glaring. ' Good heavens, Billy ! ' he cried ; ' Nat has swooned ! '

At the imminent risk of breaking his neck, he squeezed in beside Nat, and seized the control-lever. The machine nose-dived, righted itself, wobbled, there was a crash, and next moment all three occupants were lying on the ground amongst the ruins of the machine.

CHAPTER XXV.

IN THE ENEMY'S COUNTRY.

FORTUNATELY neither Billy nor Douglas lost consciousness, and both were on their feet in a minute. There was sufficient light for them to see that they were almost on the summit of a hill or small mountain. By the light of their electric torches they saw that the machine was a complete wreck. But they did not heed that; all their attention was devoted to their companion, who had fallen from the pilot's seat, his head drooped forward on his chest, quite insensible. It was but the work of a few minutes to lay him flat on his back, and force some brandy from Billy's flask between his teeth. A minute, two minutes, three minutes passed; then there was a sigh, a groan, and Nat tried to struggle into a sitting posture.

'Hurrah!' cried Billy; 'he's alive. Douglas, flash your torch here;' and as Douglas did so, they saw that the lower part of their companion's face was streaked with blood, which was running from a wound on the left side of his neck.

'Poor old Nat! he's been hit,' cried Billy, 'and, like a brick, never said a word about it.'

'I'm a-all ri',' murmured Nat.

'Yes, yes; we'll see to you;' and in a minute practical Douglas had his field-dressing

out and was binding up the wound in order to stanch the bleeding. This effected, another mouthful of brandy was poured down his throat, and Nat said he felt a deal better.

'I must have been hit in that last discharge of musketry,' he said; 'but I didn't feel anything of it until I began to get faint and dizzy. I thought I could keep on until I could make a decent landing, but I suppose I must have swooned, and—there you are. I've landed you two in the cart.'

'We should have been a jolly sight more in the cart, Nat, if it hadn't been for you,' said Billy, 'so say no more on that point.'

'What about the bus? What happened? How did we get here?'

'The bus is, I am afraid, done for. We hit something—a bit of the hill, I think—and we plumped down. By great good luck we fell softly, and neither of us is hurt. It's too dark to see where we are, or what has really happened, and I think the best thing is to get into some hiding-place before daylight, and get an hour or two's sleep.'

Billy and Douglas looked round them by the aid of the light of the torch, and saw that they were on a rocky hill, apparently quite devoid of any human habitation.

Searching about, they came to a small cave, or hollow, which penetrated several yards into the rock.

'Just the very thing we want,' said Douglas.

'Couldn't be better,' agreed Billy; and going back to where they had left Nat, they

assisted him to the cave, and, all getting in, they lay down, and were soon fast asleep.

Billy awoke some hours later to find the sun shining and his two companions still asleep. He sat up, stretched himself, and worked his arms violently to and fro, for he was both cold and stiff. The noise he made woke Douglas, and the two rose and crept out of the cave very quietly, for they did not want to disturb Nat. They soon saw they were almost on the summit of one of a range of high rocky hills, clothed here and there with patches of pine. A tiny wreath or two of smoke showed that down in the valleys there was life of some sort, but the district they were in was both wild and forbidding.

'A rum spot,' said Billy; 'looks as if we might lie hidden here for a month.'

'Providing we had an hotel next door to us. Under existing circumstances I should say a week would see us out. Rocks and air—a remarkably keen one at that—seem all there is to live on.'

'Let's see what condition the machine is in,' cried Billy, and they walked towards it. A very brief scrutiny showed that it was smashed beyond any hope of repair that they could contrive to accomplish. 'Nothing doing there,' said Billy; and then, through his glasses he made a thorough examination of their whereabouts. Neither of them was able to recognise any landmark, and after a while they returned to Nat, who was just waking up.

He felt a bit weak from loss of blood, but his brain was quite clear, and he said he was able to join in any scheme that might offer a chance of their getting away.

'We all speak very good German,' he said, 'and by keeping our wits about us we may get through all right. The first thing to do is to find out where we are, then get disguises, and finally make our way across the frontier.'

'All very simple,' grinned Billy; 'but before we attempt that, we shall want something to eat and drink.'

They had some bars of chocolate and some brandy-and-water, and this was shared among them.

Nat then borrowed Billy's glass, and going to the mouth of the cave, had a good look around. 'I can give a pretty good guess where we are,' he said after a few minutes. 'Knowing the direction in which Frankfort must lie convinces me that we are somewhere amongst the mountains north of Solms. We are about forty miles from the Rhine, and in the region known as the Seven Mountains.'

'How do you know this?' asked Douglas.

'Do you remember my telling you about the young American-German named Lincke, who gave me the ticket which admitted me to Colonel Vogt's boss meeting?'

'Yes.'

'Well, later in the same year, young Lincke and I came over to Europe together to do the sights. His uncle lived at a place

called Altstadt, in the Seven Mountains district, and there we spent a couple of very pleasant months. Old Heinrich Lincke had a daughter named Senta, a very pretty girl indeed, and I am not going to deny that there were certain tender passages between us. In fact, I corresponded with her up till the outbreak of the war, and goodness knows what might not have happened had not the war broken out.'

'Quite a romance,' smiled Billy.

'You bet; and that's not all. Her father was a shrewd old man, and had no objection to me in those days. Moreover, I rendered him a trifling service which laid him under an obligation, though our Hunnish friends are not very much inclined to remember such things in these days.'

'From which you deduce?' asked Billy.

'That there might be a chance of Uncle Lincke, as we used to call him, being able to help us to shake the dust of the Fatherland off our feet. I should have to pitch him a tale, but that would be easy enough. I don't think the exact facts would be altogether palatable.'

'There might be something in it,' said Billy.

'It's a chance, and that's all.'

'Could you find his place?'

'No. We should have to ask our way.'

'Risky.'

'But inevitable.'

'What is your plan?'

'That we wait until night, then descend

into the valley, and endeavour to get food, and perhaps a disguise. We are far removed from the war centres, and may succeed. In any case, if we are captured we are in no worse strait than we were before.'

'But can you stand the fatigue, Nat?'

'I think I can. Anyway, I'm willing to try.'

'Then let us get all the rest we can until dark, and then make for the valley below us.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE LONELY HOUSE.

EVENING was falling as the three pilots began their descent from the mountain. Billy had made a reconnaissance during the day, and had taken bearings by which he knew in what direction to steer. Nat was feeling a great deal better, but Billy and Douglas walked one on each side of him, for he was still weak from loss of blood, though his wound, which was fortunately only a flesh one, had been very carefully re-dressed.

Food was the most pressing question. All three were positively ravenous, and, unless food were obtained, must soon be incapable of making any sustained exertion. The spot where the aeroplane had fallen was a wild one, and in the depleted state of the neighbouring villages as regards population was not likely to be visited, so that the damaged machine would remain undetected, and the presence of British soldiers would never be suspected. The Frankfort people would probably think they had got away safely to their own lines, and so suspicion would be averted.

These things had been duly discussed during the day, and all the pros and cons bearing on the case had been taken into account. The three had their pistols and a

fair supply of ammunition, so that they had at least the means of defending themselves.

The descent of the mountain was a difficult and wearisome ordeal, and by the time they reached the valley all three of them, particularly Nat, were pretty well exhausted.

Fortunately, having reached the valley, they struck a fairly good road, and progress became much easier. A walk of about a mile brought them to a pine wood, which they entered, for on the high-road they might at any moment have come upon some traveller or homeward-tramping peasant. They had gone about a mile through the pine wood, when Douglas, whose eyes were everywhere, thought he caught sight of a light. He immediately called his companions' attention to it, and all halted in the shadow of the trees. Nat sat down, and Billy and Douglas, stepping a little apart, discussed his condition in whispered tones.

'He's simply full of pluck, and will go on until he drops before he'll say a word,' cried Billy. 'It's imperative to get food, even if I have to demand it at the muzzle of my pistol.'

'True! I'd as soon be shot as starved to death. Nat must have rest too.'

'I'll go on alone, find out whence this light proceeds, and endeavour to get food. It can only be a solitary house, and I ought to be able to hold my own against any people there, for they're almost sure to be unarmed.'

'If you should get into any difficulty, fire your pistol, and I'll come along at the double.'

'Right-o!' and Billy went off. He proceeded with the utmost caution, and approaching the light, saw that it came from an open door. The door belonged to a small, thatched, two-storey house, with a garden in front, and having a barn or stable at the side. Altogether it had the appearance of a superior sort of cottage.

Having ascertained this much, Billy, his pistol ready to his hand, crept along the garden path and approached the door, keeping well in the shadow. The door itself was shaded by a porch, which had a seat on each side, and into this porch Billy crept and peeped inside the house.

A strange scene met his gaze, and the sound of a human voice fell upon his ears. Lying at the foot of a flight of stairs was a big, heavy old man, groaning now and then as if in pain. Over him stooped a small, thin woman of about the same age, who seemed to be making strenuous efforts to lift the man, though the task was clearly beyond her strength. 'Do make an effort, Hans,' she was saying. 'Can you not sit up, and then I can make you more comfortable until I procure help?'

A groan was the only answer. Again the woman made an effort, but once more without result. In apparent despair, she let the man's shoulders slip down, and he seemed to be in a more uncomfortable position than before.

'Oh Thou good God,' groaned the woman, 'what shall I do? If I leave him here he

will choke, or catch his death of cold, and I can no more lift him than I could the house.' Seating herself upon the stairs, she rocked herself to and fro, and wept silently.

Billy thought for a moment, and one thing soon became quite clear. The old man and woman were quite alone in the house, or she would have got assistance in endeavouring to lift him; hence there was no need to fear interruption from others.

Besides, the woman was evidently in distress, and needed help, and the young officer's chivalry was aroused. In any case, he would do what he could for her, and then throw himself upon her mercy.

Having decided thus far, Billy stepped into the passage and stood before her. 'You seem in trouble, mother,' he said. 'Can I be of any assistance to you?'

The old woman looked up at him through her tears, and noted the sturdy limbs and strong form. 'Who are you, and whence do you come?' she asked simply.

'I am one who, like you, is in trouble. I can help you, and mayhap you can help me in return.'

'I cannot help a great strong fellow like you,' she replied; 'and I have nothing to give away.'

'I want nothing.'

'You are of the army, it seems.'

'Yes,' replied Billy, without thinking it necessary to explain that he was not a member of the German Army, which the old woman

appeared to think. 'Tell me what has happened.'

'My man, Hans here, got home late, not feeling well. He was going up to bed, when he slipped back down the stairs, and has either broken or sprained his leg. I cannot move him, and to let him lie there will be to kill him.'

Billy bent over the man, and looked at the great red face. The eyes were closed, and Hans was decidedly snoring. One thing seemed pretty clear. The old man had been drinking, which explained his inability to move. His left leg was doubled up beneath him, and might well be broken, as the old woman had said.

Another thing was clear to Billy. By himself he could do nothing; Hans weighed seventeen stone, if he weighed a pound, and it would take a couple of men to lift him.

Billy's mind was made up in a moment. Here were both a refuge and food. He would do what he could for the old couple, and in return he would demand assistance. 'Get some cold water,' he said; and the old woman obtained a bowl of it. 'Now bring a towel.'

This was brought, and Billy soaked the towel and wrung it out. 'Hold this to your husband's head,' he said, 'and, whatever you do, don't leave him. I will return in a few minutes, and will get him upstairs.'

With these words he ran off, and rejoining Douglas, told him in a few words what had happened.

‘What a rummy go!’ said Douglas. ‘It looks like a slice of luck.’

‘We must make it so. And now let’s be off.—Can you manage a few hundred yards, Nat?’

‘Ay, or a few thousand!’ and, full of pluck, Nat struggled to his feet.

In five minutes more they were at the house and had entered. The old woman, whose name they afterwards discovered was Nannerl, still knelt by Hans, holding the wet towel to his head. Billy’s first care was to shut and fasten the door; then he and Douglas lifted Hans and laid him flat upon his back. A cursory examination showed that his leg was not broken, but, to judge by the swelling, he had probably sprained his ankle.

‘Get a light, and show us where you want him taken to,’ said Billy; and Nannerl silently obeyed.

They ascended the stairs, and put the old man comfortably to bed. Nat, who knew something of surgery, confirmed Billy’s theory that the damage to the leg was only a sprain, and a cold-water compress was placed round the ankle.

‘Now all he wants is a day or two’s rest, and he’ll be all right,’ said Billy.

‘You are very kind, honoured sir; but I have no money with which to pay you,’ said Nannerl.

‘Don’t trouble about that,’ replied Billy. ‘We want food, and a room to sleep in. As you see, we are army officers, and are

on important business. We will pay you well.'

At the mention of paying, old Nannerl pricked up her ears. 'I am poor,' she said, 'and if I can earn an honest penny I shall be glad. I work hard in our bit of garden and at knitting, but Hans has expensive habits. The life is hard.'

Billy took some ten-franc French notes from his pocket. 'Oblige us, and these are yours,' he said.

Nannerl eyed them longingly. 'Are you of our own army?' she asked.

'Mother, don't ask questions, and you won't be deceived,' interposed Nat. 'You have food, have you not?'

'I have bacon, eggs, cheese, some pork, bread, and prunes.'

'Then, for Heaven's sake, let us have something to eat! And you had better bolt your door, for we don't want any visitors. You understand?'

'The honourable gentlemen need not fear,' replied Nannerl. 'There is no one living within two miles, and no travellers pass on this road at night. This is the last house.'

'Good!' said Billy. 'Now, then, for the food.'

A meal, well cooked and substantial, was soon ready, and old Nannerl, used though she probably was to the big appetites of her bucolic acquaintances, opened her eyes in wonder at the huge quantities her soldier guests devoured.

But then she did not know all the circumstances of the case, nor could she guess that forty-eight hours had elapsed since they had eaten their last square meal. Having finished, they all felt very much better, and the desire for sleep began to make itself felt. First, however, arrangements had to be made with Nannerl, and Billy, who had done most of the talking, said he should like five minutes' conversation with her.

'Speak on, sir! I am listening,' said Nannerl; and Billy proceeded to state their case.

CHAPTER XXVII.

NANNERL PROVES STAUNCH.

‘FOR reasons which I need not explain,’ he said, ‘we three are very desirous of travelling without being seen or known. We are, in fact, making for the frontier, and we do not wish to meet any—er—officials on the way.’

‘You are enemies of my country,’ said Nannerl simply.

‘Well, not to put too fine a point upon it, we are.’

‘And you are trying to escape?’

‘Just so.’

‘Well, I have no sympathy with this war. The good God and the Kaiser know why we are fighting; I do not. My only son was taken for the army, and he is a prisoner of the English.’

‘Then depend upon it he will be well treated, and when the war is over will return to you.’

‘Is that truth? They say in the village that the English kill all their prisoners.’

‘A monstrous untruth, Nannerl! They are well cared for.’

‘That is the best news I have heard for many a day. Are you sure it is true?’

‘Quite.’

‘Well, you have been kind to me, and done me a service. I will believe you.’

‘I want you to do more. I want you to give us a night’s shelter, and, if possible, procure us some other clothes. We will pay you well.’

‘Shelter you may have, but the clothes—ah! I am afraid that is impossible.’

‘Still, you are willing to help us?’

‘You will pay me?’

‘Handsomely.’

‘And if you should be found here, you will say you compelled me to obey you, as our own soldiers would?’

‘We will exonerate you in every way.’

‘Then you can count on my help. What is this war to me? What have we poor people to gain? What have we to look forward to except privation and the loss of our sons?’

‘Very good, then. Now, I noticed several rooms upstairs. Give us one to sleep in, and see that we are not disturbed.’

‘That I will do. Follow me!’

Lighting a small hand-lamp, she led the way upstairs to a front room. There was a fair-sized bed in it which would accommodate two, and in a sort of loft, reached by going up a short ladder, was a kind of box, containing a bed, which would do for a third.

‘This is topping,’ said Billy. ‘We can get a good night’s rest, and shall feel fit for anything in the morning.’

The old woman, leaving the lamp behind, went downstairs.

‘Don’t you think we are trusting this old body very freely?’ asked Douglas when they were alone.

‘I do,’ agreed Billy, ‘but I don’t see anything else for it. She hasn’t anything to gain by betraying us, and if we said she had been willing to assist us, she might get into severe trouble. To a certain extent she is in our power.—What do you say, Nat?’

‘I rather think we may trust her. At any rate, she runs a risk if any one should find us here. If she means mischief, she will inform against us. Indeed, she would have to, to save her face.’

‘In that case she must leave the house, and we should hear her,’ said Douglas. ‘We will all pretend to go sound off to sleep, but Billy and I will watch for an hour each. If by that time she hasn’t departed to rouse up the local Landsturm, we’ll sleep in peace.’

‘I’ll take first watch,’ said Nat.

‘You’ll do nothing of the sort,’ said Billy; ‘and as you require rest more than either of us, you’ll have the box-bed in the loft all to yourself. In case of accidents we could all three retire there and hold it for some time. It would be an awkward place to rush.’

Nat endeavoured to persuade his companions to allow him to watch first, but they bundled him into the loft, and in ten minutes he was sound asleep.

Billy and Douglas sat on the bed for a while listening, but in half-an-hour’s time they heard Nannerl ascend the stairs and enter

her room to go to bed. Convinced of the old woman's honesty, they both turned in; nor did they wake until it was broad daylight.

They were both rather puzzled for a few moments, and could not remember where they were. Then they began hurrying on their clothes, and went downstairs. Old Nannerl was unconcernedly preparing breakfast, and inquired of them how they had slept.

They said they had never slept sounder, and asked if they could first have a wash and then some breakfast.

Nannerl showed them a sink at which they could perform their ablutions, and said that afterwards they had better return upstairs, when she would bring their breakfast up.

Nat was wakened, and he washed as the others had done. A breakfast as plentiful as the supper had been was then disposed of, after which the three had a long conversation with the old woman.

Nat learnt from her their whereabouts, and the fact that they were fourteen miles from Altstadt, the road to which she explained to them. She said she had a suit of clothes belonging to her son Max, who was the prisoner of the English she had spoken of the night before. This suit would fit Billy or Douglas, and she would sell it. The one who wore it might go into the village two miles distant, and there buy some other things. She did not advise that, however, as, though he might pass very well for a Prussian, he might be asked for papers, and if he could not pro-

duce these, unpleasant consequences might follow.

There was much wisdom in Nannerl's remarks, and the three pilots sat for more than an hour weighing pros and cons, and discussing their next step.

'There's one thing certain; we can't stay here,' said Nat. 'It wouldn't be fair to the old lady. My idea is to make for Altstadt, and try Uncle Lincke. We may strike lucky. As I said, he is under some slight obligation to me. If we can get there undiscovered, all may be well; if not—well, we're prisoners wherever they take us, and it don't matter much where.'

Billy and Douglas were quite of the same opinion, and so the matter was arranged.

Notwithstanding the great advantage it would give them to procure civilian clothes, even if these consisted merely of coats and caps, it was deemed unwise that Billy should risk going into so small a place as the village, as a stranger would inevitably call attention to himself. Besides, if they were discovered, they might bring trouble upon Nannerl, and this they would on no account do.

'We'll wait till it gets dusk, and then start off,' said Nat. 'We'll rest during the day, remaining in our bedroom, and keeping a watch on any one coming up to the house. In case of need we can retire to the loft, and if danger should come—well, we are armed.'

'We must have some food to take with us.'

said Billy. 'How would it do to get Nannerl to go down into the village and buy some?'

'I don't like the idea,' replied Douglas. 'Until we are gone, I think it would be unwise for the old woman to go too far out of our sight. It is not that I distrust her, but you know women are sometimes garrulous.'

'Agreed,' said Nat. 'And I dare say the old woman can let us have enough food to last our journey.'

Later on Nannerl brought the clothes, and Billy put them on. His chin being unshaven, and his hands and face rubbed over with earth, he made a very fair peasant. The question of the food being arranged, the three had a sleep in the afternoon, and after a good, hearty tea, made their preparations for departure.

During the day they had dressed old Hans's sprain, Nat telling him that they were medical men travelling on the Continent for the purpose of research!

Hans, who was a rather dense person, looked with a puzzled air at his visitors, and tried to remember something of last night's happenings. But beyond the fact that he had stayed very late at the village inn he had no recollection, and so he dismissed the matter from his mind. On leaving the room Nat remarked to his friends that it would be well to leave to Nannerl the making of such explanations as she thought necessary.

So, having again consulted with the old woman about the road across the hills, and made a sketch from her description, the three

adventurers, with their food tied up in a handkerchief, took their leave of the dame who had befriended them so well.

She turned over the handsome present Billy had given her, slowly counting the notes. Then she shook hands with the three of them, and assured them that she wished them all good luck.

They thanked her, and Billy told her she had better arrange with Hans to keep his mouth closed about them.

Nannerl smiled. 'I can manage that,' she said simply; and so, with a wave of the hand in farewell, the three set out on their further adventures.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A SUSPICIOUS CUSTOMER.

THE directions given by old Nannerl, which Nat had sketched on a small map, proved of very great assistance, and, sure of the road, the trio set out. The district was a wild and lonely one, and the road chosen, right across the hills, was one on which they were not likely to meet any one, especially at night.

Every here and there they saw the distant twinkle of a light in some lonely cottage, but even such humble abodes were infrequent and easily avoided.

They made good progress so long as the moon lasted, but when it sank and they were in total darkness they had a great difficulty in finding their way. They had, however, covered a good many miles, and knew that more than half their journey was done. At last, it being so dark that they had not the least knowledge of which way they ought to go, Nat suggested that they should make a halt.

‘We may go blundering on and get right out of our track,’ he said, ‘and it may be difficult to pick it up again.’

‘That is so,’ agreed Billy. ‘So far, we know we are pretty right.’

‘Besides, we should run the risk of blunder-

ing into some one or other whom we might not want to see,' said Douglas. 'I certainly think it will be best to find some place where we may rest till daybreak, and then take our bearings.'

All being of the same opinion, when presently they found themselves among some scrubby bush they laid themselves down on the lee side of a big clump, for the wind was decidedly cold, and huddling together for warmth, they endeavoured to get some sleep.

They did indeed doze, but that was all; and when the sky in the east began to turn gray and then pink, heralding the advent of another day, all three were unfeignedly thankful.

They arose, and stamped their feet and beat their arms on their chests to warm themselves. Then, as the light increased, they looked around them, and about a mile farther on saw a big fir patch growing on the hillside.

'That will afford us some shelter,' said Billy, 'and it may be as well to make for it before it gets too light. We don't know what's round us, and on this hillside we might easily be spotted from below.'

This advice was too good to be neglected, and they made for the clump of firs at their best speed. As they walked on, the mists in the valley below them began to clear, and several dwellings could be seen.

'We didn't start any too soon,' muttered Nat, and all three felt easier when they were in among the dark trees. It was a capital place in which to discuss the viands they had

obtained from Nannerl, and having eaten and obtained a drink from a brook close by, they felt considerably refreshed.

‘I think our best plan would be to push on as far as we can in safety,’ said Billy. ‘We are perfectly secure from observation so long as we keep among the trees. The more travelling we can do in daylight the easier for us.’

This was also agreed to, and they were able to get another three miles on their journey, to a point where their path would have led them along a bare hillside, on which they could easily have been seen from below.

About a mile away a fair-sized town could be seen, and Nat was of opinion he knew the place.

‘I motored over a good bit of the country when I was staying with the Linckes. I fancy I know that old ruin-looking thing I can just see through the glasses.’

The others looked, and saw the ruin Nat alluded to.

‘If it’s the place I think it is, about five miles ought to see us at the end of our journey. And that reminds me, I shall have to fix Uncle Lincke, and it won’t do for me to go prowling around in uniform. I should probably give the whole show away.’

‘I’ve thought of that once or twice,’ said Billy. ‘What will you do? Change clothes with me?’

‘That might do, but even your clothes might attract some attention. Old Lincke’s

place is not one that a peasant fellow makes afternoon calls at.'

'What do you propose, then?'

'Well, the sight of that town gives me an idea, if you'd care to run the risk.'

'Say on; what is it?'

'Your disguise is good. Your German will pass here well enough, and you are quite dirty enough to look the peasant. I was thinking, if you could go down to the town and buy a soft, fashionable hat, a light sort of overcoat, and a silk handkerchief, I could get myself up well enough to pass in the dark for a young German buck, especially if you could get me a pair of glasses.'

'I'm game to make the attempt,' said Billy; but Douglas thought it was running a big risk.

'So it is,' said Nat; 'and, after all, why should Billy go? We can change togs now, and I can take my luck at the marketing.'

But Billy would not allow that. 'No! no!' he said; 'the idea was that I should go, and I am getting used to this peasant business. I begin to feel that I *am* a peasant, and that is half the battle. The feeling would be new to you. I'll go, and that's settled.'

Nothing his companions could say would alter him, and presently he wished them both good-bye, and sauntered off down the road as though he had passed the hills from the west. Assuming a rather lumbering walk, he went on at a good pace, and as he neared the town, passed one or two people, men and women.

with whom he exchanged a gruff '*Guten Morgen,*' and plodded on.

None of those he met took much notice of him until he overtook an old man wheeling a barrow. This old fellow, more garrulous than the rest, asked Billy where he had come from, and what his business was in the town. Billy made suitable replies, and said his business was to buy a new coat, as he hoped soon to be paying a visit to a young woman in a neighbouring village, and was anxious to look his best.

'Ha! ha!' chuckled the old man; 'always the same! You young men think ever of the maidens and of smart clothes. Such things ought not to be allowed in the middle of a great war. And, by the way, how is it you are not in the army?'

Billy put on a very knowing look, and patting the old man on the back, said, 'There is important work for clever artisans to do. It is not only those who are in uniform who are doing the Kaiser's work.'

'Ha!' ejaculated the old man, dropping the barrow-handles and staring at his companion; 'what are you, then? Not a—a'—— and he paused.

'Have you heard of the secret service?' whispered Billy.

The old man's hands shook as he again clutched the barrow-handles. 'No offence, sir; no offence,' he muttered. 'I half-guessed when I saw your hands.'

Billy thrust the tell-tale hands into his

pockets, put on a reassuring look, winked at the old man, and again slapping him on the back, said, 'Never fear; you're an honest fellow, I'll swear. What's your name?'

'Jacob Schwann, sir.'

'Come, then; let's push on;' and side by side they entered the town, Billy talking confidentially to the old man and calling him Jacob.

The town was a rather sleepy place, there being only women, old men, and children to be seen. Many people seemed to know Jacob, and exchanged a few words with him, giving Billy a passing glance.

Presently they came to a ready-made clothes emporium, and Billy purchased a coat, a cap, a handkerchief, and some collars. The coat and the cap he tried on, looking at himself in the glass, and asking whether they suited him or not, as he particularly wanted to look smart. He blushed a little as he said that, and behaved with becoming awkwardness. The old shop-keeper looked knowing, put five marks on to the price, and Billy took his parcel under his arm.

At an inn near by he saw old Jacob, who begged him to step in and drink a jug of beer with him, and, though fuming with impatience, Billy thought it best to do as he was asked. He then paid for another jug of beer for Jacob and a wizened-looking man, who listened very carefully to what was said, spoke little himself, but whose twinkling little eyes were very busy. Drinking his beer, Billy

said he must be going, and strolled off. He reached the outskirts of the town, and looked back. Was it fancy, or could he descry the wizened-looking old man standing in the middle of the road staring after him?

CHAPTER XXIX.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

THE sight of the old man gave Billy a start. He had felt suspicious of him from the first, and assuring himself that the old man was really watching him, he rapidly turned over in his mind a scheme for putting him off the scent.

He was just then at a point where two footpaths—for they were little more—met. The right-hand path led towards the fir copse in which his friends were; the left led up over the hills, towards the village on the other side from which Billy had given out that he had started.

He took the left-hand path, and strode along as though he had not noticed the old man watching him. His one fear was that Nat or Douglas might be watching him through the glasses, and seeing him, as they would imagine, going astray, would come from their hiding-place to put him right, and thus be discovered. No such accident happened, however, and Billy climbed the road until he had crossed the ridge. Then, doubling back, he again made for the fir copse. After he had gone a little distance, it struck him that it would be a very good thing to get rid of his parcel. To do so, he attired himself in the cap and coat, and put the smaller things in his pocket.

‘If that old villain should be keeping a watch from a distance,’ he thought, ‘he would not recognise me in this long coat; and, besides, it’s easier wearing clothes than carrying them.’

There were more villages visible from the side of the hills on which Billy then was than from the side on which they had been travelling. Accordingly there was greater danger of being observed, and Billy was very glad when, having struggled and stumbled along for a mile and a half, on topping the ridge again, he saw the fir copse almost immediately below him.

The descent was a difficult one, owing to the steepness and roughness of the ground, but at last Billy reached the copse, and was soon joined by his companions.

He seated himself on the trunk of a tree which had been blown down, and wiped the perspiration from his brow. ‘Hot work,’ he muttered.

‘You’ve been jolly successful, however,’ said Nat gleefully. ‘That cap and coat will do me down to the ground. Uncle Lincke will be powerless to resist ’em.’

‘Why did you branch away to the left and cross the hill?’ asked Douglas. ‘Were you afraid of being followed?’

‘I was.’

‘I told Douglas that was the reason,’ said Nat. ‘He wanted to come out and give you a “view-haloo,” but I said I bet you knew what you were about, and counselled waiting.’

I was watching you through my glasses, and I saw you strike into the path as though you were perfectly aware of what you were doing. There was no hesitation, as there would have been in a man who was not sure of his way. I told Douglas I was positive you had some reason for what you did.'

'You were quite right, Nat. And now listen to what happened, for we must discuss at once what our next move should be.'

He then related the facts, and both Nat and Douglas agreed with him that the circumstance was very suspicious.

'It won't do to run any risk of being discovered by leaving the copse until it is dark,' said Nat.

'But if they should search it in the meantime?' asked Douglas.

'We must take our chance of avoiding discovery,' said Billy. 'They wouldn't send many on such a job, and if it comes to the worst, we shall have to make a fight for it.'

Being agreed on these points, the three of them lay among the trees, taking it in turns to watch the village below and the road leading from it. In about a couple of hours several men were seen to leave the village, and to be climbing the road that led over the hills. Through his powerful Zeiss glass, as they came nearer, Billy was able to recognise the wizened old man, and with him were three other men, clearly either soldiers or policemen. Douglas and Nat looked long and steadily also, and quite agreed that the party consisted

of three men in uniform and one in civilian attire. The party went on until the road forked, and then they took the one Billy had followed.

‘By Jove, Billy! that was a cute idea of yours,’ chuckled Douglas. ‘They’ve fallen into the trap in genuine German fashion.’

‘But they’ll fall out again—also in genuine German fashion,’ said Nat. ‘When they’ve satisfied themselves that the man they are after is not on that side of the hills, they’ll double back, depend upon it.’

‘And how long do you imagine it will take them to find out their mistake?’ asked Billy.

‘Goodness knows! An hour, two, four; but, anyway, it’s risky to stay here till night. They may set additional watchers the other side the hills, and they might cut us off by sending out half-a-dozen parties. These Germans are persistent chaps on a chase.’

‘Well, why not push boldly on and take our chance? In a couple of miles we shall be amongst that scrubby bush yonder, and can elude observation. If we meet any one on the way we must act as circumstances compel, and I don’t think any one could recognise us from the valley without good glasses.’

‘Come on, then!’ said Nat. ‘Anything to get moving; I’m no friend of the waiting game.’

He had already donned the coat and cap that Billy had procured for him, and Douglas was the only one whose uniform would be observable from a distance. He ‘camouflaged’

his appearance as much as possible by putting his cap in his pocket, taking off his tunic, and carrying it over his arm. All three being ready, they boldly left the fir copse, and, walking with great difficulty on the uneven ground, struck out for the stunted bushes spoken of by Billy.

The road dropped and led nearer the village, so that there was considerable danger of arousing attention; but luck was with the fugitives, and the bushes were reached. Here, by stooping and by moving separately, they ran little risk of being discovered; and presently reaching a road which cut along between a fold in the hills, they made their way in comparative safety from observation.

'I am now perfectly sure of my way,' said Nat. 'I know where I am. A few miles will bring us to our journey's end, and then we shall know what to expect. When we get out of this mountain-road we shall reach a small river, along the banks of which we shall travel until we come to Felsau Woods. There I shall leave you, to put my theories to the test. We shall soon know whether we are going to be treated as the honoured guests or as the villains of the piece.'

It all happened as Nat had foretold, and they reached the woods without accident. Billy and Douglas found a place of concealment, and presently saw Nat, as cheerful as though he were going for a stroll down Broadway, disappear upon about as risky an errand as can well be conceived.

CHAPTER XXX.

COMFORTABLE QUARTERS.

BILLY and Douglas watched their friend disappear with no very enthusiastic feelings. They felt that he had embarked upon an exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, task, and considered what their own feelings and conduct would have been had the situation been reversed, and they, in their own land, had been asked to shelter the enemies of their country.

‘I really wonder how he has the audacity to think of such a thing,’ said Douglas.

‘It seems a bit thick to us; but the Americans are a smart people, and Nat is rather a wonder in his way. I verily believe he would talk a Jew out of his money.’

‘Well, we shall see,’ said Douglas; and they made the best arrangements they could to pass the time until their companion’s return.

Darkness fell, and two hours, three, four, passed, with no sign or sound of Nat.

‘I fear he’s failed,’ said Douglas.

‘Perhaps so. Anyhow, I hope he’s not fallen into the hands of the Philistines himself.’

‘So do I. We must wait another hour or so; but if we hear nothing by then, I think we had better get off back to the mountains, and trust to our luck to getting—somewhere.’

‘Yes; I’m not keen on seeing the inside of a German prison or internment camp. I’d much rather go down fighting.’

Another hour passed, and the two airmen had begun to think of making a retreat while they had a chance of doing so, when a stealthy footstep sounded near them, and some one was heard whistling ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’

‘By Jove! I believe it’s Nat,’ whispered Billy.

‘Don’t be too sure,’ replied Douglas. ‘Any one can whistle a well-known tune like that.’

The whistler paused, and then began to whistle ‘Scots wha ha’e.’

‘That’s good enough,’ cried Douglas, and he took up the tune.

In an instant some one approached them, and they were shaking Nat heartily by the hand.

‘What luck?’ asked Billy.

‘All the luck in the world! Uncle Lincke looked a bit blue at first, but I made out such a pretty tale—may the Lord forgive me!—that he began to see things a bit from my point of view. Then Senta—bless her foot!—came to my assistance, and I won the old man over. When I told him there were two more of us, he looked very sick; but I said such nice things about you that again he wobbled. He also thinks we are only staying a night with him, and in that belief I’ve left him. I’ve been a long time, but I had to go to work cautiously to get into the house without being seen by the servants, and to obtain speech

with Senta. And now let's hop off in double-quick time. Senta holds the garden door, and I want to get back before uncle can properly realise what's happened. Once we're in his house we'll be all right, as it would be awkward for him to explain how we got there, and he'll be mum for his own sake.'

Long before Nat had finished speaking they were all on their way out of the woods and walking at a good pace.

'Upon my word, you're the limit, Nat,' said Billy. 'How you manage it I don't know.'

'Don't trouble, sonny; and, above all, don't talk. We're in the enemy's country, and the less talking the better. And that reminds me, neither you nor Douglas had better give away the fact that you speak or understand German. We'll see how the plot develops, and mature our plans accordingly.'

Leaving the wood, they entered a road which ran between high trees, then crossed a stream by a wooden bridge, and turned down what in the darkness seemed like a country lane. At the end of this Nat peeped out to right and left, and the road being clear, beckoned to his two companions. They all walked rapidly for about half a mile down a good road, until they reached a wall, apparently surrounding a house, and at a small door Nat rapped with his knuckles. It was at once opened by a female figure wrapped in a shawl; the three passed in, and the door was shut and bolted. Crossing a garden, they

all four ascended some iron steps and entered a house.

‘All right so far. Now, remain here and keep quiet until I return;’ and Nat and the female departed. Presently he came back alone. ‘It’s going all right,’ he said. ‘Woycke, the old man’s secretary, is away on military service, and I’ve arranged with Senta that we shall have his room. It’s a big one at the top of the house, and I know it well. Come with me.’

They ascended the stairs, and soon found themselves in a big bedroom in which was a double bed. A small truckle-bed stood in a corner, and some one had placed a heap of bedclothes handy.

‘All Senta’s doing,’ said Nat. ‘Now you two turn in. I’m going down again to talk to “uncle.” I shall lock the door behind me, so as to make sure you are not disturbed.’

They had brought a candle up with them, and its light showed that there was a gas-bracket over the fireplace. Nat at once lit the gas, and then cast his eyes round the room. In one corner was a large cupboard. Opening the door, Nat gave an exclamation of delight.

‘Eureka!’ he cried; ‘old Woycke’s clobber! Here’s luck indeed!’ and he took down several coats, and removed some trousers from a press.

‘He was about my height,’ he said; and removing the greatcoat which he had worn all the time, he divested himself of his uniform.

and in ten minutes was dressed in a complete suit of civilian clothing.

'This puts me easy,' he said. 'Now tumble into bed like good little boys, and leave everything to uncle and me.'

Laughing in spite of themselves at Nat's *sang froid*, Billy and Douglas got into bed; nor did they awake until broad daylight, when they found Nat fast asleep in the truckle-bed.

They lay for some time without waking him up, but presently Douglas said it would be as well to do so to hear what his plans for the day were.

On being roused Nat yawned, looked about him, and sat up in his bed.

His wound was getting along very well, and Billy remarked that it had been strapped in a professional manner.

'Uncle Lincke's work,' explained Nat.

'Why, it's like a hospital job.'

'Well, considering Uncle Lincke is a doctor, that's not strange.'

'A doctor, is he?' said Billy in surprise.

'Didn't I mention that fact?'

'Never a word.'

'Then I didn't consider it important.'

'He's a pretty smart doctor, and he tells me he's chief medical officer to a camp for British and French military prisoners about a mile from here.'

'By Jove, what a rummy thing!' said Billy.

'It is, rather. Now let's hop out and perform our ablutions as best we can in this

somewhat primitive hand-basin. Our Hunnish friends are not great on hygiene, and there isn't, or at least there wasn't, such a thing as a bathroom in the house.'

The washing being performed, Nat thoroughly rummaged the wardrobe of Herr Woycke, and when he had finished, all three of them were attired in German civilian clothes. They were rather a mixture as to taste, and a little easy as to fit; but, as Nat said, 'they obliterated all traces of their British nationality.'

'Now you stay here while I go down and reconnoitre,' said Nat. After being away about ten minutes he returned, saying that breakfast would be brought up to them by an old woman. They were on no account to speak to her; in fact, they were to be quite ignorant of German. 'She's Senta's old nurse, and is devoted to her. She can be trusted, but you'd better leave all the talking to me.'

Billy and Douglas were quite willing, feeling it could not be in better hands.

In due course the breakfast arrived, the old woman looking kindly at the young men, and wishing them '*Guten Morgen.*' They smiled and bowed in return, and the old woman laughed.

After breakfast Nat appeared, and brought some very good German cigars. 'Smoke, rest, and don't leave the room,' he said.

Dinner was brought up in the same way, and evening came on. With it came Nat.

'We're going down to see uncle,' he said.

'He's supped well, and is now quite mellow. Don't forget you speak no German, and leave everything to me.'

The three descended to a comfortably furnished room on the ground floor. The gas was shaded with great green shades, and heavy green curtains hung at the windows. Seated at a table was a stout, bald-headed German, wearing gold-rimmed spectacles. He had on a military uniform, the tunic of which he had unbuttoned for greater comfort. A large beer-tankard stood before him on the table, and a big-bowled pipe was in his mouth.

'Here are my friends, uncle,' said Nat, and Billy and Douglas bowed.

Dr Lincke looked at them, grunted, and seemed to take no more notice of them. Nat began talking of them and their families, their wealth, and so on, and, to the surprise of both Billy and Douglas, made them out to the doctor to be Americans.

Not being supposed to understand German, they could not contradict their friend, and they had to listen to what Douglas afterwards described 'as some very tall talk.'

The doctor replied in a disinterested manner, and presently bade Nat get out the chessmen. Before the two sat down to play, Senta joined them, and displayed a great deal more interest in the young airmen than did her father.

She could speak some English, or, as she quaintly described it, American, and both Billy and Douglas were delighted to be able

to talk, though they had to father a good many of Nat's fictions.

Presently Senta asked the young men if they liked music, and on their saying they loved it, they went into an adjoining room, where they found a piano and several albums of English songs.

Music was a language they all understood, and they had passed a very pleasant hour or so when Nat joined them, and said to Douglas, in English, of course, 'Now, young feller, my lad, I'll take a turn at the harmony while you go and play uncle a game of chess, and'—he whispered—'mind he beats you.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

NAT MAKES AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY.

SEVERAL days passed. Billy and Douglas spent most of their time during the day in their bedroom, in which they had most of their meals; their evenings they passed with 'Uncle' Lincke, or in walking about in the garden, which was of large extent. The only servants they saw were Martha, Senta's old nurse, and her husband Fritz, who was gardener, chauffeur, and handy man generally.

No one seemed to take any notice of them, and as they discussed the matter among themselves, it seemed as if they were there for the duration of the war.

'Prisoners of war under specially favourable conditions,' said Douglas.

'True! I'm anxious to be doing something again. In fact, I don't know how the authorities would look upon our loitering here.'

'And Nat is so jolly close about his plans.'

'It's his way when he has anything big on. You remember how quiet he was about the Vogt affair until he'd got everything cut and dried.'

'That is so, and how he misled us all into thinking he had gone upon a sort of bu'st. Well, I suppose we must leave it all to him, though I wish he'd be a bit more communicative.'

Billy and Douglas had some ground for their reflections. Nat seemed perfectly at home, and was busy all day. His friends saw but little of him, and in answer to their questions he gave them a knowing look, and said things were going all right. How or when he proposed to make a move and endeavour to cross the frontier he kept to himself.

One evening, however, he carefully locked the bedroom door when he came up to bed, and rousing Billy and Douglas, who had been asleep for some time, he bade them get up and listen to what he had to tell them. They were immediately on the alert, and the three, sitting round the double bed, held solemn conclave.

‘Boys,’ said Nat, ‘I had formed a grand plan for kicking the dust of this enlightened country off our feet, and, by the help of uncle, who, I may tell you, would have been an unconscious confederate, to-morrow I meant to have put my scheme to the test.’

‘What’s happened to alter the programme?’ asked Douglas. ‘No difficulty that we can’t surmount, I hope, for I’m getting tired of this inactivity.’

‘Not more so than I am, my boy; but the fact is that my plan included only us three, but now I find there will be four of us.’

‘Four!’ said Billy and Douglas in a breath, and in the mind of each the image of Senta arose.

Nat seemed to divine their thoughts, for he

burst out laughing. 'No, you need not be afraid,' he said. 'It's not a case of an elopement. Come to think of it, it would be rather a novel thing for a lady to elope with three admirers at once, eh?'

'Very,' said Douglas dryly, and Billy turned colour slightly, as he lovingly thought of Lucy Hastings. He smiled to himself at the thought of *his* eloping with anything German, although Senta was certainly a very nice girl, and had behaved like a trump to them.

'Who is the fourth member of the party?' asked Billy.

'Some one you know well enough.'

'What do you mean? I know no one here. Why, you don't, you can't, mean'—and Billy paused as if he could not bring himself to give voice to a hope that had sprung up suddenly in his breast.

'My dear old chap, the fourth member of our party will be *your cousin, Oliver Hastings!*'

The surprise, the joy, the excitement of Billy and Douglas cannot be adequately described. They could hardly be prevented from giving a ringing British shout, and the coolness of Nat only tended to increase their enthusiasm.

'Tell us! Tell us all!' cried Billy, seizing Nat's arm in no gentle grip.

'There's not much to tell. You remember I told you Uncle Lincke is medical officer of the prisoners' camp. I have always been very much interested in the prisoners, and have

talked a lot to uncle about them. He doesn't say much till he's got his beer and his pipe, but I gathered there were three British officers amongst the crowd, all wounded. I have asked him lots of questions about these prisoners, but he wasn't very much interested, and I learnt but little. He carries a little despatch-case, however, and I know that in it are certain official documents relating to those prisoners who are under medical treatment, and I always meant to have a look into that case. To-night I got my chance. Dear old uncle fell asleep, and left the key in his despatch-case. I ran through its contents, and learnt several things, one being that Captain Oliver Hastings is in Hohfeld camp—that is the name of the camp of which Uncle Lincke is in charge—and that he is suffering from a gunshot wound in his right wrist.'

'Thank God for that news!' said Billy fervently.

'What! that your cousin is a prisoner of war and wounded?' said Nat with a twinkle in his eye.

'No, but that he's alive. Nat, we *must* win free. My uncle must be informed of this joyous news as soon as possible.' Then, after a pause, he faltered, 'I suppose there is no possibility of any mistake?'

'I should not think so. It is pretty evident that Captain Hastings *is* a prisoner, else how could they have got his name?'

'True! And now, how to communicate with



He saw a figure crouching down against the wall.

E. A.

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him; how to let him know that friends are near?’

‘That shall be my task,’ said Nat. ‘You know I walked the hospitals in New York for a time, and friend Lincke and I often have a professional chat. I have persuaded him that I am greatly interested in gunshot-wounds, and to-morrow morning I am going to accompany him to the camp. Leave it to me to make some sort of arrangement; then we shall have to put our heads together as to the best way of leaving Altstadt behind us and getting across the Rhine.’

Needless to say, the next day was one of great excitement for Billy and Douglas.

Nat went off in the morning with the doctor, and returned soon after midday. He at once sought his friends. ‘It’s all right,’ he said; ‘it’s he, and I’ve had a talk with him. His right arm is at present useless. He has been here some weeks, and is well treated. There are about seven hundred prisoners altogether. The camp is a mile from here, and the guard are old Landsturm men. The commandant is a beast, but is generally drunk, so we need not consider him. The prisoners go to bed at 9 P.M., and are undisturbed until the morning. They are lodged in huts, secured behind barbed wire, and the camp is surrounded in some places by walls, in others by fences.’

‘By Jove! you’ve found out a good deal.’

‘All I want to.’

‘And how was Oliver?’ asked Billy.

‘Very down about being a prisoner, but

delighted to think that help was near. He has not been able to write to his people on account of his wounded arm, and he does not know whether the German authorities have notified his capture.'

'Never mind,' said Billy. 'I hope they'll soon have to notify his escape.'

'And that's the very question I want to discuss with you. Put on your thinking-caps, and let's have a palaver, for my previous plan won't fit the present circumstances.'

During the day they discussed different ideas, and one determination they came to was that when all was dark and quiet they would creep down to the camp, examine the defences, and see for themselves what scheme offered the best chances of escape.

So as not to arouse unnecessarily the suspicion of the doctor, it was agreed that Billy and Nat should go down to the camp, while Douglas, who was the best chess-player, should remain behind to amuse their host and keep him quiet.

Accordingly, when Douglas had produced the chess-board, and the doctor had his pipe and beer-mug handy, Nat and Billy stole out, and, walking rapidly, soon reached the camp.

It bordered the road for some distance, being separated from it by a high wall, which had spikes on the top. They reached a place where a tree grew close to the wall, and by climbing this it was possible to look down into the camp. The huts could be plainly seen, also some brick buildings, for the place had

once been a factory. In these brick buildings were the offices and the quarters of the guards. No sentries were visible.

'This is a likely spot,' said Nat. 'If Hastings could get down here and cut the wire, he could reach the wall. We must procure a ladder for him to mount, and then bolt for our lives.'

'We shall want wire-nippers.'

'I'll engage to get those in the village to-morrow; also a pair of india-rubber gloves which the doctor uses in his laboratory, for the wire is sure to be a "live" wire. I mean to commandeer his motor-car, too, and then we shall have to trust to luck.'

They returned to the house without their absence being noticed, Senta, who was in all Nat's secrets, letting them in by the garden door.

The next day Nat procured the wire-cutters and the gloves, and again accompanying the doctor to the camp, managed to give the things to Oliver, and to arrange with him the details, pointing out to him the exact position of the tree, which could be seen from inside the camp, and telling him the signal he was to give when he was ready was to whistle the first bars of 'The Watch on the Rhine.' Ten o'clock the next night was to be the time; and if they failed on the first night the attempt was to be renewed on the next.

Douglas and Billy had found a light ladder in the garden which they were to take with them, and Senta was to provide a hamper of

food. The doctor's motor was to be borrowed, Nat undertaking to keep that gentleman quiet until their escape was an accomplished fact.

The next day seemed ages long to the three conspirators, who hardly knew what to do with themselves to pass the time, so excited were they. A hundred times they looked at their watches. They went into the garden, then back to their room, smoked, read, tried to sleep, until at length eight o'clock arrived, and they all descended to the doctor's sanctum.

Beer and tobacco and the inevitable chess-board were produced, and Senta played in an adjoining room. Nat was the only one who kept cool. He was playing chess with the doctor, who seemed to be unaccountably drowsy. Presently his head fell forward on his chest, and a snore announced that he had fallen asleep, just as he was about to give checkmate, too.

Instantly Nat got up, spoke a few words to Senta, seated the doctor comfortably in his arm-chair, and said, 'Now, gentlemen, time's up. Follow me; we must get busy.'

CHAPTER XXXII.

A PROMISING START.

AFTER exchanging a few more words with Senta, Nat led the way into the garden. 'What's the matter with the doctor?' asked Billy.

'Simply sleepy,' said Nat with a smile. 'He'll sleep till midnight; then he'll toddle off to bed, and know nothing till the morning. I popped a sedative into his gargle.'

In the garden Billy and Douglas seized their ladder, and went out through the little door into the lane. Nat lingered behind for a few minutes ere he joined them. At a good pace they started off down the road, Nat some distance ahead. There was a hedge on one side, with a ditch beneath it, which, as it had been dry for some time, fortunately contained no water. It was a bright moonlight night, and objects could be seen at a good distance. Suddenly Nat came running back. 'Into the ditch, you two, and lie doggo!' he cried; and almost before the words were out of his mouth, Billy and Douglas, with their ladder, were out of sight. Nat stood just in front of the place where they were concealed, apparently endeavouring to light his cigar with a patent lighter that would not work. As he was thus engaged there was a tramp of

feet, and a short civilian, accompanied by two elderly Landsturmern, hove in sight.

'Excuse me,' said Nat, with charming politeness, 'but could you oblige me with a match? My lighter won't work.'

The short man pulled up, as did the soldiers. All three looked at Nat, who was coolness itself. The old man took a box of safety-matches from his pocket and handed them to Nat, who lit his cigar.

'Very many thanks,' he said. 'Will you have a cigar?' and he handed his case to each of the three in turn.

The old man lit his, saying the soldiers were on duty, and could not smoke just then.

'Ah! some picket duty, eh?'

'No; we've been out on a wild-goose chase. There was a suspicious-looking character about a few days ago, and an English airman, or perhaps more than one, are supposed to be hiding in the country. We shall have 'em yet, if they aren't careful; but we've had no luck yet.'

'Heavens! I should not think an Englishman had the faintest chance of being in Germany a single day without being discovered.'

'You don't know; they're cunning, deceitful swine.'

'Well, good-night, and good luck! I must be getting on.' Nat went one way, and the three Germans the other.

Billy and Douglas lay quiet until Nat came tripping back. 'Did you know who that old monkey was?' he asked.

'Yes,' replied Billy; 'the man I met at the inn, who followed me across the hills.'

'He's a persistent old sleuth-hound. He's a secret police agent, for a thousand! Come on, boys; we must hustle; the chase is getting warm.'

In another ten minutes they were at the appointed spot. They hid under the tree until ten o'clock; then Nat whistled softly the first bars of 'The Watch on the Rhine.' There was no answering whistle, but in a minute or so a heavy footfall was heard on the other side of the wall.

Five—ten minutes went by; then a faint sound was heard, and Nat whistled his tune again. It was answered, and in five seconds Billy had his ladder against the wall and had mounted it. He saw a figure crouching down against the wall.

'Oliver!' whispered Billy.

'Billy, old man!'

'Thank God! I'll have the ladder over to you in a minute.'

Billy descended, and he and Douglas climbed the tree. Nat handed up the ladder; it was dropped over the wall; Oliver ascended, reached the top, was helped into the tree, and tenderly lowered to the ground.

Billy grabbed the ladder, drew it back, and in a minute was on the ground.

There was a hearty, forcible hand-gripping all round, and then Nat said, 'Form the order of march, boys! I'll go first, ladder-bearers in the rear;' and without another word they

started. A quarter of an hour later they had reached the doctor's house. They proceeded to the garden gate, where Nat gave the arranged signal.

'All is well,' he murmured to Senta, and then the whole party went to the front of the house.

'The car will be ready in five minutes,' said Senta.

While they were waiting Nat told her of their meeting with the old man and the two soldiers. 'There are some things we've left behind upstairs,' he added—'mostly clothes. Destroy everything in case of a search.'

The car came round, Fritz driving. Billy, Douglas, and Oliver got in; Nat stayed behind a moment, and took farewell of Senta rather tenderly. His friends turned away their heads, and in a few moments Nat joined them. Fritz started off, they slid away down the drive out into the road, and then Fritz 'let her go.'

The red cross painted on the head-lights was a passport for the car, and mile after mile slipped by. Conversation there was none; each was too busy with his own thoughts. They had gone for two hours at a great pace, passing through several small towns on the way, when Fritz pulled up, and told Nat they had reached their destination. The four fugitives alighted, and Fritz handed out a brown-paper parcel. Nat pressed some money into the chauffeur's hand, bidding him give some to Martha. The car was turned, and, without another word, Fritz started off on his home-

ward trip, leaving the four standing in the road.

‘So far, so good!’ said Nat cheerily. ‘Everything has gone, as the Boche says, “according to plan.” We are now about one mile from the junction of the Rhine and the Moselle. I hope we shall be able to make our way up the latter river as far as Treves. Arrived there, we must take our chance.’

‘How on earth do you hope to get up the Moselle?’ asked Oliver.

‘That I can’t say yet. A boat of sorts will be the ticket.’

‘You’ve managed everything so splendidly thus far that I leave the adventure in your hands,’ said Oliver.

‘Then the first thing to be done is to slip these togs on over your uniform. You must be a German, *pro tem.*, like the rest of us;’ and from the brown-paper parcel Nat produced a complete suit of clothes which Fritz had procured.

Oliver was soon attired, and laughed as he surveyed himself in the moonlight. ‘It isn’t the first time I’ve had to pose as a German,’ he said, ‘and I hope the luck that attended me before will remain with the whole of us this time.’

‘Amen to that!’ said Nat. ‘And now, quick march! Let us get down to the river-side, and see what luck attends us.’

In silence they walked on until they came to the edge of the rocky hills, from the top of which they were enabled to look down upon

the water shining at their feet. All four of them had been in the country, holiday-making, in time of peace, and knew pretty well the lie of the land. Away to their right, at the junction of the two rivers, lay the town of Coblenz. On the same bank as themselves were the fortress and the celebrated ruins of Ehrenbreitstein. In the river, almost on their front, was the island of Oberwerth, while below them ran the railway.

‘Now, my plan,’ said Nat, ‘is to go down to the river and cross it by a boat; then get over the railway, scale the cliffs, and cross the country till we reach the Moselle. There we must trust to our chance of getting up-river as far as Treves.’

‘It’s a possible plan,’ said Oliver, ‘though it will be full of risks. We sha’n’t reach the Moselle to-night, and shall probably have to lie hid during the day among the vineyards on the other slope.’

‘That was my intention,’ said Nat.

Neither Billy nor Douglas knew enough of the country to offer an opinion, so they wisely held their peace.

‘Very well, then; all being agreed, away we go,’ said Nat; and the fugitives began the somewhat perilous descent towards the river.

There were rough paths here and there, and these they made use of. There was always the risk of meeting soldiers or peasants, for they were dangerously near to Coblenz. However, ‘fortune favours the brave,’ and they reached the water’s edge without accident.

A walk of some half-mile along it, going away from Coblenz, brought them to a place where a boat, such as is used to ferry heavy goods across from one shore to the other, was seen. It was tied by its painter to a pile driven into the water, and in a couple of minutes the four had got aboard. Untying the painter, and getting out the heavy oars, they pulled into mid-stream. They did not go straight across, but rather up-stream for about a mile, beaching the boat just before they came to the bridge. Here they landed, pushed the boat back into the stream, and crossing the railway, began to climb the almost precipitous rocks.

It was a difficult and tiring task, and they were thoroughly exhausted before they reached a clump of trees near the top. There they found the ruins of a small chapel, a place visited by tourists in peace-time, but utterly deserted in war-time.

'I vote we rest here, and get some sleep,' said Nat; 'I'm done up.'

'I'm dead-beat,' said Billy; while Douglas and Oliver said nothing. They threw themselves down in a corner of the ruins, and in five minutes, oblivious of all around them, were fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A BOARDING-PARTY.

IT was a brilliant, sunny morning when Oliver woke the others, and going cautiously out into the daylight, they looked about them. Men were working in the vineyards, boats were passing up and down the river, trains were puffing along, and in the distance little clumps of men, presumably soldiers, seemed to be crawling along the roads.

The four were clearly in a position of great danger, and would have to keep all their wits about them if they wanted to win through.

They retired again within the ruin, eating the small amount of food they had. There was a mountain stream not far from them, but it was deemed wiser not to run the risk of being observed by going to it to obtain a drink.

They were perfectly well aware of the direction in which they ought to steer, and spent some time discussing their next movements.

Towards the afternoon the weather favoured them. A mist rose from the water, and shut out all the valley from sight.

'This seems to me a decided piece of luck,' said Billy. 'I think we might venture to make a move in this mist.'

The others were quite of the same opinion, and waiting till the fog had entirely obliterated

all the ground below them, they started off in good spirits.

In peace-time they might reasonably have hoped to pass muster as a party of students out for a holiday, but in war-time officials had a nasty knack of asking for papers, and so it was well to avoid them.

Making good progress, they passed over the high ridge, and struck across the ground that lay between them and the Moselle. On the lower ground they came into the mist, and passed several people, amongst them a small party of wounded soldiers. Before sunset the mist cleared, and the four found they were just above a small village on the banks of the river. It was clearly a stopping-place for big river barges and steamers. Several barges were lying out on the river, and the black smoke from a tug curled lazily upwards.

‘If we only had possession of that tug,’ said Oliver, ‘I should feel we had a good chance of getting to the frontier.’

‘If we only had some grub,’ said Douglas, ‘I should feel much more like attacking the said tug.’

Nat stood musing. ‘Grub we must have,’ he said; ‘a boat also would be most welcome. I’ll go down to the village and see what can be done.’

All the others opposed this.

‘Two of us should go,’ said Oliver. ‘I’ve always found two have a better chance of getting out of a tight corner than one has.’

Nat persisted, whereupon Douglas proposed

they should draw lots. In two minutes it was done. Nat and Billy won, and decided to set off at once.

‘We shall have a good opportunity of putting our disguises to the test,’ said Billy. ‘We shall have only country-people to deal with after all, and we ought to be able to hoodwink them.’

Having come to their decision, Nat and Billy started off, arranging that Oliver and Douglas were to accompany them as far as a few scattered houses which lay on the outskirts of the town, and behind which they were to hide—if they could. They walked boldly on until they reached the houses, where Nat and Billy left Oliver and Douglas by a small straw rick, and went forward into the little town. To the several people they met they nodded or passed a ‘Good-evening’ in the usual way, and went straight on down to the little quay, almost facing which was an old Rhineland province inn. The name of it was ‘The Pilot’s Rest,’ and Nat nudged Billy, saying he thought it a most appropriate name, though probably ‘river-pilot’ and not ‘air-pilot’ was intended. The two friends walked boldly up, entered the parlour, and called for meat and drink. The landlord, giving them just a cursory glance in the twilight—for the sun had set—shouted his orders to the kitchen behind, and went to see that they were properly carried out. He then resumed his seat at a little green table just outside the parlour window, at which sat a sturdy, bull-throated

man, whose blue jersey and top-boots denoted the riverman.

For some minutes the two sat in silence; then, while Nat and Billy were eating heartily, the riverman spoke. 'It's not the first or the second time the rogue has played me this trick. At Cologne, about a year ago, he went off, and I never clapped eyes on him for nigh a fortnight.'

'Ay! ay! Josef Baur was always a wild lad.'

'I'll "wild lad" him when I lay hands on him! A rope's end is what Josef Baur will get, as sure as my name's Max Bendel.'

'What made him go off, do you think?'

'It's always one of two things—the beer or the girls; and when he's full of one, or in the midst of the others, he's just a great lumpy-headed fool.'

'And you've got an important cargo, haven't you? Government stuff, isn't it?'

'It's shells, Johann, and all marked "Urgent." You know what that means. Here we're already an hour late in getting on, which, if it were known to—some people, might get me into a fine row.'

'Well, give the lad a chance. He may turn up when his frolic's out.'

'I'll wait till ten o'clock; not a moment later! Then I'll report to the tug-master that I'm single-handed, that Josef has deserted. Away I'll go, and the rogue can take the consequences.'

Johann, the landlord, stood up and looked

down at the river, where the barges, three in number, could be seen, all connected to the tug. 'Yours is the last, isn't it, Max?'

'Ay, the biggest.'

'I thought I recognised the old *Rose*,' said the landlord; and the two men each took a long pull at their beer, and chatted on as old friends do.

'Josef is the only hand you've got now, isn't he?' asked Johann presently.

'Yes; this cursed war has swallowed up all the others.'

'Makes it hard work for you, eh?'

'Slavery!'

Nat had been busy eating and listening. Neither he nor Billy had missed a single word. Nat finished his meal, called for the bill, paid it, and left the inn at once. 'Quick, Billy! I've got an idea,' he said. 'It's a chance in ten thousand, and we must take it.' They went down to the quay, and saw a small row-boat by the stairs. 'Stay here, Billy,' he said, 'and keep your eye on that boat. I'm off to fetch the others. If any one who might be Josef Baur turns up, keep him here talking till I return. Everything depends on it.'

Vouchsafing no further explanation, he darted off, and in an incredibly short space of time was back again with Oliver and Douglas.

'Any sign of Baur or the skipper?' asked Nat eagerly.

'No.'

'Good! Now listen to my plan, Billy.'

We'll all go off to Mr Max Bendel's barge; that's the last one, as we know. I want to get the lie of the land, or rather of the boat. Now in we get, and away we go.'

Without any further palaver they stepped into the boat, pulled out to the barge without being noticed, scrambled aboard, and made their way aft to the roomy cabin. Nat struck a light, found a swinging lamp, and lit that.

Looking round them, they saw two bunks, one on each side; a table stood in the centre; some boxes, a chair, lockers, a stove, and a big cupboard were the other principal features of the apartment. A door at one end led into a smaller space, in which were coal, wood, coils of rope, and other odds and ends. Similar doors opened from each side of the cabin.

'Now, boys, my plans are complete. Will you, captain, and you, Douglas, conceal yourselves in that small hole, to be ready to rush out to my assistance in case you're needed?' Nat then informed Billy what part he intended him to play. There was some discussion about this, and one or two slight alterations were suggested. At last, all being agreed, Billy stepped into the boat and pulled ashore. He made straight for 'The Pilot's Rest,' and there found Max Bendel sitting just where he had left him, smoking and drinking.

'Can you tell me if one Max Bendel, master of the *Rose* barge, is hereabout?' asked Billy politely.

'What do you want with him?' replied Bendel gruffly.

‘I have a message for him, if you can tell me where to find him.’

‘Who’s your message from?’ growled Bendel.

‘Well, I don’t know that I ought to say,’ replied Billy, most politely, ‘but since you ask, it’s from one Josef Baur.’

‘Ah! The rascal! The beast! The drunkard! Where is he?’

‘He’s aboard the *Rose* barge. But I want to tell all this to Herr Bendel. Do you know where I can find him?’

‘You’ve found him. I am he. Now, what’s your message, my good fellow?’

‘It appears that Baur has had a slight accident. He was aboard, waiting for you, and he slipped down the companion-way, and hurt his leg or his ankle. My friend and I were crossing the river in a boat, heard groans, boarded the barge, and found the man lying in the cabin. He begged we would come up here to find you, and ask you to come to him at once.’

‘Oh, I’ll come; I’ll come,’ said Bendel. ‘I’ll warrant Josef won’t be so glad to see me when I do arrive.’ So saying, he jumped up and walked off towards the water’s edge. He reached the boat and got in, and Billy asked if he might accompany him.

‘My friend is still aboard with the poor fellow,’ he explained, ‘and when he’s handed him over to your care we’ll continue our journey.’

Billy stepped in, and Bendel, seizing the

oars, drove the boat to the side of the barge. He jumped aboard and made for the cabin, followed by Billy. They entered, and Billy quietly shut the door.

'Where is the rogue?' cried Bendel, looking round him.

'In the bunk there.'

Bendel saw a man lying in the bunk, his back towards the light. He stepped across, and shook him roughly by the shoulder. 'Now, you drunken dog, what's the meaning of this?' he roared.

For answer he was seized firmly by his arms, which were wrenched behind him; two strangers appeared, apparently from nowhere, and pointed pistols at his head. At the same time the figure lying in the bunk swung his leg down and faced Bendel.

When he saw that he was face to face with a perfect stranger his face fell, and he looked from one to the other in utter and blank amazement. 'What—what's the meaning of this?' he gasped.

Nat coolly drew a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. 'I'll tell you, Skipper Bendel,' he said; 'and, mind, don't make a sound. If you do, that instant will be your last. Now, pay careful attention to what I'm going to say, because your comfort, perhaps your life, depends upon your doing exactly as you're told.'

CHAPTER XXXIV.

‘ON THE LOVELY BLUE MOSELLE.’

SKIPPER BENDEL looked from one to the other of the intruders, rubbed his eyes with his grimy fingers, looked again, opened his mouth once or twice as though to speak, but remained silent.

‘I see you grasp the situation,’ said Nat coolly.

For answer Bendel made a sudden and violent effort to free himself, but Billy held firm, and the pistols of Oliver and Douglas followed his every movement.

He quieted down, and again gasped, ‘What is the meaning of this?’

‘That you’re a prisoner, absolutely in our power,’ replied Nat. ‘If you do just as you’re told, no harm will befall you.’

‘And if I don’t do as I’m told?’

‘Then,’ said Nat with terrible earnestness, ‘to bind and gag you and let you drop very gently over the side will take us just five minutes, and Frau Bendel will never know what has become of her good man, or the little Bendels of their father!’

The skipper’s face lengthened. ‘Who are you?’ he asked.

‘I’m Josef Baur,’ replied Nat.

‘*Henkers!* what is the good of saying that? I’ve known that *Schelm* Josef since

he was no higher than my knee, and you are not he.'

'Nevertheless, I *am* Josef Baur,' persisted Nat, 'and for this trip you'll remember that.'

Bendel shrugged his shoulders.

'No, my friend, I'm not mad; far from it. I am very sane, and—I'm Josef Baur!'

'Very well,' said Bendel, 'what then?'

'Have you ever heard of the secret service?'

'Ha! do you mean'—

'I mean nothing. Does that chest'—and Nat kicked one with his foot—'belong to Josef?'

'Yes.'

'And the clothes are his?'

'Yes.'

'Look after Bendel, gentlemen,' said Nat; and in ten minutes he had effected a complete metamorphosis. He had dressed himself in a suit of Josef's, drawn on a red stockinet cap, and stuck his hands in his pockets.

'You see Josef Baur,' he said to Bendel.

'*Donnerwetter!* you are not unlike,' growled Bendel.

Nat drew one hand from his pocket and showed a pistol. 'For the duration of this trip I shall never be far from you,' he said. 'This pistol will always cover you. Attempt any trick, and a bullet will crash into your brain. Now, up on deck, and give the signal that you are ready to start.'

Bendel obediently took a lamp with green glass sides from one corner of the cabin, lit it, went up the few steps to the deck, shouted

out that all was right, and waved his lamp. Answering shouts came from the other barges; the tug gave a hoarse whistle, and the barges began to move up-stream.

'Do you steer?' asked Nat.

'It is not necessary to steer always; but either Josef or I remain on deck.'

'Good! We will both remain.'

He then called Billy to him. 'We are fairly under way,' he said, 'and the most difficult part of our task is over. Forage out some grub from the cabin, cook it, and get a good supper ready. By that time I shall have thought what our next move must be. At any rate, we have got away from Coblenz, and are, so far, masters of the situation.'

Oliver and Douglas were simply ravenous, and willingly rummaged the larder for food. Some sausages, bacon, cold potatoes, and coffee were found, together with a large loaf of bread. There was a fire in the stove; pots, kettles, and pans were in the cuddy; and Douglas set to work.

There was soon heard the frizzling and hissing of a pan and the singing of a tea-kettle, and wafted up to Nat and Skipper Bendel came a most appetising smell.

The night was fine, and the moon shone on the water foaming by the bows, on vine-clad slopes, and on bold, rugged banks and old ruins, while homely lights twinkled in the villages on either side.

'This is calm; this is peaceful; this is enjoyable,' said Nat, as he puffed at his cigar.

'And we go sailing along with five hundred tons of explosive aboard,' growled Bendel.

'Ha! indeed? For munitions, I suppose?'

'Yes; for the factories outside Treves.'

'How interesting!' said Nat, and he softly sang to himself:

'Ching, chang, Chinaman, welly, welly sad,
Much affaid, allo tlade, welly welly bad.'

At length, rousing himself, he slapped Bendel on the back. 'I say, old man, there's no necessity for us to remain up here, is there?'

'No; we can lash the rudder.'

'Do so, then, and let's go down to supper.'

They did so, and a very hearty meal they enjoyed, Skipper Bendel being seated between Oliver and Nat. He did full justice to the food, but refused the coffee, saying there was a stone jar of Dutch gin in the locker, which was much more to his taste.

He was allowed a liberal jorum; then Nat, leaving Billy in charge of the skipper, announced his intention of having a look round in company with Oliver and Douglas.

The big barges which ply on the rivers of Germany are constructed on more or less standard lines. In the after-part there is a large and airy cabin, sometimes, when the skipper takes his wife and children with him, as many do, divided into two or three apartments. In that case the windows of the cabin are decorated with gay curtains, and the top is often a veritable flower-garden.

Max Bendel preferred to leave his family at home. Nevertheless, the cabin was divided into three portions, of which one was the cuddy, one a sort of lumber-room, and the centre the eating and sleeping compartment of himself and Josef Baur.

The rudders of these barges are controlled by a big wheel, not standing perpendicularly, as on a sea-going craft, but horizontally, and having handles pointing upwards, not set round the outside of the wheel. A short ladder leads up to the deck over the cabin, and a few other steps lead down to the cabin itself. There is a space between the cabin and the body of the barge, and here the steerer usually stands or sits.

The cargo is covered with hatches or battens, and is efficiently protected from all wet. In order to get into the body of the vessel without unfastening the hatches, there is often a small door in the end of the barge, opposite the cabin door, and Nat, after looking about a bit, found it.

'This leads into the cargo hold, I suppose?'

he said to Bendel.

'Yes.'

'I'll go in and have a look round.'

'For the love of God, do not go in with a cigar in your mouth! You know what the cargo is?'

'True; I had forgotten. You have the key of this door?'

'Yes.'

'Lend it to me.'

Bendel produced it.

'Now, boys, let's investigate;' and Nat undid the door, and switched on his electric torch to light the way.

The cargo was regularly stowed in cases, an alley being left down the centre to allow of any one walking the whole length of the barge. Nat told the others the nature of the contents of the cases.

'Great Scott!' cried Oliver; 'what a noise it would make if the lot went up!'

Nat chuckled. 'But not if it went *down*,' he gurgled.

'What do you mean?'

'Of that more anon, as the villain in the play says. Now, my proposition is that during the day you three lie snug among the cargo, while I keep watch on our friend Bendel. At night we must take it in turns to watch.'

This point was afterwards debated and agreed upon. Then Nat communicated their decision to Bendel. 'You can turn in, and get some sleep,' he said. 'I shall turn in in the other bunk. My friends will take the watches in turns, and will wake us if we are needed. Should any danger threaten, or should any accident happen, one of them will just fire his pistol into one of those cases you know of, and then—whish!—away goes the *Rose*, you and me, and the other barges, anything on the banks, and goodness knows what besides.'

Max Bendel wiped the perspiration from his

brow. 'Are you a man, or—or—a devil?' he whispered.

'Sometimes one, sometimes the other. But I'm too tired now to discuss the point. Tumble into your bunk, old man, and get some sleep. I'm tired, and can do with forty winks. And don't get walking in your sleep, or you might startle one of my friends, and cause him to let off his pistol from sheer fright. *Gute Nacht; schlafen Sie wohl.*'

With this Nat curled himself up in his bunk, while Bendel got into his, and for some time lay positively shivering with fear and apprehension.

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

THE night passed quite uneventfully, and the *Rose* had gone many miles on her journey. The morning was bright and fine, and after a good breakfast, Oliver, Billy, and Douglas, taking some blankets from the bunks, crept in among the cargo, and prepared to doze away the day.

'I have the key of the door in my pocket,' said Nat, 'and from time to time shall give you a look in. In case of danger, I shall give you the tip, and you must be prepared to act promptly.'

Billy would have liked to play a more active part during the day, but Nat was a masterful personage, and had taken upon himself the direction of affairs.

'He loves to stage-manage,' explained Billy, as he and the other two stowed themselves comfortably away.

'And I must say he does it remarkably well,' said Oliver. 'Let's get to sleep. My arm pains me to-day, and, depend upon it, we shall want all our energies when the time comes to leave this comfortable old tub.'

Nat, in Josef's tarry, rust-marked clothes, with his red cap pulled well down over his face, acted his part fairly well, and had little

fear of discovery so long as Master Bendel did not play him any tricks; and he kept such a vigilant eye on that gentleman that he gave him but little chance of treachery. In fact, Nat was like the skipper's shadow, and whenever the old man looked round, he saw Nat gazing at him with an understanding glance, which he would supplement by slipping his right hand into his capacious breeches-pocket in a very significant manner. Max Bendel would have been a very dull man indeed if he had not understood so plain an intimation 'to keep off the grass,' as Nat phrased it.

Early in the morning the flotilla of barges put in at a small town on the bank for the purpose of coaling the tug, and one of the other barge-masters took the opportunity to come aboard the *Rose* and have a chat.

'Good-morning, Josef,' he said, as Nat, with bent head, was busy scouring a pot. 'Not much to say,' grinned the skipper. 'I suppose old Max gave you something for delaying him last night, eh? Well! well! you deserved it, Josef. You are a sad dog—a sad dog!'

The skipper passed into the cabin, and began to talk to Bendel. That gentleman threw one quick glance at Nat, who had followed the visitor in. Nat looked at Bendel, and it was sufficient. His fellow-skipper talked of various matters, but Bendel's answers were vague, and he was clearly ill at ease. His visitor rallied him on it, and hinted that the rascal Josef was the cause of the trouble; but

Bendel, knowing of the pistol which Nat had so handy, excused himself by saying he was troubled with an attack of rheumatism. His friend immediately suggested a glass of gin each, which was probably the reason for the visit. The cordial was soon produced and solemnly drunk. Directly the refreshment was swallowed the man took his departure, to the relief of both Nat and the skipper.

But hardly had he gone than, with a good deal of bawling of orders and distributing of abuse, a Prussian officer, one of the genuine, swaggering, bullying, insolent kind, came aboard.

‘Who’s the skipper here?’ he bawled.

‘I am, excellency.’

‘And that fellow?’ pointing to Nat.

‘My man, your honour.’

‘Any more crew?’

‘No, excellency.’

‘During your journey up from Coblenz did you notice any boat? Were you hailed from the shore? Did any one attempt to get aboard you?’

Bendel’s face turned pale and his teeth chattered. ‘No, excellency. Why, what do you think’——

‘Shut your mouth, fool! and answer my questions. You are laden with munitions?’

‘Yes, excellency.’

‘Were you on deck all night?’

‘Yes, excellency; that is, Josef and I took it in turns.’

The Prussian gave Joseph a keen look.

'Did you notice any suspicious characters on the river?' he asked Nat.

'No, excellency; all was quiet.'

'Well, a prisoner has escaped from Hohfeld camp, a cursed Englishman, and a man of some importance, a staff-officer. It is also suspected that some other Englishmen, probably airmen, who have so far escaped capture, assisted the prisoner to escape. They are known to have made their way towards the river, and may try to get away on a boat going up or down. Now keep your eyes open, and if you see any suspicious characters, detain them until you can hand them over for examination.'

'Yes, yes, excellency!' said Bendel, who seemed to have a great dread of the officer.

'What are you shaking about, you fool?' cried the officer. 'Pah! you're drunk! You stink of drink. If I were not in a hurry I'd have you ducked. Anyway, I'll not take your word; I'll search the barge;' and he strode into the cabin, his sword and spurs clanking and jingling.

He poked about here and there, then walked along the length of the deck, and back towards the small door that opened into the cargo hold. 'Open this door,' he cried to the skipper.

'Josef has the key.'

'Then you open it. I'll just have a look round.'

Nat's heart thumped violently. If that officer went in, he should never come out again. Of that he was resolved, but he cast

about in his mind for a way out of the difficulty.

The officer all the while he had been on deck had been puffing at a cigar, and Nat, key in hand, looked apprehensively at the burning end.

'The Herr Captain is smoking,' he muttered, 'and we are loaded with high explosive. One spark from your cigar and we are all blown up. That is why the skipper is so troubled.'

The captain turned pale a moment, then stepped back. 'Why didn't you mention it, fool?' he said. 'But you have no more sense than a hogshead. Bear in mind what I have told you,' he concluded, as he stepped to the side of the barge. 'If this prisoner should escape through any fault of yours, you'll be shot. Do you understand? Shot, like a dog, or rather like the pig you are.' As he bawled this out he stepped from the barge into his boat.

It would have been difficult to say which of the two, Bendel or Nat, felt the more relieved. Nat, however, gave no sign. He continued coiling a rope, but watched the officer passing from barge to barge until he reached the tug. Then the signal was given, the little tug belched forth black smoke, and they were again under way. Nat heaved a great sigh of relief, wiped his forehead, and relaxed his attention as he muttered to himself, 'Great snakes! what a bad quarter of an hour that fellow gave me! And I reckon, if he'd

guessed how near something disagreeable he was, he wouldn't have been quite so pompous.'

An hour or two later they were in a part of the river which ran between steep banks; no habitations were to be seen on either side, and the tug sped merrily on, the steersmen of the barges lolling lazily on their wheels.

Nat told Bendel he could turn in and have a good sleep; and Oliver, Billy, and Douglas coming from their place of concealment, and sitting just inside the cabin, out of sight of prying eyes, all four had a long conversation.

Nat told them of the visit of the Prussian officer, and said it behoved them to be doubly on their guard, and to think of a way of getting ashore without being observed before they got to Treves. At the same time, they must make sure of Bendel's keeping silent until they were safely over the frontier.

'Of course, we could extract an oath from him,' said Oliver; 'but what good would it be? A German is hardly likely to hold himself bound by any pledge.'

'Leave him to me. I'll fix him when the time comes,' said Nat.

'You know, Nat,' said Billy, 'we three have been very busy this morning thinking over the position, and we have come to the conclusion that it would be a great pity to let all this amount of explosive get safely to its destination. If we could destroy it, possibly thousands of the lives of our countrymen would be saved.'

'Bully for you, Billy!'

‘The German way would be to place a bomb or a fuse in the cargo, so that it would blow up in dock, and probably kill a few hundred unoffending civilians.’

‘Such an idea, I am sure, would appeal to any German.’

‘But our idea is—— Here, come closer;’ and Billy whispered in Nat’s ear.

‘It’s a glad idea—a capital idea—and we’ll just worry out the details together. Let each one put on his thinking-cap, and work hard. This is Wednesday; on Friday morning we are due at Treves. We must get to work to-morrow night.’

CHAPTER XXXVI.

TRAPPED!

THE day and night passed uneventfully, as did the next day. Bendel took quite philosophically to the position; he was kindly treated, and gave no trouble. Thursday night was dark, cloudy, and windy, just such a night as the four fugitives wanted. In the morning Nat had taken a couple of augers from the tool-chest, and handed them to Douglas and Billy when they retired to their hiding-place amidst the cargo. All day they had been very busy with them, and when night fell, and all four had assembled in the cabin, Billy was quite jubilant.

‘The water is rising rapidly now,’ he said. ‘We’ve bored her like a colander; in another hour or so her gunwales will be awash.’

‘Good! Then it’s time we began to make our preparations. First, we’ll see that the small boat is all right.’

This was soon done; then Nat abandoned Josef Baur’s clothes, assumed his own, and all had a good wash and brush.

All this time Bendel was snoring in his bunk. He had been encouraged to drink heavily all day—not that he needed much encouragement—and at that moment he would have taken a very great deal of rousing. They wrapped him in a blanket, and placed him in the bottom of the small boat, and as

they did so they noted with pleasure that the barge, heavily laden with her cargo, had settled down till the water began to lap over her sides.

'Time to sever connections,' said Nat; and he and Billy, running to the prow of the barge, and seizing a moment when the tension of the rope that secured them to the barge in front slackened, cast it off. In a few minutes the other barges had entirely disappeared, and they were alone. The *Rose* was rapidly settling, and waiting till the snorting of the little tug had entirely died away, they dropped anchor, and the *Rose*, water-logged and rapidly sinking, swung out into mid-stream. Taking to the little boat, they pulled in to the left bank, and landing at a perfectly desolate spot, waited events.

The night was very dark, and objects could not be clearly seen on the water. By straining their eyes, however, the black outline of the barge could be dimly observed; and in about half-an-hour the lights of a tug coming up the river, having another string of barges behind her, came into view.

'Now we shall see something,' said Nat; and, sure enough, they did.

Suddenly the tug gave a series of short, sharp whistles; then a hoarse shout was heard across the water. Before the sound had died away there was a crashing, grinding noise, and a flame shot up into the air, illuminating the tug, quivering from the impact of its collision with the *Rose*. There was a confused mass of barges behind; more shouting followed, and as the tug sank a cloud of steam

rose into the air. In five minutes something like silence reigned again, but the *Rose* and the tug had disappeared.

'The old *Rose* has landed her cargo prematurely,' said Billy.

'And I imagine the river will be blocked for a day or two,' added Oliver.

'Boys,' said Nat, 'we've got the bulge on old Fritz this time. We've done a good night's work for our cause. It's time we thought of making tracks.'

After mooring the boat, with Bendel fast asleep in it, to the bank, they set out at a good pace, striking away from the river. Reaching a road, they walked on, discussing their plans as they went. All agreed that boldness was their only chance; concealment was no longer possible; they must risk all, and try to bluff it out. After having walked about seven miles they came to a small town, which they boldly entered, and going to a respectable hotel, demanded supper and beds. The host glanced at them, showed them into the public room, and left them to themselves. The supper was served and eaten, cigars were lit, and with every sense on the alert, keen and watchful, they waited until the time should come for them to retire for the night.

They were still so waiting when a powerful car was stopped outside, a loud voice was heard shouting for the landlord, and a young lieutenant swaggered into the room. All four of the fugitives knew enough of the manners of the country to understand what was expected

of them. They rose and bowed, and the lieutenant, throwing off his helmet and greatcoat, nodded condescendingly to them; then, seating himself on one chair, he threw his legs up on to another, and waited for his supper.

The officer glanced curiously at them several times; but his supper coming in, he ate it in the usual German style, reading a paper the while. When he had finished, Nat called for a bottle of wine, and again bowing politely to the lieutenant, asked him if he would honour them by taking a glass of wine with them.

The German, a tall, thin young man with an abnormally long neck—which looked longer on account of the absurdly deep scarlet collar to his tunic—a pimply face, and a shock head of yellow hair, rather haughtily consented.

Nat then passed his cigar-case, and the five sat for a few moments in silence.

‘I was just wondering what you fellows were,’ said the lieutenant, as he lit his cigar.

‘Fellows of the same cloth,’ replied Nat, winking.

‘Eh!’ and the lieutenant screwed a monocle into his left eye.

‘On secret service,’ whispered Nat. ‘I rather thought I recognised you. Surely we’ve met in Berlin.’

‘Oh, I dare say we have; a good many people know Felix von Hahn of the Fusilier Guards.’

, I thought I knew you.’

‘Do you belong to the Guards?’

‘No such luck! I’m in the flying service,

as is my friend here, Lieutenant Schramm,' nodding towards Oliver. 'The other two are in the diplomatic service.'

'What the devil are you doing here?'

'We were going by water to Treves; there was a collision, and we had to land in a boat. Unfortunately some valuable papers we had were lost, and we walked on here to get a bed and await instructions. We have wired Berlin.'

'The devil! That's awkward!'

'Very.'

The bottle of wine was drunk; another followed, and Lieutenant von Hahn, under the influence of the wine, lost much of his stiffness, and began to talk freely. 'I'm on my way to—no matter whom—but he's a powerful man. He's a big pot in the secret service. Your best plan will be to come with me and make your report to him. It will be a long time before you can get a reply from Berlin.'

Nat shivered in his shoes at these words, but he knew there was nothing for it but to obey. 'If you can introduce us it would help us very much,' he said a little lamely.

They talked on for some time; then Von Hahn rose. 'We'd better be moving,' he said. 'I've got my car. I'll run you four over; there's plenty of room.'

Soon they were all seated in the big Limousin car, and gliding rapidly along the well-kept road.

Lieutenant von Hahn was in a talkative mood. He said he had been serving in

Belgium, and he related several little tales of his doings there—tales which made his four listeners long to seize him by the long scraggy neck and choke the life out of him; but they wisely held their peace. 'By the way, what's the matter with your friend's arm?' he asked Nat, nodding his head back towards Oliver.

'Oh, he got pipped in an air-fight. That's why he is with me, just till his arm's all right again.'

Now, since the meeting with Von Hahn, the friends had not had an opportunity of exchanging views or making any arrangement. Everything had to be left to chance, and each one felt it incumbent upon him to be very wide awake, for there was no saying how soon or how quickly they might have to act, and to be ready to back one another up in any action that might be taken.

Oliver had the most experience of the Germans and of their country, and he was inclined to be suspicious of Von Hahn. To him it seemed that the lieutenant had accepted their statements too readily, for your true German is by nature a most suspicious person. In low whispers he was able to communicate his doubts to Billy and Douglas, and they, by nods and winks, intimated to him that they understood.

Their journey at last came to an end, and the car was driven into the courtyard of a fine house. Here there were several people, including one or two soldiers, and Von Hahn and the others leaving the car, the

German at once requested an interview with one he called 'the colonel.'

They all entered the house, passing up a broad flight of stone steps and into a spacious hall. From this hall doors gave access to a number of rooms, and the five were shown into one of these. A pale young man entered in a few minutes, and requested Lieutenant von Hahn to follow him. No sooner was he gone than the four hurriedly considered the situation.

'We seem to be in a hole,' said Oliver. 'I don't quite like the turn affairs have taken.'

'We're in it, and we must make the best of our chances,' said Nat. 'We must bluff it out.'

They had been speaking for a few minutes, weighing the pros and cons, when Oliver was seized with an idea to take a look round. He communicated his resolve to his friends, and, before they could stop him, walked out of the room. He crossed the hall, peeped in at one or two open doors, and then ascended the stairs.

These ended in a corridor that ran round three sides of the house, and gave access to a number of rooms. Some appeared to be bedrooms; one, the door of which was open, was fitted up as an office, with tables, typewriters, a telephone, and so on. The office led to a luxuriously furnished study, and Oliver, peeping in, saw that this also was empty.

Having noticed this much, he crept out again into the corridor, over the balustrade of which a full view of the hall beneath could be obtained. He peeped down just in time to see Nat, Billy, and Douglas coming out of

the room they had been left in, following the same man who had summoned Von Hahn. They came up the stairs, and Oliver popped back into the small office, and peeped through the partly opened door. His friends were shown into a room directly opposite him. Their conductor came out, and after waiting for a second, shot a brass bolt on the outside. Oliver saw the whole thing, and the truth flashed upon him in a moment; *his companions were prisoners.*

It was clear to Oliver that they were suspected, and it was also clear that their safety depended upon him alone. He remembered how they had risked their lives to rescue him, and bracing himself, he prepared to do what he could to repay them. He glanced round the small office and took in all his surroundings. In one corner was a door. Opening it, he saw it was a cupboard for hats and cloaks. Hardly had he made this discovery when footsteps were again heard approaching, and he slipped inside the cupboard, silently pulling to the door behind him. The new-comers entered the office, shut the door, and went on into the study. They were talking, and Oliver recognised Von Hahn as one of the speakers. The other voice was deep and raucous.

‘Now that they’re safe till we want them,’ it was saying, ‘we’ll talk of them afterwards; but first to your business.’

For five minutes there was silence; then the same voice said, ‘This letter you bring me is

important. It will be necessary for you to go at once to Brussels, and to lose no time about it. I will give you a letter, and you had better go down to the Seventh Division Aerodrome and get Treibe to send you with a trusty pilot by aeroplane. It is the quickest way. I'll give you an order and a pass to say you are on secret service business, and that any one seeing your warrant is to obey you in all things. You can refer to me for authority.'

'Very good, colonel.'

There was again silence for some minutes, after which the deep voice said, 'Now, about these fellows you met; tell me all the details.'

Keeping pretty much to the facts, Von Hahn related how he had met Oliver and the others, and how he had proposed they should come on and see the colonel.

'What made you suspect them?'

'I don't know exactly. Their German was all right, with just a Bavarian accent. But their tale seemed a bit too glib.'

'H'm! And one, you say, had a wounded arm?'

'Yes, though I did not notice it at first.'

There was silence again; then the colonel said, 'Thousand devils! I was told a few days ago of the escape of a British prisoner. He had a wounded arm, and to-night, you know, there's been a mysterious collision on the Moselle. It's half-suspected there are one or two flying-men knocking about in the country, who were brought down a week or more ago. I wonder if by accident we've

fallen upon this gang of rogues. You did right to suspect them, Von Hahn, and to suggest putting them under lock and key till we can look into the matter.'

'Perhaps you'll see them, colonel?'

'I will; but we must go carefully to work. Don't let them think we suspect them. Go to them and chat with them for a few minutes; then suggest that you present them to me. Bring them in, and do you stand behind my chair and keep an eye on them. Have you a pistol on you?'

'No, colonel.'

'Take this one, then, and don't hesitate to use it if there is any necessity. If you hear me say, "I am amazed, gentlemen," ring that electric bell just here on the desk, and keep them covered with your pistol until my men come in.'

'Very good, colonel;' and Oliver heard Von Hahn cross the small office.

He left the door open when he went out, and Oliver's mind was made up in a moment. He slipped out after the German, saw him gently draw back the brass bolt and enter the room in which were Nat, Billy, and Douglas. Oliver quickly crossed the corridor, turned the handle of the door, and stepped in. Von Hahn was standing just inside the door, speaking to those within. He turned as Oliver entered, and carefully shut the door behind him.

'Go on,' said Oliver; but Von Hahn was clearly taken aback at this sudden appearance, and clapped his hand on his sword.

Nat gave a shout, Von Hahn turned, and as he did so Oliver, with his sound hand, smote him full and sure on the temple. The German fell like a log.

'What's the game?' asked Billy in a moment.

'Keep the door, one of you,' cried Oliver. 'Now help me to gag and bind this fellow. Off with his uniform, too. We are in deadly peril.'

Like lightning the four went to work, while Oliver related what had happened, and explained his plans. Von Hahn was stripped to his underclothes, gagged, and tightly bound with the curtain-cords. He was then rolled under the table and put out of sight, while Oliver slipped on the uniform.

'Now, follow me, and keep the colonel in talk until I give the sign; then fall upon him.'

They bolted the door behind them, and crossed to the colonel's room. Oliver entered first, and locked the office door behind him. Then, pulling the German's helmet well down over his eyes, he held his handkerchief up to his mouth, and crying, 'Enter, gentlemen,' led the way into the study. He walked rapidly behind the colonel, whose gaze was fixed upon those who followed. He gave one glance at them, and they at him. Thus they remained for some twenty seconds, when Nat gave a low whistle.

The man sitting at the table before them was Colonel Vogt!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

JUST IN THE NICK OF TIME.

THE silence that followed was broken by a hoarse laugh from Colonel Vogt.

‘Ha! ha! Ho! ho!’ he laughed sardonically. ‘The tables are turned, it seems. Our positions are altered since we last met.’

‘I am at a loss to understand what you mean,’ said Nat, anxious to gain time.

‘Indeed? Shall I make my meaning plainer? When last we met you were under the impression that within forty-eight hours I should be shot. Ha! ha! fools to try a fall with me! Now the position is that within six hours *you* will be shot. You’ll find it a harder matter to get out of my clutches than I found it to get out of yours—eh?’

‘Whom do you take us for?’

‘Whom do I take you for?’ thundered Colonel Vogt. ‘Whom do I take you for? Why, an American dog who spoilt my game in France. Yes, you hound! you dared to pit yourself against me, and now you shall die, you and these English swine. And you try to bluff me, here in my own castle! *I am amazed, gentlemen!*’

Hardly had the words left his lips than Oliver from behind clapped a hand over his mouth, and Nat, with a mighty, crashing blow straight between the eyes, felled him like a

bullock. He was bound and gagged in a trice. This being accomplished, Oliver looked amongst the papers on the table, found what he wanted, put it in an official envelope, and slipped it into his pocket.

'Now we must clear out double quick,' he said. Arranging their dress, they started, Oliver locking the office door behind him, and slipping the key into his pocket.

He found a case of cigarettes in the said pocket, and he took one out and lit it. They descended the stairs, and reaching the courtyard, called to a man to bring Lieutenant von Hahn's car round.

'And see that there is an extra can of petrol put in,' he said.

'Yes, Herr Lieutenant.'

The car being brought, they all four entered it, Nat taking the driver's seat.

'By the way,' asked Oliver of the man, 'which is the shortest way to the Seventh Division Aerodrome?'

The man explained fully, and in a minute the car was gliding on its way.

No sooner were they clear of the castle than they began to talk quickly.

'It's do or die now,' said Oliver. 'In twelve hours we shall be in our own lines or in prison.'

'Or dead,' muttered Billy. 'I'm getting tired of leading this hunted-rat life, and I won't be taken without a struggle.'

The car was a powerful one, and Nat let the engine go. Mile after mile slipped by,

and every now and then they had to pull up to ask the way. At last they reached the large aerodrome, to find that, though it was past midnight, there were plentiful signs of activity.

Gaining admittance on the strength of his uniform, Oliver at once demanded to see Commandant Treibe. That officer was still busy in his sanctum, and Oliver, being taken to him, came to the point without delay.

'I am Lieutenant von Hahn, and I come from Colonel Vogt,' he said. 'I am on secret service, and you are to obey me in all I command. Here are my credentials;' and he handed the commandant Colonel Vogt's letter.

On seeing the signature the commandant's manner at once became obsequious. 'Ha, yes, Herr Lieutenant; and what is it you desire?'

'I require two double-seater aeroplanes at once.'

'I regret I am unable to oblige. I haven't a double-seater in the aerodrome at the moment. All are up.'

Oliver gave an impatient exclamation. 'What have you, then?' he demanded. 'I tell you my business is of the very highest importance. You know Colonel Vogt, and if any one upsets his plans, he must be prepared to give a good reason.'

'I know, Herr Lieutenant; but this is rather a strange business.'

'I tell you it is business that must not be delayed. What machines have you?'

'I have a four-seater bombing-machine; but it is not ready to take the air.'

'Get it ready instantly; turn every man in the place on to it.'

The commandant suggested a difficulty, but Oliver pointed to Colonel Vogt's letter. 'If I tell you that my business concerns the All-Highest'—— he whispered.

The commandant turned pale. 'Come with me,' he said, and calling a flight officer, he gave him some commands. They then went to a hangar, and soon twenty men were busy on a big four-seater bombing-machine.

How the minutes dragged as the men worked! Half-an-hour, an hour, passed. The machine was almost ready. The propellers were started, and the four climbed in, sitting while the engine tuned up.

Nat was at the controls, and the minutes seemed hours as they waited. Suddenly the toot-toot of a motor-horn was heard, then a confused shouting. Looking back across the brilliantly lit aerodrome-ground, Oliver saw a figure rushing madly, shouting as he came. In an instant Oliver recognised him. It was Lieutenant von Hahn! The game was up!

'Let her go, or we are lost!' he shouted to Nat.

The noise of the engines became deafening; the machine ran along the ground; the crowd around stood clear of those enormous propellers; the machine rose, circled, and they were off. From below came a roar, then the report of rifles; but all sounds were lost in a

second. Away into the dark night they flew, up, up, higher, faster, away over Germany and towards the British lines. The four gave a hearty cheer, then settled down with a feeling of heart-felt thankfulness for their wonderful escape.

The news of their daring exploit was probably being sent along a score of wires. All four kept a sharp look-out for intercepting aeroplanes, and flashes from below showed they were being occasionally fired at. But they safely crossed both the German and the British lines at a great altitude.

The danger was, however, not yet over. To be seen by the Allies meant that they would at once be heavily shelled, for who could guess that the great German bomber contained friends? So they went far behind the Allies' lines, and when day broke, seeing an open field, began to circle in order to make a descent. Then Nat made a nose-dive, and, although greeted with rifle-fire, they reached the ground safely.

Immediately a dozen *poilus* rushed up, surrounded them, and made them prisoners.

'A hostile reception for friends,' smiled Oliver as he climbed out, 'especially as we make you a present of a brand-new German machine.'

The sergeant glared at the German uniform. 'You're not the first of your countrymen who have had to descend in our lines,' he growled; 'and, in spite of your good French, you'll come to my captain.'

‘Delighted, I’m sure,’ replied Oliver jovially.

In ten minutes they were in the captain’s presence, and then they told their tale.

The captain shrugged his shoulders. ‘Your tale may be perfectly true, messieurs,’ he said; ‘but my duty is to pass you on to headquarters under escort.’

‘Nothing will please us better,’ said Oliver; and by the afternoon they reached their destination.

They were hospitably received, and enjoyed a good meal; and Oliver was allowed to telegraph to his father to tell him of his safety.

Then the English headquarters were communicated with; and the next day, their identity being fully established, they went on to their own division. There they received quite an ovation. In the evening they had the honour of dining with the headquarters staff, and had to give an account of their adventures.

‘Well, gentlemen,’ said the general, as he proposed their health, ‘I think you have earned a rest.—You, Hastings, must go home and have that wounded arm properly seen to; and your friends, I should say, were due to leave.’

And so it happened that in two days’ time the four of them started for the coast, Oliver to receive proper medical attention, and Nat, Billy, and Douglas to enjoy what the American called ‘fourteen days’ soft.’

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE GATHERING OF THE STORM.

THE fourteen days' leave of Billy and his friends passed like a dream. The railway journey from Folkestone to London, through the beautiful sunlit English counties, was a sheer delight. The life, the gaiety, the cheeriness of London, which they noted as they drove away from Charing Cross Station, acted like a tonic.

Those who have not left the Metropolis during the strenuous years of the war note the many changes—the constant stream of men in khaki; the heavy transport-wagons on every thoroughfare; the closed places of business, whose proprietors are at the front; the lack of young men; the serious looks of the elders carrying on their work. But to those who return to London from the riven and blasted battlefields, from the roads crowded with grim-faced soldiers going into the trenches, with weary, mud-caked men coming out, with ambulance-wagons and ammunition and food lorries; to those coming from the country of wreck, ruin, desolation, and death, London seems a veritable paradise. So it was to Billy and his friends. Nothing could exceed the warmth of their welcome at The Hollies by Sir William Hastings, who had insisted on the whole party going straight to his house.

Oliver was greeted like one returned from the grave. Sir William could hardly control his voice as he grasped his son's hand; Lady Hastings broke down completely; the girls were almost as bad; and Vivian Drummond could not tear himself away from his old comrade and brother-in-law. And what a dinner-party followed! What speeches! What welcomes! Nat was made much of, and proved himself a brilliant and witty conversationalist. Afterwards Douglas sang, Billy talked to Lucy, the general told stories of his earlier campaigns, and Vivian related some of his and Oliver's adventures, till somebody, apparently noticing the clock by accident, mentioned that it was two o'clock in the morning.

The following days were one giddy round of dinners, theatres, parties, excursions, friendly calls, shopping expeditions, dances, and so on. Then early one morning there was a quiet little group at Victoria Station, Billy, Douglas, and Nat saying good-bye to the Hastings household, and to Vivian Drummond and his wife. There was a close grasp of hands, a last farewell, then the slamming of a carriage door, the blowing of a whistle, and the three flying-officers sat very quiet until Folkestone was reached, and they were aboard, *en route* for the front once more. Oliver, whose arm required surgical treatment, was left behind on sick leave, and the three friends knew how much they would miss him.

But directly they were again in France,

going up the line among the old familiar surroundings, their spirits rose. They took up their job where they had laid it down; their trip was not forgotten—far from it—but it was left behind; and they threw themselves heart and soul into the work of ‘ending the war.’

And by this time it was abundantly clear to those who had eyes to see and brains to understand that this ‘ending the war’ was going to be a stupendous task.

Russia, sold by Ministers in the pay of Germany, lay prostrate at the feet of her enemy. The poor misguided Russian soldiers, misled by the promise of that ‘liberty’ in whose name so many acts of treachery have been perpetrated, found themselves in a slavery more degrading, under a tyranny more ruthless, than that they had sought to escape from under their weak but well-meaning Czar. Countless hordes of Germans, in defiance of the promise made to Russia, were being hurried across from the Eastern to the Western front, there to be hurled against the Franco-British armies.

German treachery and underhand propaganda had produced almost the same effect on Italy. Attacked by Germans from the Russian front, whole armies threw down their weapons and surrendered without firing a shot. French and British troops were hurried to the Italian front to stem the tide of victorious barbarism; but much damage had been done, and guns by the thousand and men by the hundred thousand had been captured.

The heroism of the French and the British at last stopped the rout; but thinking men wondered how far the 'rot' had gone, and to what extent they could rely on any further resistance by Italy.

America was coming in, but very slowly; and so, as the winter months passed, the British and the French stood waiting, waiting, for the sledge-hammer blow to be delivered by millions of men, by which Germany hoped to finish the war.

During these winter months both Douglas and Billy had a spell in hospital, the former through a severe chill which threatened pneumonia, the latter through a shaking-up caused by an unfortunate landing. After a few weeks in a base hospital in France, they were engaged during January on a course of new aeroplane work; but early spring found them back at the front, watching for the first signs of the great enemy offensive.

They had a very busy time. Day and night they were flying over the German lines, observing the hordes of troops practising 'open warfare,' by which they hoped to sweep the hated 'English' from the field. Thousands upon thousands of men were always arriving, batteries of huge guns were coming by the dozen, and though 'Tommy' laughed and sang as usual, in his heart he knew the great struggle of the war was yet to come, and was prepared to fight to the death for the cause of freedom and humanity.

Soon after their return to the front Nat

had been recalled to the American Army, which was then arriving, and preparing to take its part in the titanic conflict; and a great miss their breezy friend was to Billy and Douglas. One bit of good news they received, and that was that both of them, as well as Nat, had been awarded the Military Cross 'for effective and valuable services rendered behind the enemies' lines.'

'Well, at least we have a bit of ribbon to show for our trouble; and Nat *will* be pleased!' cried Billy.

'It will be something to put among my curios when I return to civil life,' said Douglas.

They often talked together of the blow that was pending; and Oliver, who, being restored to health, had come out again, discussed in confidence with his friends the various pros and cons of what all believed would be the decisive battle of the war.

'There is no doubt in my mind that Germany is going "all out" for a real decision,' said Oliver. 'She is stronger in the West now than ever she has been before, and she must get victory this year, or acknowledge to her people that her offensive has failed. If she so fails she may enter upon a purely defensive warfare that may easily last for years.'

'I question whether we could stand the strain for years,' said Billy.

'We can and must if it is necessary,' retorted Oliver. 'The question is, are we going to let civilisation be put back for five hundred years, or throw every man into the

fight and spend every shilling until victory is ours?'

'We'll do all that mortal man can do,' said Billy; 'but when I think of the countless hordes of the enemy, of his skill, and of his ruthlessness, I tremble for the result.'

'Bah! we've been in tighter corners before,' cried Douglas. 'We're the same breed as the men of Trafalgar, Albuera, and Waterloo.'

'And of the "thin red line" and the men of Delhi,' added Oliver. 'We've right on our side; we'll do our duty and trust in God!'

'And if we fail, I for one will leave my bones in France,' said Douglas.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE BREAKING OF THE STORM.

THE middle of March came round. Day and night the Allied aeroplanes flew over the German lines; none of the enemy preparations escaped the eagle eyes of the aviators. The storm troops, the guns, the supports, the reserves—all were seen; and the British staff knew the blow must soon fall, and nerved itself to meet it, calmly confident in its strength to frustrate it. For two days Billy and Douglas had been spotting, and bringing back almost hourly reports. Tired out, they had retired to rest, and in the early hours of 21st March were sleeping the sleep of the just. About dawn they were awakened by the noise of a cannonade, the like of which they had never heard before. The German artillery had opened along practically the whole British front. Howitzers, mortars, field-guns, trench-mortars, every variety of weapon, large and small, joined in the hellish concert. The forward trenches, reserve and support lines, even the whole of the back area, which could be reached only by high-velocity guns, were subjected simultaneously to the fiercest bombardment experienced since the beginning of the war.

Billy and Douglas sprang to their feet, donned the few clothes they had laid aside

when turning in, and started for their headquarters.

'The ball has opened,' said Billy. 'Perhaps this is "The Day" the Germans have talked of for so many years.'

Even as he spoke a high-explosive shell burst twenty yards from them, the force of the explosion blowing them both over.

'A bad beginning,' muttered Douglas, picking himself up. 'Hurt, Billy?'

'A bit shaken;' and Billy looked about him in a dazed fashion.

They paused a moment, uncertain what to do next; then, as shells began to drop with increasing frequency, they made for their headquarters at a run, and reached them after a dozen hairbreadth escapes. Though subjected to a severe shelling by long-range guns, everything at headquarters was quiet and orderly. Machines were going up to bomb the German batteries, and to discover what could be seen of the infantry destined to attack.

Soon Billy and Douglas, in one machine, were in the air, and as the sun rose they soared over the German lines. The sight was appalling! For eighty miles the German front was literally ablaze; every conceivable sort of shell was being rained upon the British from every conceivable kind of gun. Earth, bricks, pieces of timber, houses, dug-outs were flying in the air; it seemed as if nothing could live through such an experience.

Thousands upon thousands of infantry were

seen massing for attack; the ground was literally black with them, and every bomb that Douglas dropped found its mark. A battery was next attacked, and one of its guns silenced; then a German machine came whirring through the air towards them, and Douglas turned his attention to that. There were some minutes of turning and manœuvring, of firing, diving, and pancaking; then Douglas saw his chance, made for his adversary, got behind him, and emptied a drum of bullets into him. Billy at the same moment sent three shots from his automatic pistol at the pilot, whereupon the machine seemed to stagger, turned completely over, and dashed down to the ground.

Puffs of smoke around them showed they were being fired at from the ground, and a shell-splinter shattered one of the ailerons, while another chipped the propeller badly. The machine wobbled and jerked, and Douglas knew it would soon be out of control. Fortunately they were facing their own lines, and, putting on full speed, they raced for home. They dropped lower and lower as they flew, but they managed to pass the British trenches, and landed in a field close to a battery posted on a hill.

Not a man was to be seen, for gas-shells were falling all round, and the gunners, their masks on, had been ordered to take cover until their turn should come to join in the devil's concert.

Billy and Douglas, a bit shaken by their

sudden descent, were gazing about them, when they saw some one wearing a gas-mask emerge apparently from the earth, but in reality from a dug-out, and beckon them towards him. They ran across, and were pulled into a dug-out. The stranger took off his gas-mask, and, to the delight of the boys, they saw their companion was Lieutenant Emmett, of the Canadian artillery.

‘Here’s a bit of luck!’ he cried. ‘How d’ye do? Something gone wrong with the machine, eh?’

Billy explained.

‘Good job you got as far as this. You’d have had small mercy if you’d fallen into the Boches’ hands to-day, I’m thinking. They’re out for blood, it seems to me.’

‘I believe you.’

After shaking hands, the three exchanged a few remarks between the crashing of the shells. They were thus occupied when a man rose from a corner, and, tapping Billy on the shoulder, saluted.

‘Norman!’ ejaculated Billy in surprise. ‘How did you get here?’

‘Sent across with a message to the battery, sir; too hot to get back. Thought I’d stop and see it out with the guns;’ and the ex-artilleryman smiled contentedly.

‘You’d better do the same,’ said Emmett to Billy and Douglas. ‘I’ve got a machine-gun to spare.’

‘And we can get ours from the bus,’ cried Douglas. ‘I’ll go for it.’

'Not yet,' said Emmett, laying a hand upon his shoulder. 'This gruelling will die down directly. When the Boche attack begins, it won't be so unhealthy.'

There was no gainsaying this, and so they waited in the dug-out till nearly ten o'clock, when a telephone-bell rang.

After taking the message, Emmett exclaimed, 'The infantry are attacking! Now for our show!'

The bombardment died down as if by magic, and Emmett ran from his dug-out and blew a whistle. His men at once flew to the guns, and they opened fire on their objective. As the eight guns crashed out Billy and Douglas went to their damaged aeroplane, got the machine-gun, and took up a position close to the battery alongside other machine-guns. Every one had a gas-mask on, so that conversation was impossible. Grimly all set about their task, the guns pounding away at an opposing battery, the machine-gunners heaping up reserves of ammunition.

The morning was bright and beautiful; the sun shone, the air was warm, and the atmosphere clear.

Suddenly wave after wave of gray-clad Germans was seen advancing, and the British front-line trenches blazed with rifle and machine-gun fire. The Germans went down in swaths, but others pressed on, and gradually drew nearer and nearer to the trenches. The Canadian guns were loaded and fired as rapidly as possible, and their shells, placed

with beautiful precision, blew gaps in the masses of advancing Germans.

But others took their place; wave on wave, battalion on battalion, they came, a never-ending mass of gray figures, running, leaping, swarming, crawling! In spite of the great harvest death was reaping, the attackers seemed at the end of an hour to be more numerous than ever.

Billy and Douglas, seeing their time had not yet come, left their machine-guns and joined the battery, for many men had fallen, and all the gun-teams were short-handed. Norman had got command of a gun, and, stripped to shirt and trousers, was working like a nigger. Billy and Douglas, throwing off their heavy coats, set to, and, handing up the shells, worked on the same gun as Norman.

They toiled hard for the next hour, but by the end of that time the front British trenches had been captured, and still the same never-ending swarm of Germans was pouring forth. The second and third-line trenches, after being fought to the last, had to be abandoned, for the ammunition was exhausted, and the handful of surviving infantry, blood-stained, capless, grimed with sweat and dust, spent with exhaustion, but with their faces to the foe, and a proud, exultant, unconquerable look, retired upon the guns.

The Germans had ceased firing gas-shells, and the gunners had again torn off their gas-masks. As the infantry joined them, they

gave the gallant heroes such a cheer as their parched throats could utter, and were answered by a wave of bent and blood-stained bayonets. Then, as the infantry retired behind the guns, and ammunition was hurried up, the Germans once more advanced, the step being heralded by another shower of gas-shells. Hastily donning their masks, the gunners resumed their task, and the machine-gunners got to work.

For four hours after that they poured shells and bullets upon the advancing Huns without a pause, until the men sickened at the sight of such slaughter. Wave after wave of Germans came surging up the hill, while with open sights, and firing at six hundred yards and less, the field-guns showered their shells upon them. Gaps and lanes were cut through them; they lay in heaps and in rows. Billy and Douglas worked their machine-guns until they could not bear their hands upon them. Still the Germans advanced, sullenly, doggedly, determined to conquer or die—and they died.

Such a day of slaughter not a man of them had ever seen before, or hoped ever to see again. And so through the scorching hours, parched with thirst, faint with hunger, and aching with fatigue, the British fought, until a well-nigh impassable barrier of German dead protected them from their foes.

Then, as the sun was setting, the German attack slackened, and the exhausted gunners sank beside their guns.

At that moment a sound was heard which

thrilled them to the heart. The gallant infantrymen, temporarily rested and refreshed, and supplied with more ammunition, gave one rousing British cheer, and, led by their heroic officers, rushed across the open space with all the majesty of conquerors, reached their old trenches, flung themselves upon the fierce, resentful enemy, and literally hurled him out, retaking what had been lost, and remaining in the self-same spot they had occupied in the morning.

‘Good heavens!’ cried Billy, ‘such men are more than human.’

‘Yes,’ said Douglas; ‘they’re British. The Hun hasn’t met us in the open since the battle of the Marne. When he does he’ll learn something.’

‘And what of the guns?’ asked Norman proudly, wiping the perspiration from his forehead with the back of his bare arm.

‘Superb!’ answered Billy.

An hour later, on the ground they had held all day, the three sat eating a well-earned meal. Then, throwing themselves down, they slept, but not for long. A shake aroused them.

‘Get up, lads,’ said a voice. ‘We’ve got to retire, and the guns must be saved!’

CHAPTER XL.

AT BAY!

AFTER the fatigue of the day it took Billy and Douglas a full minute before they were fully awake.

‘Retire—retire!’ muttered Billy. ‘What have we got to retire for? We’ve held all right.’

‘The line has given somewhere west of St Quentin,’ said Emmett moodily. ‘We’re “in the air,” so to speak; and we’ve got to look slippy to prevent being cut off.’

Norman joined them at that moment, also grumbling audibly about having to retire.

‘That was the mistake of Mons,’ he growled. ‘If we’d stuck where we were, the Germans would have been thoroughly beaten.’

‘Orders are orders,’ yawned Douglas; ‘ours is but to obey.’

‘Give me a hand with the guns,’ said Emmett, and they went to the battery.

Two guns were smashed by German shells; three were too badly injured to be moved, and these were rendered useless. The remainder were limbered up and taken away. Not without a fight, though. The enemy, directly the dog-tired troops evacuated the trenches they had so gallantly retaken, opened fire, while their infantry pressed on the heels of the retiring British.

They fell back in the bright moonlight, fighting as they went. Everything had been splendidly arranged, and the retirement went like clockwork. Emmett's battery joined up with the magnificent 51st Division, and Douglas's heart warmed to his countrymen—Gordons, Seafortths, and the Black Watch—who during that historic day had held their own against terrific odds, and had perhaps saved the Fifth Army from destruction.

For seven miles they trudged, the men, grim-faced and pale, burning with anger at the forced march, and determined, when they did halt, to make the Hun pay bitterly for their retirement.

During this retreat Douglas joined himself to some officers of the Black Watch, and Billy remained with him, so that they became separated from the guns.

Having arrived at their halting-place, they took up the positions assigned to them, sank upon the ground, and endeavoured to snatch an hour's sleep before dawn should again call upon them to resist the oncoming hordes of Germans.

Nor had they long to wait. Before it was light they were roused by a sergeant, who told them that it had been decided to retire yet a little farther, and to take up a position they had to hold.

The place had been partially prepared, but there was much to do; and Billy and Douglas set to with the rest, for the help of every man was valuable. The young airmen were with a

battalion of the Black Watch, with one of whose officers, Captain Ogilvie, Douglas was acquainted.

Hardly had the first rays of dawn lit up the battle area than the German artillery fire increased in activity, and was answered by the British. The retirement had evidently given the enemy the idea that the sting had been drawn from the British resistance, and that it would be an easy matter to turn the retreat into a rout. Holding this view, they did not trouble to subject the British to nearly so heavy a bombardment as on the previous day. For one thing, they had not, of course, been able to bring up their heavy artillery; but even from their mobile guns they had indulged in only half-an-hour's heavy fire, when dense crowds of their infantry could be seen massing for the attack. The significance of the movement was perfectly clear to the British.

'They think they knocked the stuffing out of us yesterday,' said Captain Ogilvie grimly to Douglas.

'They'll find out their mistake in due time,' replied Douglas.

'Yes'—and the Highlander looked round at the faces of his men—'the old fighting spirit is just as much alive to-day as it was at Prestonpans. My boys, Highlander and Lowlander alike, will give a good account of themselves, and the Germans will pay for every foot of ground they win.'

Douglas, whose blood always thrilled at the remembrance of the glories of his native

country, glanced at the set faces, the lowering brows, the firmly shut mouths, and the steely glint of the eyes of the men around him, and he felt that such troops would conquer, or fall where they stood.

Presently the German infantry, again in masses, began their advance. The British guns played on them and broke their formation, but they kept on, men behind constantly filling the gaps in front. Nor could it be said that on this occasion the Germans, in spite of the punishment they were receiving, hesitated or faltered in the slightest.

Douglas had a machine-gun ; but Billy had provided himself with a rifle and bayonet, his infantry training making him familiar with the use of those weapons.

The Scotsmen, as though scorning to open fire until they were absolutely sure of their aim, let the foe come on to within six hundred yards, and then they began. Cool as though at the butts, every man selected his object, and the result of the shooting was appalling. The Germans went down by ranks, and the faster they advanced the faster they fell. On and off, this lasted for more than a couple of hours, until even German prodigality of life was staggered.

The remains of the last infantry battalion flung into the fight were withdrawn, and presently a terrific bombardment was opened. High - explosive, shrapnel, gas - shells were thrown across, and for two hours the defenders, wearing their gas-masks, had to cower

from the cruel rain of death. Then a barrage was laid down, and behind that half-a-dozen battalions of picked 'storm troops' came on. The barrage being lifted, this deluge of gray-clad men came forward at a run, but the British fire caught them, smote them, shrivelled and blasted them, until the newly uniformed battalions of Germans lost all formation and became a mob. But these were picked troops, and they still came on in such numbers that they could not be shot down before some of them reached the shallow trench held by the Scotsmen. Then, with eyes flashing, and yelling the old slogan, the Highlanders leaped to their feet, and with levelled bayonets ran to meet their foe. Hating the kilted man, their fiercest enemy, with a bitter hatred, the Germans stood, and a furious bayonet fight began.

The men thrust and parried, grappled and fell, while the mass heaved to and fro. Billy, mad with excitement, had leapt forward with the rest, and used his bayonet manfully. Douglas, leaving his machine-gun, joined in the *mélée* with his pistol, and having emptied it, coolly reloaded. While he was doing so, a German officer levelled a revolver at him, but Billy bayoneted him in the throat a moment before he could pull the trigger. Next instant a rifle-butt crashed on Billy's shoulder. Douglas's pistol barked, and the German went down. Then half-a-dozen animal-faced Huns, their red eyes glaring like those of wolves, surrounded the two airmen, and Douglas,

after shooting one, slipped and fell on his back.

Curling back his lips from his teeth, a German 'shortened arms' to stab the fallen Douglas in the stomach, but Billy dashed his bayonet into his side. The man fell with a shriek, but another sprang into his place, and having no time to withdraw his blade and thrust again, Billy swung the butt up from under and smashed the Hun's jaw. His rifle and bayonet were, however, beaten from his hands that minute by a blow from a rifle-butt. The German then made a lunge, but Billy, remembering a trick his old bayonet-fighting instructor had taught him, seized the German's rifle-barrel, and pulled it towards him. The German naturally pulled the weapon back towards himself, whereupon Billy suddenly ceased pulling, and gave a violent push in the direction of the German. The man staggered backwards, and as he did so an upward kick from Billy's knee in the pit of the stomach doubled the German up. Releasing his grasp on the rifle, the next moment he had six inches of his own bayonet in his chest.

Captain Ogilvie and one or two men came sweeping up, and the pressure was over. The struggle lasted a few minutes more, and then the German 'storm troops' reeled back from the deadly ferocity of the Scotsmen. Fire was opened on them, and the remnants of the battalion turned and ran, bullets mowing them down as they fled.

The British troops reoccupied their trench,

and Captain Ogilvie, his face pale—for he was bleeding from a thrust in the arm—came up to Billy and Douglas, who, during the few minutes' pause, were sitting on the ground. Captain Ogilvie handed his cigarette-case, and taking one himself, lighted it from Billy's.

'We're not so cheap as the Boche thought,' he said flippantly.

Billy gazed out across the ground in front, on which the German dead and wounded lay in heaps. 'It's horrible!' he said. 'What can compensate Germany for such slaughter?'

'God knows!' replied Captain Ogilvie. 'Certainly not the amount of ground she is gaining, for that is scarcely enough in which to bury her dead.'

CHAPTER XLI.

THE GAP IN THE LINE.

NOTWITHSTANDING the gallant resistance of the Highlanders, they had to retire to another position, in order to conform with movements on their right and left. There was no chance of checking the German flood of men. It could be dammed for a time; but then it had to flow on, though every foot of ground was paid for, and the second day's fighting was even more costly to the Germans than the first.

During the afternoon the remains of Captain Ogilvie's regiment retired to still another position, just behind which was a large and well-stocked canteen, surrounded by huts. The famished men flocked in, and never were food and drink more welcome. All the while the men were eating, shells were falling around, but beyond a passing glance if one burst near, no notice was taken. Then came news that the Germans were again advancing in force, and that the remains of the division were to retire at once.

'Pity to leave all this grub behind,' said Billy to Captain Ogilvie as he looked round at the stacks of food.

'Let every man take what he can lay hands on,' ordered Captain Ogilvie, 'and be quick about it.'

It was clear that a lot of food would have to be left behind, and it was proposed to fire the canteen. A brilliant idea, however, occurred to Billy, and he communicated it to Captain Ogilvie, who laughed grimly.

'By Jove! we'll do it,' he said; and he sent off a messenger to request that a couple of field-pieces should be lent to his division for a few hours.

The retirement was continued, and presently the advancing Germans came upon the canteen and the surrounding huts. One look inside showed them that plenty of food had been left behind, and, more ravenous even than the British had been, they speedily crowded the canteen. Hundreds forced their way in, and they fought like wolves round the doors. From an ambush near, where a company of Highlanders, a couple of machine-guns, and the two field-pieces, cleverly camouflaged, lay hidden, Billy, Douglas, and Captain Ogilvie kept eager watch.

'Time's up! We can't give the beggars any longer,' said the captain. 'Ready now, everybody!'

He put a whistle to his lips and blew shrilly. In an instant a fury of fire burst from the ambush. Shells fell on the canteen, the entrance was swept with machine-gun fire, rifle-fire searched the huts, and screaming Huns fell in scores.

In ten minutes the canteen was on fire in several places, the huts were blown up, and not a German was left standing on his feet.

Captain Ogilvie, seeing all was over, turned to Billy and said, 'A very smart idea of yours, Granville! Now tell the gunners to limber up; we must be off.'

That night they held a hill all through the bright moonlight hours, for there was no cessation either of firing or of fighting. They held out until the enemy worked round each flank of the hill; then they had perforce to retire. Mile after mile they went, to halt again in a small village. Here they got food and a few hours' rest, until the enemy, creeping up in the mist, took them by surprise, and after a fierce fight, turned them out.

Forced back, though still unbroken, the division retired in perfect order; but from that time the whole thing appeared to Billy and Douglas like some terrible nightmare, in which fighting and marching, with occasional halts for food or an hour's rest, alternated with unflinching regularity, while all the time the air was full of the thunder of heavy guns.

At the end of the third day of almost incessant fighting, the British in the section which was being so heavily attacked was back on the river Somme. Peronne and other important places had fallen; but although the British line had been pressed back, it had not broken. North and south of the wide salient it stood firmly; and the Germans had nothing adequate to show for their quarter of a million slain.

That night Billy and Douglas got some sleep, and next morning they obtained food and had a good wash. It was now high time

they tried to find their own branch of the service, and bidding a hearty good-bye to Captain Ogilvie, they went off to find Major Corcoran, which they did later in the morning.

He was delighted to see his subalterns, whom he had given up as dead; but he rated them soundly for having got lost, and then told them they were just the very lads he wanted.

'You know, this German knock has shaken us up a good bit,' he said, 'and although everything has worked like clockwork, certain unforeseen events have happened that have caused us much uneasiness. One thing is that we were obliged to entrust one part of our line to some of our Allies who have not yet been broken in to the terrible conditions of this war. The result was that on being heavily attacked they, like many other equally brave men in similar circumstances, gave way, and there is a nasty gap in our line. We haven't got a man to fill in there, but the French are hurrying up reinforcements. Meanwhile the ground must be watched, every yard of it, and any advance of the Germans in that neighbourhood must be communicated to headquarters without an instant's delay.'

Major Corcoran gave Billy and Douglas other details, and they saw how great was the danger did the enemy discover the gap in the lines and pour through.

In an hour's time they were seated in a Sopwith Scout, and were on their way to the French general with a letter from Major Corcoran.

The French general was politeness itself, and explained the situation to the young aviators. 'There are three miles of undefended line,' he said, 'which I and a score of mounted orderlies are constantly patrolling. If the Germans come before we can bring up reinforcements, they must get through. I am watching here. I want you to go out across the Somme, keep constantly in front of this sector, and let us have instant advice of the approach of the foe. Let us know how far off he is, and how long we have before he can be here.'

Billy and Douglas, thoroughly understanding what was required of them, started off, and flew toward the German positions. They soon located the enemy, and though heavily fired at, flew low, and took in all necessary details as to the strength and disposition of the troops. Presently two German aeroplanes started up in pursuit, and knowing they dared not risk capture, Billy and Douglas flew off.

Returning, they saw on the flat open country the French general and his orderlies trotting about as though reconnoitring. In reality their aim was to mislead the enemy if he should arrive; to bluff him and hold him until the promised reinforcements could come up. As Billy and Douglas approached the general, no one would have guessed, seeing his smiling face, the agony of anxiety that consumed him.

The road to Paris was unbarred; there was a gap in the line. If the foe came up a vital

wound could be inflicted; and all that stood between the capital and the enemy were twenty French soldiers.

Billy and Douglas went up a second and yet a third time. The last time they saw that the Germans were advancing, and directly for the gap, too!

The moment had come! The French general, on hearing the news, went back to his field telegraph. He was busy for a few minutes; then he rejoined Billy with a pale face.

‘In five hours my men will be here,’ he said. ‘In five hours all would be safe; but in five hours the Germans will have arrived and will have passed, and everything will be lost!’

‘Cannot you get any men up before that?’

‘Not a moment sooner, *mon enfant*.’

‘Cannot the British help?’

‘Gallant fellows, they have more than they can do now, and no troops could march from their lines in time.’

‘How about cavalry?’

‘*Mon Dieu!* if they could spare me but a regiment!’

Again the telegraph was busy, and presently the general, smiling, appeared once more.

He wrung Billy’s hand. ‘You are my good genius,’ he said. ‘Your gallant countrymen stand by me. A regiment of hussars will be on its way in five minutes, and a company of infantry are coming in motor-buses. We shall stop the gap! We shall save France!’

CHAPTER XLII.

HOW THE ROAD WAS BARRED.

THERE passed two of the most anxious hours Billy and Douglas had ever known, during which the young aviators constantly kept the advancing Germans under observation, returning frequently to report to the French general and his orderlies, a score of men blocking the road to Paris.

At last the faint hum of an aeroplane was heard, and a machine, seeing the British aeroplane on the ground, began to circle round.

'Who on earth can this be?' said Billy to Douglas. 'Is it a British or a French machine?'

'Can't say. Some one with a message, I doubt not.'

The machine came lower. 'It isn't a Boche machine, anyhow,' said Billy, as he and his friend continued to observe it.

'No,' said Douglas; 'neither is it British or French. I can just see the white star on a blue ground on its wings. It's a Yankee!'

And such it proved to be, for the machine made a fair landing close to the British aeroplane. A man clambered out, and approached the two airmen; then a well-known voice drawled, 'By Grundy, my old chums! Sakes alive, boys; shake!' and Nat, hurrying forward, shook his friends' hands as though he

would never leave off. 'We must have a pow-wow together by-and-by,' he said. 'At present I'm hot foot to find General Lefèvre. I've got a message for him.'

'Come with us; he's quite close.'

'I'm glad of that. Some of our boys got rattled in that last stunt—"got the wind up," as you fellows say, and let the Boche through. But it's all right now. When they'd thought it over, and got their second wind, they saw what fools they'd been, and are hurrying back in force. They won't weaken again, I'll give you my word. They're the goods this time, and Brother Boche will know it. I've to find out the exact position here, and take word back.'

Billy and Douglas informed him how things stood before they found the general. The Frenchman was delighted with Nat's news, and told him he expected British reinforcements every minute. Nat was to return and hurry up the American troops, which he promised to do at once.

In less than half-an-hour after his departure a regiment of British hussars, tough, hardy-looking troopers in steel helmets, trotted into view. The French general at once rode off to meet them; the colonel came forward, and the two shook hands. The explanation that followed took only five minutes; then the colonel, rising in his stirrups, addressed his regiment.

'Officers and men,' he cried, 'the enemy is approaching the river in strength. This is

the only bridge by which he can cross. We are going over to meet him, and fight a delaying action till our gallant French comrades arrive.'

A mighty British cheer burst from six hundred throats; then the colonel held up his hand. 'We have waited long enough for this day,' he said; 'now we'll make the most of it. By sections from the right, walk march! Trot!' and with a thudding of hoofs and a jangle of accoutrements the hussars trotted over the bridge.

Not very long afterwards a company of the Royal West Surreys came upon motorlorries and buses, and these also crossed the river.

'We'll get up in the air again, Douglas,' said Billy. 'We shall see a very pretty fight, I'm thinking, and may be able to lend a helping hand.'

They were soon over the hussars, who were pushing rapidly on. Passing them, they went on until they saw the advancing Germans; they then returned to the British cavalry, and gave the colonel all the information they had gained.

The road along which the enemy would advance led through some wooded country, and it was here the colonel decided that he would take his stand. He dismounted his men, the Number Three of each section retiring with the horses. Then the machine-guns took up their positions; the troopers, every magazine charged, lined the roadway,

and waited for the signal to give the enemy a rough surprise.

It was almost an hour before the head of the dusty column appeared, and in silence it was allowed to proceed until a whole battalion had passed.

Then the hussars opened fire, and a storm of lead smote the Germans, cutting them down like a scythe.

The enemy, taken absolutely by surprise, recoiled on the battalions following, but the leaden hail pursued them and drove them into indescribable confusion. The whole leading battalion was swept away, but those behind deployed, and opened a heavy fire upon the wood. Some field-guns were also hurried up, and soon a battle on a small scale was raging.

The wood was penetrated by the Germans, but every foot of the way was disputed, and though the British fell back, they took a heavy toll of their foes.

For fully two hours those intrepid cavalymen held up two German divisions, and time of the utmost value was gained. At length a mounted French dragoon came spurring up to the British colonel, saying that the French had arrived, and that the British were to retire across the Somme. Fighting coolly and stubbornly, they fell back until they got to their horses, when they mounted.

Billy and Douglas had again gone up, and had swept round to see how things looked. To their consternation, they found that while the fight for the woods had been going on,

the Germans had pushed several battalions round another way, and had cut off the retreat of the British by the bridge. Seeing this, the airmen returned and told the hussar colonel. He looked grave for a moment, and tugged at his gray moustache. Then he laughed grimly. 'It can't be helped,' he said. 'We've given the Boche a taste of our mettle as infantry; now we'll let him see what we can do as cavalry. We'll make straight for the river, cut our way through any of the enemy who try to intercept us, and then ford the stream.'

A few short and sharp commands were given, the survivors formed troop, and leaving the woods, entered the open. There was a German battalion between them and the river. The hussars formed squadron, and then line; and slinging their rifles and taking to their swords, they dashed upon the foe with a ringing cheer. The Germans seemed hardly to know what to do; that cavalry would dare to charge them never seemed to have occurred to them. They could not fire in their present formation, and before they could alter it the hussars were on them. The swords rose and fell; the Germans endeavoured to get out of the troopers' way, but a good hundred of them went down.

The hussars cut through them, and went on towards the river. Then a catastrophe occurred. Many of the horses refused to take the water, and, despite all the efforts of the riders, would not face the stream. The

Germans had hurried up some guns, and unlimbering, they opened fire on the British cavalry. Cut off by the river, and falling without a chance of striking back, those whose horses would not take the water re-formed, and, led by their colonel, charged back at the German infantry, dying to a man, but killing a number of Germans first. Those hussars whose horses had plunged into the broad river got stuck in the muddy slopes of the opposite bank, and were ploughed into by German shells. Eventually less than a hundred reached the shelter of the French troops, which had by then arrived; but the regiment had performed a deed of great valour which will be proudly remembered as long as British *esprit de corps* exists. The whole episode had been witnessed by Billy and Douglas, who could have wept with rage; but though they flew low over the enemy and peppered him with machine-gun fire, they could not avert the disaster.

Meanwhile the Surreys had occupied a château, and had held up two battalions of Germans for over an hour, despite the most desperate assaults delivered by the enemy. Their retreat was, however, cut off, and the French general knew that unless he could rescue them, not a man would escape alive.

He placed himself at the head of a light infantry battalion, and crossing the bridge at the double, they marched on the attacking Germans.

Billy and Douglas went with the battalion.

On nearing the château the battalion deployed, and opened a withering fire on the enemy. For a quarter of an hour a fierce duel of musketry ensued; then, headed by their officers, the *poilus* charged with a fierce yell. Bayonets and clubbed rifles dealt havoc amongst the foe, and the Germans were driven back, helter-skelter. The château was reached, but, alas! too late. The company of West Surreys had died to a man, each at his post. The place was surrounded with a heap of German dead; but numbers had told, and the gallant Surrey men, true to the old traditions of their glorious regiment, had fought to the last.

The Frenchmen uncovered their heads as they looked at the bodies of their Allies, and, more emotional than the British, many of them gazed with tear-dimmed eyes. Then, as fresh hordes of Germans were seen to be advancing, the French retreated to their own side of the river.

Some field-guns had arrived, and these were trained point-blank on the bridge, the only means of passing the river. During the bright moonlight the enemy made several attempts to rush it, but the guns smashed every effort, and the bridge was piled with German dead.

During the night more French troops arrived, together with a battalion or two of Americans, among whom was Nat. These hastily threw up shallow trenches, and the following day smashed every attempt of the Germans to cross the river. The guns

swept the bridge, and rifle and machine-gun fire defeated the enemy's every endeavour. They tried crossing in boats, on big rafts, even by swimming; but every attempt was beaten, though it cost the gallant defenders a good many men.

Towards evening Billy, Douglas, and Nat were sheltering in a shallow trench. They had fought like Trojans the whole day.

'Some chimozzle this, boys!' said Nat.

'It'll be some disaster soon if we don't get reinforcements,' said Billy wearily. 'Fresh enemy troops have been arriving all day, and we shall never last out the night. Several batteries have arrived, and they'll shell us out.'

A French officer joined them. 'Our task is done,' he said. 'We had only to hold the enemy until our next line of defence was prepared. That is now ready, and, in spite of the danger, the American engineers have mined the bridge. The next big rush they make, we shall hold until the bridge is crowded; then we shall press a button, and—"pouf!"—a hundred or so Boches will never see the Fatherland again.'

They had not long to wait for the attack, for the Germans were furious at being checked. They hurled a battalion in mass at the bridge, and rushed at it twelve men abreast. The French and Americans met them with a fierce fire, and drove them back until the bridge was chock-a-block with masses of the enemy. Suddenly there was a blinding flash, a dull

roar, and the bridge, with most of those upon it, blew into the air.

'Our gallant fellows are avenged, anyhow,' said Billy grimly.

'And the Boche has got a sharp lesson,' added Douglas.

This was true, for, except for a heavy artillery fire, he made no further attack.

Under cover of darkness the Allies withdrew, Nat marching with his countrymen; while Billy and Douglas, their duty finished, flew off to British headquarters with a letter from the French general, who had fortunately escaped all dangers.

CHAPTER XLIII.

OLIVER REASONS.

A WEEK of almost incessant fighting followed. Pressed by hordes of the enemy, the British were forced farther and farther back, though every bridge, every village, every yard of ground was hotly and bitterly contested.

On those days when flying was possible, Billy and Douglas, together with hundreds of other airmen, flew over the enemy, bombed their bivouacs, their artillery, and their transport, and flying low, broke up their infantry formations with machine-gun fire.

Armentières, Ballieul, the Messines Ridge, and other places, that it had cost thousands of British lives to capture a year before, fell into the enemy's hands; but the British line, though it bent, was never broken! Dogged, determined, and unconquered, they retired. English, Scots, and Irish, Canadians, Australians, and New Zealanders, vied with each other in performing feats of unparalleled heroism. The main strength of the German army was flung upon the British, but though they staggered under the weight of the sledge-hammer blows, they held on grimly. Smilingly they faced death, surpassing the warriors of Marlborough and of Wellington, of Lawrence and of Havelock, of Wolseley and

of Roberts. And when, after days and nights of fighting against terrific odds, the survivors, marching back to enjoy a brief rest, passed comrades marching forward to shoulder their burden, their faces wore the exalted, unconquerable look of men who could be beaten only by death itself.

Weary, wet, and, if the truth must be told, rather dispirited, Billy and Douglas, after twenty-two hours' almost continuous fighting, were sitting in a little cottage just behind the lines, enjoying their first meal for twelve hours, when the door was thrown open, a staff-officer entered, and in a minute was wringing Billy heartily by the hand.

'By Jove, Oliver! I'm glad to see you,' cried Billy. 'You put me in mind of pleasant times.'

'Times when the Boche was dancing to our piping, eh, and not—as now?'

'True, oh king.'

'And how's Douglas?' asked Oliver, gripping the Scotsman's hand.

'Just biding his time, and praying for the hour when the Boche may resume his dancing—to our piping.'

'All in good time,' said Oliver. 'The sun does not always shine on the same side of the hedge.'

'And it's always darkest just before the dawn,' said Billy. 'But it's been a very dark hour indeed for us.'

'So that the dawn will be all the brighter! Cheer up, Billy! I can understand that you

who've been through the inferno of the last few weeks see more of the shade than the shine just now. But let's change the subject; I have messages for you from home. I had a long letter this morning.'

And for a time the talk turned on loved relatives and friends they had in common.

But there was no shutting out for long the recollection of the enormous struggle that was then being waged, and Billy was inclined to be a little pessimistic.

'I should not have cared so much if we'd only stood,' he said. 'Our losses, heavy as they are, are not to be compared with the enemy's. We've made him pay a big price, but we've had to retreat before him, and that hurts my pride.'

'Pride is all very well, Billy, and the man who wins can afford to be proud. It's too early yet to speak of the end, but I tell you we are going to win.'

'We absolutely must,' cried Douglas, 'or Europe goes back again to barbarism. It's the twentieth century fighting the fourteenth.'

'That may be,' agreed Billy; 'but, candidly, I don't like the look of things. To go back, after all that it cost us to get forward, is horribly against my grain.'

'It was the only thing to do, Billy,' said Oliver. 'I'll give you an illustration. You are, I know, a very fair boxer. Suppose you found yourself in the ring against a fourteen-stone brute, who didn't fight according to the rules of the game, but who, when he had

knocked you down, meant to jump on your stomach, what would you do?’

‘Lord knows!’

‘Say he meant to try to get you into his grip, so that he could pound your face to a jelly, what would be the correct tactics?’

‘I should certainly try to avoid closing with him.’

‘Being lighter, quicker, and possessed of more science, while he had the brute strength, you’d dance round him, avoid his sledge-hammers, tire him out by letting him make mad rushes at you, take with a good grace what punishment he could inflict, and let him have it here and there whenever you saw a chance.’

‘That would be the correct game, I suppose.’

‘And if you saw one eye closing up, blood flowing from a shrewd tap here and there, while he began to stagger a little under the punishment he was getting, you’d be hopeful of beating him in the end, providing you could still keep up the same tactics.’

‘I imagine I should.’

‘Well, apply the simile. Call Germany the heavy-weight, and the Allies the more active light-weight, what do you say so far of the conflict?’

‘If put that way, the prospect looks better.’

‘It must be put that way,’ said Oliver. ‘I dare not tell you all I know, but this I will tell you. It pays us better to give ground which is useless to the enemy, and which he has to purchase with tens of thousands of

lives, than to hold that ground at as reckless an expenditure of life as his own.'

'But it's the retreating that I don't like,' persisted Billy.

'Retreats are sometimes as surely the fore-runners of victory as advances. Corunna was won after a most trying retreat by Sir John Moore. Wellington often retreated. We had to retreat from Mons, but that led us to the victory of the Marne. We shall retreat while it pays us, and then we shall stand and fight it out. We have plenty of reserves, and the whole matter has been carefully thought out. And don't forget America has not struck yet. It is because Germany sees she must hit hard before our Ally gets in that she is making this prodigious effort. For her it's now or—never. And I tell you, man Billy, it will be—never! We must, we *will*, conquer in the end! Lord, Britons are never going to bow their necks to the Teuton! Why, the bones of our ancestors would not rest in their graves. The British Empire must be saved, and it will be. Ours is the cause of Liberty and Justice, and in the end will assuredly triumph. The darker the night, the fairer the dawn. We'll take these words to heart, Billy, and though things look black now, we'll put our trust in One above, and, believe me, we shall not trust in vain.'

CHAPTER XLIV.

TOWARDS THE DAWN.

ONE result of the talk which Billy and Douglas had with Oliver was to put quite a different complexion on the events of the preceding few weeks. After all, they had carried out a definite plan; they had had to retreat, but it was a strategic retreat, and was the only thing possible. The enemy had been forced to pay bitterly; every mile—nay, every yard almost—had cost him lives, and the German army of manoeuvre was being smashed, while his reserves were being rapidly used up.

The resistance of the Allies stiffened daily. It grew more and more difficult for the Germans to advance; often, indeed, they could not advance at all, and sometimes were even driven from ground they had previously taken.

The airmen were busy day and night, flying low, bombing the enemies' artillery, their headquarters, and their ammunition-dumps, and taking a heavy toll of their infantry with machine-gun fire.

The British artillery had the range to a yard of every road the Boches could use, and a ceaseless rain of shells fell upon them. Bad as things were for the Allies, they were a great deal worse for the Germans, as the exhausted and dispirited men who were

captured admitted. At last the fury of the German attack abated, and, save for the incessant gun-fire, there was little doing along the whole front.

'I suppose this is the end of the first round,' said Billy, as he, Douglas, and Nat sat one night discussing a good supper.

'Yes,' replied Nat; 'and old Fritz hasn't got much to crow about. He's pushed us back and taken some ground, but there's still a wall of steel between him and the Channel ports.'

'It's a bit early to talk yet,' said Douglas. 'He's got a deal of kick left in him, and he'll attack again and again with fresh divisions, while we shall have to put our already hardly-tried men into the line to meet him.'

'And they'll do it,' cried Billy, 'and give as good an account of themselves the second time as the first.'

'I don't know that they'll be called upon just yet,' said Nat, lighting one of his favourite cigars. 'My opinion is that the Boche will go for the French next. He's had a taste of the British, and I think the flavour of it will make him sort of hanker for a change of diet.'

And so it proved.

A big German attack was made south of the Aisne River, but the French and the Americans held the enemy, and inflicted huge losses upon him, so that at the end of two days the attack weakened down. It was, after all, only the preliminary to a bigger effort,

which was made on a twenty-two-mile front between Montdidier and Noyon, and carried the enemy five miles nearer to Paris. The attack was made by twenty-five fresh divisions, but the French and the Americans made a superb defence, and the fighting was particularly bitter. Villages were taken and retaken several times, and after a very heavy attack by the Germans had carried them down to the valley of the Aronde, a magnificent 'counter' hurled them back to their old position, with a loss of a thousand prisoners and many guns.

These successes filled the British with delight, and they longed for the time to come when they could go even one better than their gallant comrades in arms.

The grave position of the Allies, caused by their serious outnumbering, owing to the huge reinforcements Germany had been able to draw from her Russian front, had one great result. America saw that she must accelerate her programme and hurry out men if she wanted to be in time to avert a disaster. France and Britain would do all that was humanly possible; they would die to a man if need be; but they were getting spent with heavy and incessant fighting against a foe in overwhelming numbers, led by some of the cleverest generals in Europe, and help was badly needed.

America's efforts, already stupendous, were doubled, and men began to arrive in hundreds, in thousands, and in tens of thousands.

Nat was in his element. 'What did I tell

you boys?' he cried. 'Didn't I say we were right in this scrap? And we're going to do the trick, you bet! We're out to smash the Kaiser and his Prussian bullies for good and all, and make no mistake about it! You Britishers say you saved Europe from old Louis XIV. and from Napoleon; and now we're going to save the old lady, Britannia, from Kaiser Bill.'

'Get on with it, Nat, then!' said the imperturbable Douglas. 'Roll your sleeves up, and get to work with your fists, and give your tongue a rest.'

'You're all right, Douglas,' said Nat. 'We may talk more than you canny Scots, but you can lay we'll fight as hard.'

'Then all will be well,' said Billy, who always avoided these exchanges of national repartee.

A few days after this Billy and Douglas went on duty to a base camp, where American troops were arriving for final training in the trenches. They were standing outside the station just as a trainload of Americans arrived. In due time they detrained, and were marched out into the broad road, on one side of which was a veteran British battalion going up again into the line to stem the rush of the foe. For some minutes the steel-helmeted Britons and the lithe Americans looked furtively at one another. Then one young American, who had a tiny Stars-and-Stripes stuck in the muzzle of his rifle, sang out, 'Hello, Tommy!'

'Cheerio, lad!' answered a grinning Tommy; and the ice was broken.

'I reckon we've taken the big water-jump to pull you old tin-hats out o' the mud,' cried another Yankee.

'And you've left it about long enough too, Sammy,' retorted Tommy.

'Oh, we don't want to hurry nothin'; things gits broke in a hurry. But now we're here, you'll see we're the good goods. Ole Fritz 'ull shore find he's goin' to git hurt if he don't watch out.'

'You've got to do it with your rifles, not by chin-wagging, old dear,' said a smart young corporal.

'We'll use our rifles right enough,' retorted the Yankee. 'You give us the ammo., and we'll give the Huns a real Wild West spectacle.'

'We've got a special box for you up at the front, and you can have all the shooting you want for nix.'

And so the chaff went on, quite good-naturedly, while Briton and Yankee seemed to be taking each other's measure.

When they moved off, marching in parallel columns, the Yankees began asking what it was like 'in the front line,' and many were the wonderful yarns Tommy pitched. When he had used up facts, he fell back on fiction, and the Americans looked a little puzzled at some of the wonders they heard related. But they had come out to 'make good,' and they were no whit dismayed. What a 'Britisher'

could do and stand, they could, they said to each other; and when they halted there was much back-slapping, hand-shaking, and exchanging of souvenirs.

Billy and Douglas marched along with two young American lieutenants, very different men from Nat, but keen and full of confidence.

'I think they'll be all right when they've had a week or two of it,' said Billy to Douglas when they were alone.

'I'm sure of it; and, I say, Billy, if you were the Kaiser, and knew there were close on a million of these chaps ready to face your tired men, and that by the end of the year the number would be doubled, how would you feel about it?'

'Pretty sick, I should say.'

'So sick, I expect, that you'd know, if you didn't smash your enemies before those two million men were ready, you'd never do it, eh?'

'That's so, Douglas.'

'Then, after all, we've got nothing to worry about. We've held the Huns for nearly three months, and we'll hold them another three. It will mean hot work for us, but we'll put our backs to the wall. We've always shone at the holding-out game. There was Lawrence at Delhi, Gordon at Khartûm, White at Ladysmith'—

'And there'll be Haig in France. I'm as certain, now, that we shall do it as I was dubious during that first bull-rush in March.'

'Yes; there'll be no more of that sort of

thing. Fritz will pay the price for all he gets now;’ and the truth of that statement was fully proved a few days later.

Billy and Douglas were in the neighbourhood of Compiègne, as also was Nat. Aerial observation had shown that the Germans intended delivering a big attack in that district, and the airmen were extremely busy between Compiègne and Château Thierry.

It was a delightful country, and the weather was perfect; but the shadow of war hung over all, and Billy and Douglas had eyes only for the grim reality of the gigantic struggle. A night of tense anxiety followed a day of furious bombardment by gas-shells and high explosives, and as soon as it was light Billy and Douglas were in the air.

On flying over the enemy’s lines, it was soon apparent, by the dense masses of infantry that had been moved up during the night, that the attack was imminent, and soon the bombardment reached a climax of fury. Then, preceded by clouds of gas, by flame-throwers and tanks, the Germans advanced. Soon a terrific battle was in full swing, and Billy and Douglas, swooping above the swarms of gray-clad infantry, bombed and fired at them until their ammunition was exhausted.

Returning for a fresh supply, they mounted to about four thousand feet, when two German machines came swooping out of the blue towards them. Douglas at once accepted the challenge, and a lively interchange of machine-gun fire took place, while the three machines

swooped, dived, spiralled, and pancaked in a fashion that any one from below would have found difficult to follow. But there were none to observe, for a hand-to-hand combat was being waged on the earth that for savage intensity equalled anything that had happened during the war.

The two German machines were very skilfully handled, and they tried their hardest to get Douglas between them and then cripple the machine. This, however, he avoided; and on one of the Germans suddenly diving so as to avoid Douglas's fire, Billy dropped a well-timed bomb, which, striking the fuselage, exploded, and blew the body of the machine to pieces. Bursting into flames, the German aeroplane fell hurtling to the ground, the airmen leaping from the burning wreck, and being literally smashed into unrecognisable heaps.

Watching the burning machine, Douglas's attention was for a moment taken off the second German, who, swooping by, let rip with his machine-gun. Half-a-dozen bullets crashed into the engine, and the machine gave a lurch as the propeller slackened.

A few seconds' scrutiny showed Douglas that his engine was ruined, and swinging round, he planed towards the earth. The German followed him, firing all the while, but did not hit him again. Nat, coming up at an opportune moment, engaged and drove off the German.

Douglas chose an open spot and made a descent, but the landing was so violent that

the machine was practically wrecked, and both the aviators got a severe bruising. In ten minutes or so they recovered, and found they were in the midst of a fierce fight. Australians, Americans, and French were making a furious counter-attack in an attempt to retake a small wood from which they had been expelled. The Germans had hurried up machine-guns, and hung on to the wood like grim death; while the Allies poured in a furious rifle-fire, and then, despite the inferno of bullets that sang and zipped around them, prepared to charge with levelled bayonets.

'Come on, Douglas!' cried Billy, fiercely excited. 'Let's join in this;' and he took from a dead Australian his rifle, bayonet, and bandoleer. Douglas picked up another weapon, and joining a group of Americans and Australians, they dashed towards the wood.

Streams of machine-bullets smote the advancing men cruelly, but their blood was up, and the survivors never flinched. Soon they were amongst the trees, and here some shelter was obtained. Advancing from tree to tree, and firing at every enemy head they saw, they pushed on until the centre of the wood was reached. Here a strong stand was made by the Germans, and the victorious advance was stopped.

A young Australian officer dashed to the front. 'Come on, boys!' he yelled. 'Let's get the ferrets out of this; we're not going to be stopped now!'

A roar came from the men; then Billy and Douglas dashed to the officer's side, and, followed by a score of men, they sprang forward.

Many went down, but the survivors reached the machine-guns. Billy went for a man who was trying to remove his gun to a place of safety. In an instant he bayoneted the fellow. An officer leapt at him with upraised sword, but Douglas shot him dead. Three Huns with fixed bayonets attacked the two lads, but Billy got in one with his rifle-butt, and as the man fell the other two put up their hands. Ignoring these fellows, Billy and the others swept on, beating down all opposition until the edge of the wood was reached, and for a few minutes they shot down retreating Germans.

'Seems as if the tide was turning,' panted Douglas; and a small reinforcement coming up, they all pushed on, driving the enemy before them for quite a mile. They came to a small village, strongly held, and here more caution had to be observed.

Waiting until more men came up, the Americans and Australians, fighting side by side, attacked on the left, while a strong body of French attacked on the right.

With loud shouts they advanced, and soon another fierce fight was in progress. They reached the village, and fought their way from house to house until the place was carried, and once more they had the enemy in the open. But the Germans had been

strongly reinforced, and offered such a resistance that the Australians were again checked, until a couple of field-pieces came trotting up, and unlimbering, peppered the enemy so successfully that again he began to retreat.

‘Why, surely that’s Norman, Douglas!’ said Billy, pointing to a tall figure working on the gun nearest to them.

‘So it is; and did you ever see a man more in his element?’

Weary with fighting, Billy and Douglas paused to admire the way in which the guns were being worked, when an exclamation of annoyance from an Australian officer caused them to look to their right, where, to their surprise, they saw the French were retiring.

‘What on earth is the matter with them? If they bolt, we must go back too,’ cried the Australian. ‘Here, can any of you speak their lingo sufficiently to ask what’s up?’

‘I can,’ said Billy.

‘And I,’ added Douglas.

‘Then, for Heaven’s sake, go and bid them only stand, and this part of the field is ours!’

Racing forward, Billy and Douglas were soon amongst the French, who were sullenly falling back.

‘What’s the matter?’ Billy asked of an officer. ‘Why retire?’

The French captain shrugged his shoulders. ‘I know no more than you. We have received orders; that is all I know.’

‘From whom are these orders?’

The Frenchman pointed towards a big man

in French staff uniform who was shouting out, and pointing with his arm to the rear. Billy and Douglas approached him to see what was the matter, and heard him shouting, 'Retire! Retire! The Germans are coming on in overwhelming numbers! You will be cut off!'

Billy and Douglas looked at each other, while the big man continued shouting, 'Retire at the double! Retire, *mes enfants!*'

Suddenly Billy clutched Douglas's arm. 'Don't you recognise that voice?' he asked.

'I thought so. Let's get closer to him.'

They went up to the French staff officer, and both made sure of his identity at the same instant.

'Colonel Vogt!' shouted Billy.

The man in the staff uniform, on hearing the words, swung round as though he had been shot.

'Retire!' he shouted.

'Arrest that man!' yelled Billy to some French soldiers near. '*He is a German spy; I know him!*'

At the word 'spy' the Frenchmen drew a sharp breath. Colonel Vogt whipped out a revolver and levelled it at Billy, but a French sergeant knocked up his arm. At the same time Billy flew at him, and tried to wrench the pistol from his grasp. He would have stood no chance against the burly German, however, had not several French soldiers hurled themselves upon him. Even then the struggle was terrific. Vogt fought, and

kicked, and even bit, and when they got him to the ground continued to struggle; whereupon a *poilu*, turning to an officer who had come up, and shortening his bayonet, said, 'Shall I settle him, *mon officier* ?'

'No; stun him! We'll satisfy ourselves that he is a spy first.'

A tap on the head quieted him, and Douglas was looking on amazed, when another officer in French staff uniform, who had been with Vogt, started off, and dashed away toward the enemy. As he went by, Douglas recognised him. 'Von Hahn!' he muttered, and leveling his rifle, he fired at the flying man. His bullet sped true, and, shot through the lungs, Von Hahn fell. Several French officers had assembled by this time, and Douglas speedily explained. Von Hahn, who knew that his minutes were numbered, confessed that he was a German, and, indeed, underneath his blue-gray tunic was a German gray coat with the ribbon of the Iron Cross passed through a button-hole.

'Let the spy die,' said a French major. 'Come, we'll see that the other German dog does not escape. Meanwhile you, Alphonse, and you, Ducroy, stop the retreat; lead the men forward, and keep in line with our gallant Allies.'

As the French again advanced, Billy, Douglas, and several French officers approached Colonel Vogt, who had recovered consciousness. On his being searched, ample evidence was found that he was a German, and

it hardly needed Billy and Douglas to identify him as a notorious spy.

‘Bah! you cannot fight like gentlemen,’ cried the French major to Vogt. ‘Your methods are always dark and underhand.—Lead him away, sergeant; do not leave him, and in half-an-hour shoot him.’

‘Curse you! Curse you all!’ hissed Vogt. ‘We shall beat you yet. I do not fear death. I have served my country well, and the only regret I have is that I did not shoot you two swine when I had you in my power;’ and he glared at Billy and Douglas.

‘Come away,’ said Billy; ‘he isn’t a pretty sight;’ and they turned their backs upon him as he was being led away to the doom he so richly merited.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE LINE IS HELD.

AMONGST the letters found on Colonel Vogt were some official notes which, when transcribed, showed that a determined attempt to reach Paris was about to be made. From the notes it was clear that the attack would be delivered on a wide front, both east and west of Reims.

The imminence of the projected attack was verified by aerial observation, and Marshal Foch quietly made his preparations to meet the blow. French and American troops were hurried up in reserve, and aeroplanes were busy all day reconnoitring the German positions, and bombing their dumps and lines of communication all night.

Douglas and Billy were flying at all hours, and many a hairbreadth escape they had.

After a particularly heavy day, the young airmen had turned in for a few hours' sleep, but before midnight they were aroused by a terrific bombardment.

Turning out, they were soon joined by Nat, and together they made their way to their machines. The whole of the eastern heavens was blazing with the flash of guns, while the thunder of the reports was appalling.

'The big thrust for Paris has begun,' said

Nat grimly; 'the fate of the city will be decided within forty-eight hours.'

Billy felt the truth of the remark, and trembled to think of what would happen to the tens of thousands of defenceless women and children, and to the priceless works of art in the city, should the Hun succeed. He knew that before the Germans could enter the city they would have to march over the corpses of Marshal Foch's magnificent soldiers, but from experience he also knew that the enemy launched his attacks with such overwhelming numbers that it was almost impossible to stop his first rush.

The French batteries, armed with the knowledge that the airmen had obtained, opened fire on the German batteries, and for hours a furious duel was waged. By the fluctuations in the weight of the barrage thrown down by the Germans, it was evident that the French batteries were doing good work.

At half-past four in the morning the barrage lifted, and the Germans delivered a terrific attack. This was gallantly met by the French and the Americans, and a bitter struggle ensued.

The duties of the airmen were to fly low over the advancing waves of gray-clad Germans, and to bomb and machine-gun them until their formations were broken up. Douglas, Billy, and Nat had some narrow escapes during the early hours of the morning, but the danger was from guns rather than from enemy aircraft, of which very few were about.

Although attack after attack was partially smashed, the enemy made progress, and by ten o'clock the French had fallen back several miles, fighting every step of the way. Billy and Douglas had landed behind the French lines for want of petrol, and were gratefully partaking of some bread and cold meat offered by a French officer, when they were joined by the French major who, a few days before, had ordered Vogt to be shot.

His face, shining with perspiration, and grimy with powder and dust, was glowing with satisfaction. 'Ha, messieurs!' he cried to the airmen; 'a happy meeting! This will be a great day for France.'

'I trust it will,' said Douglas gravely; 'but the enemy is advancing.'

'Advancing—yes; but at what a cost, and how very slowly! We know that by this time he expected to have penetrated to a depth of nine miles, and he has not gone four. We shall soon have him, and then, *voilà*, you will see!'

'I hope we shall see him entirely stopped.'

'You will see more,' cried the major rapturously. 'You will see him hurled back! You will see him smashed! I tell you Marshal Foch is a great general; he knows exactly what he wants to do, and he will do it. The Boche—the major literally spat out the hated name—'has got his nearest to Paris; from now he goes back.' After accepting a drink from the officer to whom Billy and Douglas had been talking, the major hurried away.

‘He seems confident enough, anyhow,’ said Billy.

‘Major Du Barri is of the marshal’s staff. He knows what he is talking about; and if he says so, it will be so,’ said the French officer gravely.

The airmen had landed at Épernay, and were waiting there till a supply of petrol could be procured, when information arrived that the enemy had succeeded in crossing the Marne at Jauglonne. This was very serious news, and seemed to belie Major Du Barri’s confidence. Motor-cyclists, at break-neck speed, came tearing into Épernay, begging that every man who could hold a rifle should hurry to oppose the invader.

‘Here’s our job, Billy,’ said Douglas. ‘Petrol we must get, and then, hey for Jauglonne!’

Almost as they spoke a French lorry laden with petrol came along. Billy explained the situation, and in ten minutes his tanks were full. In five minutes more they started, and in half-an-hour were at Jauglonne. There a terrific combat was being waged. The Germans had managed to get a number of men across the river in small canvas boats, and these, having established themselves on the south bank, were holding on, under the protection of a heavy barrage, while their comrades threw pontoons across. As Billy and Douglas circled round they saw the position at once, and flying low, they poured machine-gun fire upon the struggling Germans beneath them.

They exhausted every drum, although they had to fly in a perfect inferno of shell-fire. The planes of the machine were riddled with shrapnel, and a bullet grazed Billy's head, but he stuck heroically to his work. When their ammunition was exhausted they rose to a greater height, and dropped a couple of bombs, which blew an almost completed pontoon to pieces.

Such, however, was now the condition of the machine that they were compelled to descend. This they did safely, and Douglas insisted on Billy's getting the graze on his head bound up at once. As the airmen walked along, little groups of infantry cheered them loudly, for all recognised the great part that the airmen had played in the fighting.

They were passing one or two groups of slightly wounded men, who were smiling and cheering over their success, when Nat came running towards them. Seizing both Billy's hands, he wrung them warmly.

'I knew it was your bus, boys,' he cried. 'By Jove! you did wonders. My bus was smashed up an hour ago, and I've been working a machine-gun. We're giving the Boche "what for," but he's in such numbers that we can't stop him yet.'

'We'll soon be with you,' said Billy; and in half-an-hour the three were working with a machine-gun battery.

The fighting was terrific. The Germans had made up their minds to cross the river at any cost, and under the protection of a

perfectly infernal artillery fire, they paddled across in canvas boats, each holding thirty men; while lower down hundreds tried to wade, some succeeding, but more being either shot down or swept away by the water.

Presently two pontoon bridges were successfully thrown across, and the Germans simply swarmed over; while the Americans and the French, under a hail of shell, sullenly retired.

But when they got beyond the range of the German guns, French and Americans fell furiously upon the exultant enemy, and, with terrible slaughter, drove him back to the river's edge, taking many prisoners in the process. There they held the Germans pinned until lack of ammunition prevented the Allies from advancing any farther.

'Ammunition! Ammunition!' was the cry, and Nat bit his lips in fury as he looked at the empty drums scattered round his gun.

'Come on, boys; we must get ammo,' he shouted.

He and Billy and Douglas, followed by a dozen grim-faced, square-jawed gunners, seized every horse they could find, and started back for ammunition. Dozens more volunteers followed them, and they streamed along the road, which was rendered almost impassable by German shell-fire. But though men and horses fell, the survivors kept on. The dump was reached at last; vans and barrows were loaded, and the return journey began. This was worse than the outward trip had been. Every now and then a shell would

explode an ammunition-wagon, until in the end every horse was killed. But the men packed the boxes on to the barrows, and running along through a veritable inferno, brought up the much-needed ammunition to their comrades.

Attacking fiercely once more, the Allies drove the Germans back again, inflicting huge losses and capturing nearly one thousand prisoners.

'By the living Jingo, it's great!' cried Nat in a pause of the fight. 'We're holding him, and simply wiping him out.'

'There may be some truth in what Du Barri said,' muttered Douglas. 'Anyhow, the Boche hasn't got it all his own way this time.'

In spite of all they could do, however, lack of ammunition caused the French and the Americans to fall back again, and when night came the Germans were still across the Marne, and had penetrated some miles.

Absolutely tired out, Billy and his friends got a few hours' sleep, which was a mercy, for the next day was one of fierce fighting. But it was also one of great elation for the Allies. It seemed as if Du Barri's words were coming true, for, save towards Épernay, the whole of the fighting went in favour of the French. To the east of Reims five big German attacks were absolutely smashed, and the French retook ground lost in the first day's fighting. At the end of that day fresh troops had come up, and our friends found themselves in rear

for a rest. Invited to the quarters of an American colonel, they there again met Du Barri, his face wreathed in smiles. Over a few bottles of choice champagne which the Americans had managed to get hold of, it was whispered that on the next day Foch intended to counter-attack, and every one present at that informal meal made up his mind to be in the fight.

Fatigue and wounds were forgotten; everything was forgotten, except the one burning fact. After months of retreating and acting on the defensive; after being outnumbered and outgunned, fighting stubbornly, grandly, heroically, but, alas! often hopelessly, they were going to turn; they were going to act on the offensive. They were going to ATTACK, and the blood coursed madly through their veins at the very thought. The secret had been well kept; no one had dreamt of it; the enemy did not suspect it.

At 4.30 the following morning the attack commenced. Without any artillery preparation, the French struck on a twenty-seven-mile front. The infantry—French, American, and Australian—preceded by tanks, moved forward, and falling upon the Hun suddenly, smote him heavily. From the very first brilliant success attended the Allies; the Germans, as though paralysed at the idea that the enemy they thought beaten was strong enough to 'counter,' that the brilliant Foch had outgeneralled their High Command, fought in a confused fashion. By the early

afternoon the Allies had reached the Mont de Paris; by three o'clock they had penetrated to a depth of eight miles, and had taken five thousand prisoners and thirty guns.

Billy and Douglas, who were attached to the American Army *pro tem.*, performed prodigies in the air; and that night, on the field over which they had fought, they, with Nat and several French officers, discussed the good news.

'A jolly good bag, I call it,' said Billy.

'It is a mere bagatelle,' cried a Frenchman, lighting a cigarette. 'We shall double it, treble it—ay, quadruple it, before we've done.'

Douglas had his doubts, and looked solemnly at Billy; but Nat quite agreed with the Frenchman. And Douglas had cause for his doubts, for the next day the Germans, realising that they were in danger of losing their colossal gamble, counter-attacked with the greatest fury. Reserves were thrown in headlong, and the struggle was appalling. The ground in places was absolutely covered with dead and drenched in blood; but France held, and America held; and Germany, gnashing her teeth and snarling, recoiled, leaving in the Allies' hands seventeen thousand prisoners and three hundred guns!

The British that day, too, had made a move, and recapturing the village of Meteren, had secured three hundred prisoners.

Fervid enthusiasm reigned among the Allies. The tide had turned; they were acting on the offensive; the hated Hun was retreating, and

the cry was everywhere, 'Forward! Forward! To the Marne! Let us repeat our victory of 1914! The Marne is Germany's grave!'

And so the advance pressed on. Château Thierry was gallantly retaken, the Allies over-looked Soissons, and the enemy was very uncomfortable in the salient he had won south of the Marne. It was on this spot that the French pressed him hardest. Paris could not breathe freely so long as a single Hun remained south of the Marne, and the next day a violent attack was delivered by the Allies, and at Chassins and Passy the passage of the river was forced.

As the situation became desperate, German resistance stiffened. Whole divisions were thrown into the line, only to be gradually worn down by the Allies. But the Germans fought with the savage tenacity of a tiger at bay. The great gamble for Paris must be won, or the millions of docile Germans at home would want to know why; so thousands were sacrificed, and the struggle grew more and more bitter day by day. At last the steady pressure of the Allies told; the Germans could stand no more. They began a general retreat, and from that very Épernay whence they made their greatest advance the movement spread. Pressed by cavalry, battered by artillery, bombed by aeroplanes, and rolled up by infantry, the Germans retired sullenly day by day. Often they turned and fought till they died, but without avail. The relentless pressure continued, and the heart

of Paris throbbed with joy as she heard, day by day, hour by hour, of the victories of her gallant sons.

‘I thought that French chap, when he was talking the other day about the success of this push, was inclined to let his optimism run away with his better sense,’ remarked Douglas to Billy one night as they sat over a hastily snatched supper; ‘but he underestimated the bag.’

‘What is it to-day?’ asked Billy.

‘Nat told me the figures had reached forty thousand men and one thousand guns.’

‘It’s a hard knock for the Boche,’ said Billy meditatively as he lit a cigarette.

‘But he’ll stand a good many more such yet, I am afraid,’ growled Douglas.

‘Yes; he’s got too much to lose to give in till he’s absolutely smashed.’

‘Then let us get on with the smashing;’ and Douglas rammed a fresh charge home into his pipe.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE TURNING OF THE TIDE.

A FEW days after the events just related, Billy, quite recovered from his slight wound, Douglas, and Oliver were seated in the best room of a small house some mile or so behind the front.

‘I dare say you were both disappointed at being recalled from the American Army,’ said Oliver, ‘and at the time I was not at liberty to tell you why. Now, however, I can explain to you that we want every pilot we can lay hands on. When we start our offensive, we shall depend very largely upon aeroplanes and tanks.’

‘I am more than astonished to think that we even meditate an offensive. I had no idea we were in a position to strike,’ said Billy.

‘Nor had the Boche, I expect,’ added Douglas grimly.

‘That is the only question that worries us,’ said Oliver. ‘Much will depend upon the element of surprise. We lost a few prisoners to the enemy last night, and if they give anything away, the Boche will be ready for us.’

‘Oh, our boys are game enough; they’ll not betray us,’ interposed Billy.

‘Not willingly; but a careless word dropped is enough to reveal to the Boche that something is afoot, and once he gets suspicious, he’ll be on the alert.’

‘May I ask when the attack is to be made?’ ventured Billy.

‘Well, among us three, it’s the day after to-morrow. But not a word of this to any one.’

‘Mum’s the word.’

Thirty-six hours later the three were standing at a point some two miles behind the front line. It was an anxious time. Did the enemy know of the impending attack, and was he prepared for it? The night was clear, and the hours passed slowly. From time to time anxious commanders looked at their watches, until, with a sort of sigh of relief—relief that the hours of waiting were over—watches were neglected, and revolvers were looked to.

Day began to break. The morning was clear, but it was not very light, when, exactly at half-past four, a solitary rocket flared up. Instantly thousands of guns belched forth their contents, and the earth trembled, while the air vibrated with the thunderous roar. The barrage fire lasted exactly five minutes, but those five minutes were more stupendous than anything in the way of bombardments that had gone before. The enemy’s defences were flattened, and he was left stunned and naked.

As suddenly as it commenced, the bombardment ceased, and on a fifteen-mile front—twelve British, three French—the eager infantry leapt forward.

The German artillery seemed slow to

respond to the Allied fire, but machine-guns swept the ground as the Allies advanced. Nothing, however, could check them; the German trenches were carried in one rush, and then the victorious troops, headed by hundreds of tanks, swept on to the positions they had to attack.

The moment the barrage had ceased, Billy and Douglas, in separate machines—for it was unwise to risk two experienced pilots in one aeroplane—rose into the air. Their task was to bomb the aerodromes in rear of the enemy lines, and to smash his machines. As the men beneath them were rushing the German trenches, bombing or bayoneting all who resisted, the aeroplanes, still rising, swept on over the foe.

Billy found his objective and dropped his bombs; then, returning, machine-gunned a regiment marching up in support. The air was literally alive with British aeroplanes, and they harassed the roads blocked with troops, bombed the bridges over the Somme, and machine-gunned groups of gunners, who fought desperately to check the victorious British advance.

Billy had been twice over the German lines, and having reloaded with bombs and machine-drums for a third time, flew over the enemy's position once more.

Away in the rear he saw a long and heavy train puffing laboriously, and guessing it contained troops, he flew towards it. Another British one-seater, seeing the move,

understood, and joined in. Overtaking the train, Billy flew the whole length of it, firing in through the windows, returning along the other side and giving it a dose. The one-seater followed suit; and Billy, rising, flew right over the engine and dropped a couple of bombs. The second one exploded literally on the footplate, wrecking the locomotive, which dashed down a cutting, dragging half the train with it.

On the way back the two machines were attacked by fifteen enemy aeroplanes, which they gallantly tackled. Billy shot the pilot of one machine, which immediately turned over and went down in flames; while a second was dashed down head first to earth. The one-seater sent a third spinning down, and a fourth and fifth collided with each other, causing both to crash. After that Billy and the one-seater kept up a running fight till they were over their own lines, when the enemy gave up the chase. Billy had to descend, for the body of his machine was shot to pieces, while his observer was badly wounded; but he felt that he had done not a bad morning's work.

By that time the British were driving the Germans steadily back, and had progressed several miles; Bayonvillers, Wiencourt, and Harbonnières were already in their hands; while the French had carried Morisel, Fresnoy, and La Neuville.

The cry was for ammunition, which was being used up at a tremendous rate, there

being insufficient facilities for getting it up to the front quickly enough.

A sudden idea occurred to Billy. Why should not aeroplanes engage in the work of bringing up ammunition? He at once communicated his idea to a divisional commander; the plan was accepted, and in a new machine Billy was soon off with a dozen boxes. He landed them safely, and returned for more; other aeroplanes were signalled, and used for the same purpose. Flying so low, they were a mark for the German gunners, and thirty or forty were shot down. But the others made many useful journeys; the front line was well supplied with ammunition; and against the loss of the machines could be placed an advance of eight miles, and the capture of ten thousand prisoners and two hundred guns.

It was the most sudden and crushing blow the Hun had suffered, and he reeled under it. All night long the British artillery shelled him, while tanks and cavalry pursued him.

With the first streaks of dawn Billy and Douglas were again in the air, following up the defeated enemy. With their machine-guns they sprayed the roads crowded with the panic-stricken remains of Von Hutier's army. Guns, wagons, crowds of men of many regiments, all jumbled together in indescribable confusion, were pursued by the relentless aeroplanes, which avenged many a crime committed by the enemy in France and Belgium.

The cavalry were in their element, being

out in the open country. The remains of one regiment, the same which had so gallantly held up several battalions of Germans on the Somme until French reinforcements came up, had their revenge. By making a big detour they reached Vauvillers, seized it by surprise, sabred all who offered resistance, and captured seven hundred prisoners and a complete staff. Then, leaving a squadron to hold the village, they joined with a squadron of another regiment, captured a train containing four hundred men returning from leave, charged three batteries of German field-guns in Vauvillers Wood, and bagged the lot.

And so day by day the battle went on, the Germans, in their hurry, abandoning everything.

The British troops were back in their old fighting area on the Somme, and felt quite at home. Everywhere success had attended them, and as they advanced evidences of the complete rout of the enemy surrounded them. Guns, steel helmets, gas-masks, rifles, and equipment lay all about. The wrecks of German tanks, smashed lorries, corpses of men and horses lay on all hands; while the torn and battered ground spoke volumes for the work of the British artillery. On the other hand, the German guns were strangely silent.

At the end of ten days, however, the pursuit had to slacken; tired humanity could do no more; but the enemy had been thoroughly thrashed. The French and the Americans had destroyed his hopes of ever taking Paris,

and had hurled him back; the British had driven him from before Amiens, and the dream of its capture was over. Sooner or later the German nation would understand; meanwhile Germany's chance had gone.

Before the enemy had time to recover from the sledge-hammer blows he had received, the Allies struck again, and struck heavily. Bapaume, Roye, and Peronne were recaptured; and on a glorious September morning British troops attacked and smashed the so-called impregnable 'Wotan' line on a front of six miles.

Billy and Douglas bore their part in the fighting. In the evening they were watching the batches of prisoners being marched by.

'It's a great day for us,' quoth Billy.

'And a bad one for the Hun,' said Douglas. 'It opens the road to Douai and Cambrai, anyhow, and perhaps to the Meuse, or even the Rhine! Who can say?'

'Who, indeed?' and the airmen went off to snatch a few hours' well-earned sleep.

On the following morning Billy, Douglas, and Nat were walking towards the village just behind their billets, when a cheery shout from a staff-officer, who was riding a motor-cycle, attracted their attention.

'Oliver, as I'm a living sinner!' cried Billy, delighted at seeing his cousin.

'Hallo, you fellows! I was just on the lookout for you,' cried Oliver; and handing his cycle over to an orderly, he joined his three friends.

Nat looked at the spruce figure and smiling face. 'You look as pleased as though you'd drawn first prize in a State lottery,' he said.

'I'm more so,' smiled Oliver.

'And why?'

'One hundred and twenty-eight thousand prisoners, two thousand and seventy guns, fourteen thousand machine-guns, and over seventeen hundred trench-mortars captured! That's enough to make us all glad, isn't it?'

'Gee!' whistled Nat; 'is it as much as that?'

'Yes; and the numbers are increasing.'

'Hallo, here's Major Du Barri!' cried Douglas; and the Frenchman, seeing them, ran across the road and greeted them in truly French fashion.

'Ah, *mes amis*, is it not grand? Is it not superb? Did I not say'—and he wagged a finger at Douglas—'did I not say we should turn, and we should hurl back the cursed Boche? And now, what has happened?'

'Just as you prophesied, major,' admitted Douglas.

'Yes; poor France! she has bled, she has suffered, her sons have died, but Paris is saved, and soon, very soon, the hated Hun will be back across his vaunted Rhine, and then, ah'—and the veins on the major's forehead swelled and his eyes blazed as he contemplated the idea of carrying the war on to German soil.

It was a typical group standing there, representatives of Great Britain, France, and

America, all glorying over the same news, all filled with the same hopes. A couple of Colonial officers passing at that moment seemed struck with the idea, for they smiled and spoke to one another in an undertone.

In a few minutes Major Du Barri hurried on his way. The others entered an *estaminet*, and while breakfast was being prepared, discussed the latest news, the principal theme being the fine fashion in which America had rushed troops across the Atlantic, and the splendid fight they had put up.

'They were some time coming, but they're all right now they are here,' said Billy.

'You don't understand our methods,' commented Nat. 'We never believed in sending over dribbles to get chawed up in detail. Our idea was always to put in a big bunch at once, and until we were ready to hit good and hard, we had to keep your spirits up by talking. Now the talking's done, and we're going to do things. I know, Billy, when I first met you and Douglas on that old steam-tub in the Channel, you thought I was an all-fired bouncer, but I knew the part I had to play. Now it's over; by the end of the year we shall have two million men in France. Not fledglings and dug-outs, mind you, but just the pick of our nation, and when there's five millions here, there'll be another five millions ready to follow.'

Douglas sucked his pipe meditatively. 'The Germans are a clever nation,' he said musingly; 'yet they've done some idiotic

things. When Russia dropped out, they'd got us in a hole. Their game all through was certainly to keep America out of the war, but in spite of that they go and sink the *Lusitania*. Not content with that, they threatened to sink at sight any American vessels found within the "war zone;" and they did it, too.'

'Yes,' said Billy, 'it seems to me that was the greatest mistake they ever made. It brought America in on our side.'

Nat smiled enigmatically. 'And do you think we should have stood out if it had not been for that?' he asked.

'Goodness knows,' replied Billy. 'Do you?'

Nat smiled again. 'I can't say all I know now, but some day the world may know all.'

'Well, the Germans are a bad lot, anyway,' said Douglas, 'and the sooner they're wiped out the better.'

'They're not all bad either,' said Nat.

'Old Uncle Lincke, for instance,' whispered Billy, winking at Douglas.

'Precisely!'

'Well, I hope he didn't get into any trouble over us,' said Douglas.

'No fear of that,' replied Nat; 'he is a man of influence, and smart enough to protect himself, you bet.'

'I don't think we had much to thank the old gentleman for; it was the fair Senta who stood our friend,' suggested Douglas.

'For which,' grinned Billy, 'I think that

Nat ought to go back after the war and make the *amende honorable*. The lady was decidedly pretty, and quite gone on Nat.'

The American flushed under his tan. 'And, by gum!' he cried, 'I'm not going to say that I sha'n't. She stood by me, and I'll never desert any one that's befriended Nat Brown-rigge, be it man or woman.'

'Hear! hear! Exactly my sentiments,' said a man who had just entered. 'Stick to your pals through thick and thin, I say.'

The three looked round, and saw a tall, war-worn figure.

'Norman!' cried Billy. 'By Jove, I'm glad to see you're all right! We've heard of you once or twice, but haven't managed to run across you. Sit down; here's room for you.'

After a handshake all round, Norman seated himself. 'I've been hunting for you for some time,' he said, 'and I'm in luck in finding you, for I'm for home in a day or so.'

'Home?' echoed all three in surprise.

'Home it is! I've got recommended for my commission, and after fourteen years' service, have got to go home and learn how to do my job. Funny, isn't it?'

'Hearty congratulations,' cried Billy. 'I suppose you're staying with the guns?'

'Yes; I'm seeing this out with my own branch of the service.'

'The Gray Battery?' asked Nat slyly.

'No; the Field Artillery.'

‘But I thought you’d never serve in any but your old battery.’

‘An officer can serve in any battery without losing his dignity. The Gray Battery will be proud of me, sir, and I shall always be proud of it.’

‘And I shall be proud of having soldiered with you, Norman,’ said Nat genially. ‘You’re a man after my own heart.’

‘And now, my boy, sit down, eat, and drink, for I dare say you’re peckish,’ cried Billy.

‘I could eat a steak cut from a mountain battery mule,’ said Norman; ‘and that’s a tough morsel, I can assure you.’

And while Norman ate, the friends talked of old days; and when pipes were produced the refrain of a rollicking chorus sung by a party of American soldiers close by came rolling in.

‘They’re not down-hearted, anyway,’ said Billy.

‘Down-hearted!’ replied Nat. ‘Rather not! It’s old Fritzie that’s going to be down-hearted this journey, and don’t you forget it!’

THE END.

