

The Boy Allies at Verdun; Or, Saving France from the Enemy

Clair W. Hayes

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The Boy Allies At Verdun

OR

Saving France from the Enemy

By CLAIR W. HAYES

AUTHOR OF "The Boy Allies At Liège" "The Boy Allies On the Firing Line"

"The Boy Allies With the Cossacks" "The Boy Allies In the Trenches"
"The Boy Allies On the Somme"

1917

CHAPTER I

THE EVE OF VERDUN

On the twenty-second of February, 1916, an automobile sped northward along the French battle line that for almost two years had held back the armies of the German emperor, strive as they would to win their way farther into the heart of France. For months the opposing forces had battled to a draw from the North Sea to the boundary of Switzerland, until now, as the day waned—it was almost six o'clock—the hands of time drew closer and closer to the hour that was to mark the opening of the most bitter and destructive battle of the war, up to this time.

It was the eve of the battle of Verdun.

The occupants of the automobile as it sped northward numbered three. In the front seat, alone at the driver's wheel, a young man bent low. He was garbed in the uniform of a British lieutenant of cavalry. Close inspection would have revealed the fact that the young man was a youth of some eighteen years, fair and good to look upon. As the machine sped along he kept his eyes glued to the road ahead and did not once turn to join in the conversation of the two occupants on the rear seat. Whether he knew that there was a conversation in progress it is impossible to say, but the rush of wind would have made the conversation unintelligible, to say the least.

This youth on the front seat was Hal Paine, an American.

The two figures in the rear seat were apparently having a hard time to maintain their places, as they bounced from side to side as the car swerved first one way and then the other, or as it took a flying leap over some object in the road, which even the keen eye of the driver had failed to detect. But in spite of this, even as they bounced, they talked.

One of the two figures was tall and slender and there was about him an air of youthfulness. He was in fact a second American boy. His name was Chester Crawford, friend and bosom companion of Hal Paine. Like the latter he, too, was attired in the uniform of a British lieutenant of cavalry.

The second figure in the rear seat was built along different lines. He was short and chunky; also, he was stout. Had he been standing it would have been evident that he was almost as wide as he was long. He had a pleasant face and smiled occasionally, though upon each occasion this smile died away in a sickly grin as the car leaped high in the air after striking a particularly large obstruction in the road, or veering crazily to one side as it turned sharply. In each case the grin was succeeded by a gasp for breath.

The figure was that of Mr. Anthony Stubbs, war correspondent of the *New York Gazette*, on the firing line in Europe to gather facts for his newspaper. He was attired in a riding suit of khaki.

Said Mr. Stubbs:

"Well, we may get there and we may not."

"Oh, we'll get there all right, Mr. Stubbs!" Chester raised his voice to make himself heard.

"We're likely to land out here in the ditch," was Stubbs' reply. "The way Hal runs this car, there is no telling what may happen."

"Not frightened, are you, Mr. Stubbs?" asked Chester, grinning.

"Frightened?" echoed Stubbs. "Why should I be frightened? We can't be going more than a couple of hundred miles an hour. No, I'm not frightened. I'm what you call scared. Wow!"

This last ejaculation was drawn from the little man as he was pitched over into Chester's lap by an extra violent lurch of the car. He threw out a hand, seeking a hold, and his open palm came in contact with Chester's face. Chester thrust Stubbs away from him.

"I say, Stubbs!" said the lad half angrily. "If you want to jump out of here, all right; but don't try and push me out ahead of you. Keep your hands out of my

face."

"I wasn't trying to push you out," gasped Stubbs. "I was hunting something to hang on to."

"Well, my face is no strap," declared Chester.

The automobile slowed down suddenly and a moment later came to a stop at a fork in the road.

"I'll have to have a look at this chart," Hal called over his shoulder to his companions, as he thrust a hand into a pocket. "Forget which way we head from here."

"We're headed for the happy hunting grounds no matter which road we take," mumbled Stubbs.

"Don't croak, Mr. Stubbs," said Hal. "Barring accidents, we'll reach General Petain at Verdun in time to deliver these despatches before it's too late."

"What I don't understand," said Chester, "is why it is necessary to deliver these despatches by courier. What's the matter with the wire?"

"I don't know," said Hal, as he returned the chart to his pocket after a quick scrutiny, "unless there is a leak of some kind."

"Hardly," said Chester.

Hal shrugged his shoulders as he settled his cap more firmly on his head and laid a hand on the wheel.

"You never can tell," he said.

"Well," said Stubbs, "I don't—hey! what're you trying to do, anyhow?"

For the little man again had been hurled violently against Chester as Hal sent the car forward with a lurch. "Trying to leave me behind? What?"

"Can't be done, Mr. Stubbs," said Chester.

Mr. Stubbs glared at the lad angrily, but deigned to make no reply. So the big

army automobile continued on its way in silence.

Darkness fell. Hal stopped the car and lighted the lamps.

"Can't take any chances while going at this speed," he said.

Stubbs grinned feebly to himself, seemed as if about to speak, then thought better of it and remained silent. But he waved a hand in disgust.

A moment later the car was rushing through the darkness at the speed of an express train; and while this journey in the night continues it will be well to explain the presence of the three companions in the big army car, how they came there and why, and the nature of the mission upon which they were bound.

A month before the three had been in the Balkans. There the two lads, together with Anthony Stubbs, had gone through many dangerous adventures, finally reaching Greek soil in the nick of time, with a horde of Bulgarians just behind them. With them had been others—Ivan, a Cossack, a third British officer and a young girl. Ivan had elected to join the Anglo-French forces at Salonika; the other British officer had found his own regiment there and the girl, whom it had been the good fortune of the boys to save from the Bulgarians, found friends in the Greek city who had taken her in charge.

Hal, Chester and Stubbs had embarked on a French battleship, homeward bound. After due time they landed in Marseilles.

"Now," said Chester, when he once more felt French soil under his feet, "I suppose the thing for us to do is to return to the Italian lines and see if we can learn anything of Uncle John, then return to Rome and to New York."

Uncle John was the brother of Chester's mother. All had been bound for home when Hal and Chester had become involved in a matter that took them forward with the Italian troops. Uncle John had been along to keep them out of mischief, if he could. He hadn't succeeded and had fallen into the hands of the Austrians. The boys had saved him. Later they had been forced to seek refuge in the Balkans, having found it impossible to get back into the Italian lines, and they had lost Uncle John. Their arrival in Marseilles had really been the first step toward a return to Rome, where they intended to try and find their mothers.

But their plans to return to Rome did not materialize. As Hal said: "Luck was with us."

In a little room in a Marseilles restaurant they had overheard a conversation between two men, plainly foreigners, that had resulted in their once more being sent on active service. While they had been unable to gather all the details, they had learned enough to know that the German Crown Prince had laid careful plans for an attack on Verdun. They had taken their information to the French commanding officer in Marseilles. The latter had been somewhat skeptical, but Colonel Derevaux, an old friend of the boys, had arrived at the psychological moment and vouched for them.

Immediately the French officer decided that something must be done. The plans of the Germans, so far as he knew, had not been anticipated. For some reason he did not wish to trust the information to the telegraph wires, and the two lads had volunteered to deliver it in person to General Petain. Their offer had been accepted, which accounts for the fact that we find them upon the last leg of their journey to Verdun at the opening of this story.

Stubbs had elected to accompany them, for, as he said, "I've got to get the news."

The two lads had seen considerable active service. They had fought with the Belgians at Liège; with the British on the Marne; with the Cossacks in Russian Poland and in the Carpathians; with the Montenegrins and Serbians in the Balkans, and with the Italian troops in the Alps.

They had been participants in many a hard blow that had been delivered by the Allies. They had won the confidence of Field Marshall John French, commander of the British forces in France until he was succeeded by General Sir Douglas Haig after the battle of the Champagne, and of General Joffre, the French commander-in-chief.

While they ostensibly were British army officers, their titles were purely honorary, but they held actual lieutenancies in the Belgian army, these having been bestowed upon them by King Albert in recognition of services accomplished in and around Liège in the early days of the war.

The boys had been chums since early childhood. They had been brought up together. They attended school together and were inseparable companions. Each spoke German and French fluently, and service with other armies had given them

a knowledge of other tongues. Both were strong and sturdy, crack shots, good with sword and sabre, and particularly handy with their fists. These accomplishments had stood them in good stead in many a tight place. But better than all these accomplishments was the additional fact that each was clear-headed, a quick thinker and very resourceful. They depended upon brains rather than brawn to pull them through ticklish situations, though they did not hesitate to call on the latter force when occasion demanded.

Hal, peering ahead by the glare of the searchlight on the large army car, suddenly slowed down; the car stopped. A group of mounted men rode up. Hal stood up and gave a military salute as one of the group advanced ahead of the others.

"I am from General Durand at Marseilles, sir," he said. "I have important dispatches for General Petain."

The French officer returned the salute.

"Follow me," he said briefly.

CHAPTER II

VERDUN

Rightly is the fortress of Verdun called the gateway to France. By reason of its strategic position, it is absolutely essential that an invading army have possession of Verdun before thought of a successful advance on Paris can be entertained; and it was upon the capture of Paris that the German emperor laid his hopes, in spite of the collapse of a similar offensive launched in the first days of the war.

But Wilhelm II had learned a lesson. Verdun must be taken before he ordered his armies upon the French capital; and so it was that, upon February twenty-third, 1916, the German Crown Prince began a determined assault upon the historic French fortress.

In sheer human interest the battle of Verdun surpassed all other individual events of the war. For six months and more the defenders of the gateway to France withstood a storm at the fury of which the world stood aghast.

Foot by foot, almost inch by inch, the Germans forged ahead with a reckless disregard of their lives, a tenacity and cool courage which was only equalled by the cool determination of the French. Five months after the opening of this great battle, the unofficial estimate of German dead was a half million men. The assailants fought their way to within three miles and a half of the fortress itself, but there they were finally halted. It was then that the tide turned; and though the Germans surged forward day after day in heavy masses they progressed no further. It was the beginning of the end.

The Germans advanced confidently. The destruction of the fortress presented no hard problem to them. The utter worthlessness of similarly fortified positions had been proven in the earlier days of the war—in the destruction of Louvain,

Liège, Brussels and Antwerp, the latter the most strongly fortified city in the world, with the exception of Paris itself. The huge 42-centimetre guns of the Germans had battered them to pieces in little or no time at all.

It was with the knowledge of the effectiveness of these great guns that the Crown Prince opened the battle of Verdun. The fortress of Verdun and the outlying fortifications, it was believed, would be shattered with little effort. With these facts in mind, the German Crown Prince opened with his big guns, first upon the fortresses guarding Verdun itself.

These approaches shattered, the Crown Prince ordered his infantry and cavalry to the attack. But where the onrushing Germans, according to the reasoning of the Crown Prince, should have found no resistance, they encountered strenuous opposition. Abandoning the outlying artificial fortifications, the French had thrown up huge earthworks and from behind these received the German attacks coolly.

Against these great earthworks the heavy guns of the attacking forces availed little. The force of even the great 42-centimetres was not great enough to penetrate the loosely built mounds of earth behind which the French reposed. The great shells struck the fresh earth, were embedded there and did no harm. The French general staff had realized the uselessness of fortresses as soon as had the Germans.

Therefore, while the Germans were able to destroy forts and fortresses at will, almost, it availed them little. The defenders were secure behind their breastworks of earth. True, German guns dropped huge shells in the trenches, a veritable rain of death, but the gaps in the defending lines were filled promptly.

There remained naught for the Germans but to try and carry the trenches, under the support of their artillery.

Day after day the Crown Prince launched assault after assault. The French met them bravely. But the Germans were not to be denied; and urged on by the Crown Prince, and often by the presence upon the firing line of the German emperor himself, they continued the herculean task without regard to loss of life.

Gradually the French were forced back. Hand-to-hand fighting for possession of the greatest strategical positions, fought daily, for a time resulted in advantage to neither side. Among the chief objectives of the German attack were two

particularly important positions—Hill No 304 (so called to distinguish it from numerous other elevated positions) and Le Mort Homme (Dead Man's Hill). This name, which was fated to become historic, was gained only after days and days of constant hand-to-hand fighting and is now recalled as one of the bloodiest battlefields of the titanic struggle.

General Henri Phillip Petain, in direct command of the French operations at Verdun, endeared himself to the hearts of all his countrymen by his gallant conduct of the defense. While the decision of General Joffre, the French commander-in-chief, to give ground before the German attacks rather than to sacrifice his men in a useless defense of the fortresses, was criticized at first by the people, the resulting value of this move was soon apparent and censure turned to praise.

While the heaviest assaults of the Germans were launched in the immediate vicinity of Verdun itself, the great battle line stretched far to the north and to the south. When it appeared at one time that the French must be hurled back, General Sir Douglas Haig, the British commander-in-chief, weakened his own lines to the far north to take over a portion of the ground just to his right and thus relieved the French situation at Verdun somewhat.

General Petain thus was enabled to shorten his own lines, and from that moment, with few exceptions, the French stood firm.

It seemed that the Germans, beaten off time after time as they were, must soon abandon the attempt to break the French lines at Verdun; but each repulse brought a new assault mightier than before. The Germans raced across the open ground under a veritable hail of lead. They fell by hundreds and thousands, but what few survived hurled themselves against the barbed wire entanglements of the French or into the trenches, there to die upon the points of the foes' bayonets, or to be shot down as they tumbled over the breastworks.

The German general staff drew heavily from its forces on the east front and added these new legions to the already large army occupied before Verdun; but the result was always the same. So far they could progress and no farther.

After almost five months of defensive tactics, General Petain began to launch assaults of his own. At first the Germans put these down with regularity, but at last the effort began to tell. The French made headway. Much of the lost ground

was recovered. The French moved forward a bit day by day, occupied new positions and consolidated them. It was terrible work, but the French persevered.

Around Hill No. 304 and Dead Man's Hill the fighting was especially severe. There men died by the hundreds and by the thousands that one of the opposing armies might advance a few yards. Gains even were counted by feet—almost by inches. Gain of a few yards was accounted a day's work well done.

Not once did the French troops falter under fire; nor did the Germans, for that matter. Never was there greater bravery, loyalty and devotion. Called upon for tasks that seemed well nigh impossible, the men did not hesitate. They met death in such numbers as death was never met before.

Almost daily, after the French had taken a brace three and a half miles from Verdun, it seemed that the Crown Prince must give up the effort. It appeared incomprehensible that the useless sacrifice of men could continue. But the attempt was not given up; rather, it was pressed with greater vigor each succeeding day.

But, after five months, the fury of the German assaults gradually lessened. They were not delivered with the same effectiveness as before. The great guns continued to rage, scattering death over the field for miles, but the massed attacks of infantry, and cavalry charges, became more uncommon.

Then came a day when the Germans failed to attack at all. For more than twenty-four hours there was a lull. Weeks passed with the Germans launching only occasional drives. The same held good for the French. It appeared that each side was content to rest on its laurels, biding the time when a grand assault could be delivered with some degree of effectiveness.

The fighting was intermittent. It came spasmodically. Each side had fought itself out and had paused for breath. What advantage there had been, all things considered, rested with French arms. The losses on both sides, in killed and wounded, had been enormous—almost beyond comprehension. The number of prisoners taken by the French was large. Many French troops also had been captured, but not so many as Germans. Also, the French having been the defenders for the most part, they had suffered less in killed and wounded than had the foe.

This, then, was the result of the battle of Verdun six months after it had begun.

There had been no decisive victory. Each side retained its positions, but each was ready to strike whenever the opportune moment presented itself.

Even while the fighting at Verdun was at its height there came the whisper of a grand offensive to be launched by the Allies. The whisper became louder as the days passed. There was more talk of Roumania and Greece throwing their armies to the support of the Allies, thus forming a steel cordon around the Central powers and their smaller allies, Bulgaria and Turkey, and forcing the Germans to shorten their lines. In the eastern war theater the Russians again were on the advance and were pushing the Germans and Austrians hard, threatening for a second time to invade Galicia and the plains of Hungary. It began to appear that the end was in sight.

Italy, too, had launched a new offensive with Trieste as the objective and the driving power of the Italian troops was beginning to tell. It began to appear that the Central powers must before long be placed upon the defensive in all war zones.

The world waited impatiently for the opening of the grand allied offensive that, it was expected, would be delivered simultaneously on all fronts. It was felt that it would not be long coming. There was talk of a new great field gun perfected by Great Britain—a gun that would be more effective than the German 42-centimetres—but so far it had come to play no part in the struggle.

But of all battles, land or sea, that had been fought in the greatest war of history, the battle of Verdun stood head and shoulders as the most important. It was the greatest and bloodiest struggle of all time, up to that period.

And it was in this battle that Hal and Chester, with the friend Anthony Stubbs, war correspondent, and other friends, old and new, were to play important roles. While each realized, as the three made their way to General Petain behind the French officer who had interrupted their wild automobile ride, that an important engagement was about to be fought, neither had, of course, means of knowing that they were to take part in one of the greatest of all battles.

It was with the satisfaction that they had arrived in time to prevent a surprise attack that they made their way to General Petain's quarters. But, as it transpired, they had arrived a trifle too late. For even as they reached the general's tent the German guns spoke.

CHAPTER III

GENERAL PETAIN

To the soldier the voice of the great guns speaks plainly. Their ears accustomed to the various forms of bombardments, Hal and Chester realized as well as the rest that this was no mere resumption of an artillery duel. It was not a single salvo from a single German position that had been fired. The great guns boomed from north and south; and continued to boom.

The officer who was conducting the three friends to the headquarters of General Petain turned and called a single word over his shoulder:

"Hurry!"

He broke into a run and the others did likewise. A short turn or two and they brought up before a tent somewhat larger than the rest. This the lads knew was General Petain's field headquarters.

Even as the French officer approached the entrance, the general himself rushed from the tent, followed by members of his staff. The officer who had conducted the lads there accosted him.

"Sir," he said, "despatch bearers from General Durand at Marseilles."

General Petain waved them aside.

"I've no time for them now," he said, and made as if to move on.

Hal stepped forward.

"Sir," he said, "the despatches we carry have to do with the impending action."

General Petain stopped suddenly and eyed the lad keenly. Then he said abruptly:

"Come with me."

He led the way into the tent, and Hal, Chester and Stubbs followed him. The general seated himself at a desk at a far end of the tent and demanded:

"The despatches."

Hal produced several documents, which he passed to the general. The latter broke the seals quickly and read. Then suddenly he sprang to his feet and dashed outside. The lads could hear him delivering sharp orders to members of his staff. A moment later his voice became inaudible.

After fifteen minutes' waiting, Chester grew fidgety.

"Wonder where he went?" he said.

"Don't know," returned Hal with a shrug.

"Let's go out and see what's going on," said Stubbs, and moved toward the exit.

"Hold on," said Hal. "We're under General Petain's orders now. We had better remain here until he returns."

"You and Chester may be," said Stubbs, "but I'm not. I'm going out and have a look around."

"Better stick around, Stubbs," said Chester grimly. "If they find you wandering about you're liable to be put under arrest. You can't go snooping around without permission, you know."

"Snooping!" repeated Stubbs. "Snooping! Who's going snooping? I want to find out what's going on."

"Same thing," said Chester.

The little man was offended.

"Call it snooping when I go out hunting news for my paper?" he asked.

"It's snooping when you go sticking your nose into other people's business," declared Chester.

"This is my business," exclaimed Stubbs.

"Oh, no, it's not. It's just a plain case—"

"I tell you it is my business. It's the business of the *New York Gazette*. The people in the United States want to know what is going on over here."

"I'm afraid General Petain wouldn't agree with you, Stubbs," interposed Hal. "He doesn't care what the people in the United States want. All he cares about right now is to lick the Germans."

"Well, maybe you're right," Stubbs admitted, "but just the same—I want you fellows to know that hunting news is not snooping."

"Stubbs," said Chester, "I've got to give you credit. In my opinion you're a first class snooper."

"What?" exclaimed the little man, fairly dancing with rage. "Snooper? Me a snooper? What do you mean?"

"Of course you are," replied Chester; "and a good one. Why, I can remember once or twice that if you hadn't been a good snooper Hal and I wouldn't be here now. Remember?"

"Well, yes," said Stubbs, somewhat mollified, "but I don't know whether that's what you meant or not."

"Why, Stubbs," said Chester, "what else could I have meant?"

Stubbs looked at Chester coldly; then turned and walked to the far end of the tent.

"Now see what you've done, Chester," said Hal, in a whisper meant for Stubbs to overhear. "You've made him mad."

Stubbs whirled about angrily.

"You bet you've made me mad," he declared. "You can bet, too, that I won't ever do any more snooping on behalf of either of you. The next time you get in trouble you'll have to depend on someone besides Anthony Stubbs to get you out of it."

"See," said Hal. "I told you not to do it, Chester. He's liable to let us both get killed. He—"

Stubbs could stand no more. He turned on his heel and made his way from the tent. But even as he would have moved away he became involved in more trouble.

With head down and not looking where he was going, he collided with another figure and was pushed violently backwards. Stubbs looked up angrily and was about to say something when he glanced at the other. It was General Petain. The latter spoke before Stubbs could apologize.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Can't you see where you're going? What were you doing in my tent, anyhow? Who are you? What's your business here?"

The questions, came so fast that Stubbs was confused.

"I—why—I—" he stuttered.

"Come inside here," said the general.

He stretched forth a hand, seized Stubbs by the collar and pushed him in the tent. Stubbs, caught off his balance, went stumbling and almost fell into Hal's arms. General Petain entered the tent immediately behind him.

When his eyes fell upon Hal and Chester he gave a start of surprise. Evidently he had forgotten all about them. Then he remembered.

"So you're still here?" he said. "I had forgotten all about you."

"We are awaiting your orders, sir," said Hal.

"I don't know as I have any for you," was the reply. "I have taken what precautions I can. Had you arrived a day earlier it might have been different. I

would have had more time."

"We came as fast as we could, sir," said Chester.

"I've no doubt of that," said the general. "Your information is of great value, of course. I suppose you will return to Marseilles?"

"We had rather remain here a while, sir," said Hal.

"So," said the general. "It's fighting you want, eh? Well, I guess I can accommodate you. I probably shall need every man I can get hold of. I shall attach you to my staff temporarily. But tell me, who is this man here?" He pointed to Stubbs.

"War correspondent," replied Hal briefly.

"What?" roared the general, "and in my tent! I'll have him court martialed!"

Stubbs quailed visibly.

"A war correspondent, eh," continued the general, "and walking about within my lines as free as air. He may be a spy. I'll have him shot."

"Look here, general," said Stubbs, "I—"

"Silence!" thundered General Petain. He turned to Hal. "Your name, sir?"

"Paine, sir."

"A lieutenant, I see."

"Yes, sir."

General Petain turned to Chester.

"And your name?"

"Lieutenant Crawford, sir."

"Good. I'll turn this man over to you. You may do as you please with him. I see he is a friend of yours."

"Yes, sir," returned Hal. "He's a good friend of ours, sir. He's rendered us several valuable services. Also, sir, he is to be trusted. He will seek to send out no information which you desire suppressed."

"I never heard of one like that," said the general.

"He's the only one in captivity, sir. His name is Stubbs, sir, of the *New York Gazette*"

"His name will be Mudd, sir, if he doesn't conduct himself properly while within my lines," declared General Petain. "Take him with you. Find Lieutenant Maussapant and tell him to find quarters for you. Report to me at midnight. I probably shall have work for you."

The lads saluted and made their way from the tent. Stubbs followed them. Chester glanced at his watch.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "I had no idea it was so late."

"How late?" asked Chester.

"Ten-thirty."

"Nor I," said Chester. "Where do you suppose we are going to find Maussapant?"

"You've got me. However, here comes a young officer; we'll ask him."

Hal did so.

"That is my name," was the young man's smiling response.

"Then we're in luck," said Hal. "General Petain requests that you find quarters for me."

"As it happens," said the young Frenchman, "two of my brother officers have been transferred and I can ask you to bunk with me."

"How about Stubbs?" asked Hal.

"Stubbs?"

"Yes; our friend here, a war correspondent."

"Oh, I guess we can find room for him. Come with me."

The three friends followed the young Frenchman and presently were installed in a large, comfortable tent.

"Turn in whenever you're ready," said the Frenchman.

"We must report to the general at midnight," was Hal's reply.

"What's up?"

"You've got me," said Hal. "Hope it's something good, though."

"Probably is, or he wouldn't want you at that hour."

"Well," said Stubbs at this point, "you boys can do what you please. I'm going to get a little sleep."

"All right," said Chester. "If we shouldn't be around in the morning, don't worry. We'll turn up sooner or later."

Stubbs nodded and made ready for bed.

At five minutes to twelve o'clock, Hal and Chester started for the headquarters of General Petain.

"Here's where we get busy again, old man," said Chester.

CHAPTER IV

THE BATTLE OPENS

For forty-eight hours the greatest of modern artillery duels had raged incessantly. German guns swept the French positions in all sections of the Verdun region. Fortresses protecting the approach to the city of Verdun had been shattered. The Germans had hurled two and three shells to each one by the French.

But after the first day the French had entrenched themselves behind their earth breastworks, hastily dug and thrown up, and now remained secure. Into these the German guns now poured their fire. The defenders were ready for the first attack by infantry, which it was realized would come soon.

And it came even sooner than was expected.

Hal, with a despatch for the officer in command of the first line troops just to the north of Verdun, was about to return when there came a sudden shout:

"Here they come!"

Hal turned quickly.

There, perhaps half a mile away, stretched out a long thin line, barely visible through the dense cloud of smoke that overhung the ground. Hal took in the situation, instantly. The German infantry was advancing to the charge under artillery support.

Behind the first long line stretched out a second and beyond that a third and a fourth and many more. They advanced slowly in the face of a rain of lead turned on them by the men in the trenches. Men fell to the right and to the left, Hal could see, but the gaps were filled instantly and the long lines pressed forward.

Now they were within three hundred yards and the heavy German guns became silent. The advance now must be made without further artillery support, for the German batteries could not fire without imminent danger of shooting down their own men. The Germans broke into a run.

From behind the French earthworks was poured a hail of lead, but it did not serve to check the approaching foe. On to the breastworks they came and clambered up. Behind the first line came many more and they swarmed upon the defenders like bees in a hive.

Bayonet met bayonet and revolvers cracked. Men struggled with their bare hands. Friend and foe went down together, struggling to the last. On the right and on the left, though Hal could not see these actions, similar scenes were being enacted. The Germans had made their initial advance upon a front of almost fifteen miles.

A bugle sounded.

French reinforcements were rushed forward to aid the hard-pressed men in the first line trenches. More Germans poured in. The struggling mass surged backward and forward. Then the French broke and fled, and Hal found himself among a panic-stricken mass of humanity, running for life for the protection of the second line trenches. From behind, the victorious Germans fell to their knees and poured a steady rifle fire upon the vanquished. Over the heads of their fleeing countrymen the second line French troops returned the fire.

Hastily the Germans fell to work throwing up earthworks facing the second French line. Under experienced hands the breastworks sprang up as if by magic. They entrenched calmly under the rifles of the French infantry and the heavy guns of the French batteries, though men fell upon all hands.

Far away, but coming closer, the German batteries now opened fire on the second French trenches, firing above the heads of the victorious German infantry. The infantry action subsided. The duel of big guns was resumed.

Chester, who had been despatched by General Petain with orders, arrived there to witness a scene similar to the one Hal had seen in the center. The German assaults had been successful all along the line. The French had lost their first line trenches on a front of approximately twelve miles. Only at one or two isolated spots had the Germans met reverses; and these few points that the French still

held were doubly dangerous now. They could not be given the proper support. Later in the day they were abandoned.

Hal and Chester returned to their posts about the same time. Each was sadly disappointed at the result of the first infantry fighting. For several hours they were kept on the jump carrying despatches, and it was after dark before they found themselves alone together after the strenuous day.

"Pretty hard," said Hal, shaking his head sadly.

"I should say so," Chester agreed. "It seems to me that those fellows could have been stopped."

"It doesn't to me," declared Hal. "The way they swept into our trenches seemed to me beyond human power to stop. I'm glad they stopped when they did. They probably could have gone farther."

"They'll try again to-morrow," said Chester positively.

"I'm afraid so," agreed Hal; "and if they do, I'm afraid they'll drive us back again."

"And what's the reason?" demanded Chester.

Hal shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know," he said. "Of course they can only progress so far. They'll wear themselves out by their own exertions. They lost a great deal more heavily than we did to-day; but certainly it seemed as if nothing could stop them."

There was little rest for Hal and Chester that night. It seemed to both that they had hardly closed their eyes when they were again summoned to General Petain. Assembled there they found the entire staff. The French commander was reviewing the events of the day and issuing orders and instructions rapidly. He realized that there would be more and probably harder fighting on the next day and he was laying his plans accordingly. Hal and Chester received their instructions for the morrow along with the rest.

Returning to their own quarters again, they were attracted by the sound of confusion a short distance away.

"Something up," said Chester. "Let's have a look."

Nothing loath, Hal followed his chum.

In the light of a large camp fire they made out a crowd of soldiers gathered about in a large circle. Howls of amusement and hilarious laughter rose on the air. Hal and Chester pushed closer and were able to ascertain the cause of merriment.

In the center six French soldiers held a blanket and in the center of this blanket was a man. He rose and fell as the six men alternately released the blanket and then drew it taut again. He was yelling at the top of his voice to be let alone and threatening dire vengeance on his tormentors when he would be able to get at them. But he was laughing and taking the joke good naturedly.

Hal and Chester joined the circle of spectators and derived as much amusement as the others from the proceedings. At length, tiring of their present victim, the men lowered him to the ground. One of them, a large, strapping fellow, perhaps thirty years of age, cast his eye around the circle of faces.

"Let's get another one," he shouted.

There was a chorus of assent from the others and all six set to looking about for a victim who would not prove too willing. As Hal said to Chester, apparently there was no fun tossing a man who took it good naturedly.

At last the big fellow gave a howl of delight and dashed forward. Hal gazed after him. As the big fellow bounded forward, a slight figure in the first row turned and ran. But the big fellow overtook him and dragged him back.

"Here's one, men," he cried. "See, he doesn't want to come with me. He doesn't know what a good time he is going to have. We'll give him a good one."

The others lent a hand and dragged the unwilling captive forward. As they would have put him on the blanket, the youngster—for such the captive proved to be—protested.

"Some other time, fellows," he said. "I'm sick to-night. I hadn't ought to be out at all, but I couldn't stay in the tent any longer. I'll let you toss me in the blanket some other time, but please let me alone to-night."

From where Hal and Chester stood it was plain to see that the boy was telling the truth. His face was deathly pale and he looked very ill.

"Great Scott," said Hal, "they shouldn't torment him. He is telling the truth."

"Certainly he is," Chester agreed. "I believe the boy is very ill."

But the young French boy's protest fell on unheeding ears.

With loud guffaws the men grabbed hold of the blanket and sent the captive spinning aloft. Two, three times he rose and fell, and upon the last was still in the blanket. Apparently the men who held the blanket had not noticed this, however, for they were preparing to toss him aloft again. But Hal had detected the lad's condition. He decided it was time for some one to interfere, and as no one else apparently was ready to call a halt on the proceeding, he determined to take a hand himself.

Quickly he shed his overcoat and then tossed off his jacket and passed them to Chester.

"Hold 'em!" he said, and sprang forward.

At the edge of the circle he halted and gazed at the big Frenchman, who had chanced to turn in his direction.

"Let the boy go," he said. "Can't you see that he is unconscious?"

The big Frenchman grinned at him. When Hal had taken off his coat, he had removed all signs of his rank and the soldier had no means of knowing he was an officer.

"One more toss," said the Frenchman.

Hal stepped close to him.

"The boy is unconscious," said the Frenchman, and added: "Then we'll take you."

He nodded to the others in signal that it was time to toss; but before he could move, Hal had seized him by the wrist and whirled him around.

"You heard me," the lad said quietly. "I meant what I said."

He gave the Frenchman's arm a quick twist and the man dropped his hold on the blanket. The Frenchman's hold on the blanket released, the lad upon it tumbled to the ground, where he lay still. Instantly several others bent over and gave their attention to bringing him to. The man whom Hal had confronted turned on him angrily.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"I told you to let the boy alone and I meant it," said Hal quietly.

For answer the Frenchman struck at him. Hal dodged the blow and stepped back. He would have avoided a fight if possible. But the Frenchman stepped after him and struck again. Again Hal dodged and the blow passed harmlessly over his head. The lad struck out quickly with his right and caught the Frenchman a hard blow upon the side of the neck. Big man though he was, the Frenchman toppled over. Hal walked back to where he had left Chester, donned his coat and the two moved away.

Behind them, as the big Frenchman staggered to his feet there was a howl of merriment. The Frenchman shook a fist angrily at Hal's back.

CHAPTER V

THE BLACK PEAS

The howling without continued when Hal and Chester reached their own quarters.

"Well, you've made another enemy, Hal," said Chester.

"Can't help that," was his chum's reply. "It had to be done. By the way, I wonder what's happened to Stubbs?"

"Oh, I guess he is spooking around some place. He'll turn up before long."

The lad was right. Hal and Chester had hardly composed themselves to sleep when the flap to the tent was lifted and Stubbs' head appeared. He struck a match and looked at the two lads.

"Asleep?" he asked.

Neither lad was, but neither replied. They were both too sleepy to care to enter into a conversation with Stubbs, so they maintained a discreet silence.

"All right, then," said Stubbs, "if you're asleep I'll soon be with you."

He removed his clothing and went to bed.

Stubbs was up early the following morning and when the lads arose entertained them with an account of his wanderings.

"And," he concluded, "I've stumbled across a story that's a wonder."

"A story?" repeated Chester.

"Yes. A 'story' is a newspaper man's way of expressing something big."

"Something to do with the battle?" asked Hal.

"It may have and it may not," declared Stubbs. "It may have something to do with the whole war—and it may not. I don't know."

"What is it, Stubbs?" asked Chester.

Stubbs winked one eye at him.

"As I happened to stumble across this while I was snooping," he said, "and as you don't think much of snooping, I am going to keep this to myself."

"Come, Mr. Stubbs," said Chester, "you know I was just fooling."

"Well, I may be just fooling now, for all you know," said Stubbs.

In vain did the lads plead to know what he was talking about. Stubbs was obdurate and took his departure, announcing that he was going to do some more "snooping," without enlightening them.

Hardly had he gone when the lads received a caller. It was none other than the young French boy whom Hal had rescued from the hands of his tormentors the night before.

"They told me you came to my aid," he said to Hal, "so I have come to thank you."

"Who are they?" asked Hal.

"Some of the men. It was true that I was ill last night. Jules Clemenceau will not forget."

The young French boy had stood with one hand in his pocket, and now withdrew the hand and extended it to Hal. As he did so, two small objects fell from his pocket. Apparently Jules did not notice them. Hal shook hands with the boy and the Frenchman took his departure.

Chester, in the meantime, had picked up the two little objects and now he called

to Jules, but the young Frenchman did not hear him.

"Oh, I guess he doesn't want these things, anyhow," the lad muttered.

"What things?" asked Hal, who had not seen the objects drop from Jules' pocket.

Chester passed one of the objects to him.

"Know what it is?" he asked.

"Sure," returned Hal, "don't you?"

"No. What is it?"

"A pea."

"I never saw a pea like that."

"Probably not. They are rather rare. A black pea, that's what it is. Where did you get it?"

"Jules dropped it out of his pocket."

"Well, as he seems to think I have done him a favor, I am just going to keep this. I guess he won't mind. I'll carry it as a pocket piece."

"Then I'll carry the mate to it," said Chester.

He put the little round pea in his pocket and Hal followed suit.

Although neither could possibly have suspected it, these two little peas were to be the means of getting them into all kinds of trouble.

There was heavy fighting that day and when night fell it found the Germans safely entrenched in the French second line trenches along a seven-mile front. For some reason or other Hal and Chester did not get to the front, their duties confining them close to General Petain's headquarters. They were kept busy most of the day, however, and were tired out when they returned to their own quarters late that night.

Ready as they were for bed, they consented to sit up a while and talk with Stubbs, who announced that he had a wonderful tale to unfold.

"Well," said Stubbs, "I have discovered a strange thing. It's a big thing and there are many men in the French army implicated in it. Most likely in the British, too, and I know that it has touched the ranks of the enemy."

"What is it, a conspiracy?" asked Chester.

"It is," said Stubbs, "and it's a whopper. I haven't been able to find the names of any of the leaders and I wouldn't know what to do if I did learn who they are. This one thing, rather than anything else, is likely to disrupt the aims of the Allies."

"Then you had better tell General Petain about it," declared Hal.

"I suppose I should," said Stubbs, as he drew out his pipe and proceeded to fill it.

He was quiet a moment as he ran his fingers in his vest pocket, seeking a match.

"Say, I'm a good one, ain't I?" he demanded, forgetting his grammar absolutely.

"What's the matter now?" asked Hal.

"Matter is that I can never keep a match. Have you got one?"

"Fortunately for you, I have," said Chester. "I don't carry them, as a rule, having no use for them, but I chanced to find a box of safety matches to-day."

He reached in his pocket and produced the box; and as he did so the little black pea rolled from his pocket. It rolled toward Stubbs and the little man caught it. He would have returned it to Chester, but as he started to do so he took a close look at it. He gave a sudden start and the box of matches Chester had extended to him dropped to the floor even as his fingers would have closed on it.

"H-m-m-m," he muttered to himself. "I wonder. I suppose it would be a great thing. I wonder."

Stubbs picked up the box of matches and proceeded to light his pipe with deliberation.

"Well, now that you have that pipe puffing," said Hal, "what's the rest of this story of yours?"

"On second thought," said Stubbs calmly, "I have decided to keep it to myself."

"You're not going to tell us?" demanded Chester.

"No," said Stubbs. "By the way, here's your black pea," for Chester had not noticed that he had dropped it.

"Thanks," said Chester, taking the pea and dropping it in his pocket, "I wouldn't want to lose it."

"No, I guess not," said Stubbs mysteriously. "Pretty scarce articles. I don't suppose you could find another one in some distance."

"Oh, yes, you could," said Hal. "I have one myself."

"That so?" said Stubbs, and added to himself: "I thought so, but I wanted to make sure."

Hal produced his black pea. Stubbs examined it carefully and passed it back to him.

"Better keep it in a safe place," he said. "As I say, they are scarce and it never does a fellow any good to lose anything when there is anyone around."

Hal and Chester started guiltily. How could Stubbs know they had found the peas when they fell from the pocket of Jules Clemenceau? Stubbs, who had been watching the two closely, observed these sudden starts and interpreted them to his own satisfaction.

"Come now, Stubbs," said Chester, "tell us the rest of this story of yours."

"No," said Stubbs, "I am going to keep it to myself." He added under his breath: "The young cubs! Trying to pump an old-timer like me to see how much I know!"

"You mean you are not even going to tell the general?" asked Hal.

"That's what I mean," said Stubbs.

Hal and Chester exchanged glances. They wondered what had come over the little man so suddenly. Stubbs caught the interchange of glances and again he read it wrong. To Stubbs it appeared that there was relief on their features.

Stubbs shook his head.

"I'm going to turn in," he said.

Not another word could the lads get out of him, try as they would. But Stubbs, on his cot, did not sleep immediately. Covertly he watched the two lads as they talked in tones too low for him to hear, strain his ears as he would.

"Well, I guess I don't need to hear 'em," he told himself. "I can guess what it's all about."

He rolled over and went to sleep.

But the nature of the lads' conversation was a whole lot different from what Stubbs thought it was, though it concerned the little man himself.

"Something wrong with him," said Chester.

"Right you are," agreed Hal. "Talks like we had offended him or something."

"Maybe he just wants to keep us guessing."

"That might be it. Anyhow, if he doesn't tell us to-morrow, I'm going to tell him what I think of him."

"Then he won't talk," said Chester.

"We might be able to get him mad enough to make him talk," returned Hal.

"By Jove! so we might," said Chester. "We'll have a try at it to-morrow if it's necessary."

"All right. Then let's turn in. I've a feeling it's going to be a strenuous day to-morrow."

And it was; though not strenuous in the way Hal had expected.

CHAPTER VI

A PERILOUS SITUATION

Hal and Chester held no conversation with Anthony Stubbs the following day, and therefore were unable to learn more than they already knew of the war correspondent's great "story."

Before they rose Stubbs was up and gone, and when he returned, several hours later, Hal and Chester were receiving orders from General Petain.

The German advance had continued the day before in spite of the heroic stand of the French troops. Successive charges by the Teuton hordes had driven the defenders back along practically the entire front. Here, with the coming of night, they had taken a brace with the arrival of reinforcements and had stemmed the tide; but not a man failed to realize that there would be more desperate work on the morrow.

The French lines now had been pushed back well to the west of the city of Verdun itself and the civil population of the town had fled. The town had been swept by the great German guns until hardly one stone remained upon another. North of the city, the French had been bent back as the Germans thrust a wedge into the defending lines almost to the foot of Dead Man's Hill.

This hill was of particular importance to the Germans, for it commanded the approach on all sides; and now the German Prince had determined upon its capture. General Petain anticipated the move and acted promptly.

It was toward this point, then, that Hal and Chester found themselves moving upon the sixth day of the great battle. They bore despatches from General Petain and each bestrode a high-powered motorcycle, which the French commander had placed at their disposal. The two lads rode swiftly, for there was no time to

be lost.

Even above the "pop-pop" of their motorcycles could be heard the terrible roar of the German guns as they were brought to bear on Dead Man's Hill, paving the way for an infantry advance, which was to come a few hours later. It was risky business upon which the lads were bent, for the great shells struck on all sides of them, throwing huge masses of dirt in the air like giant fountains and digging immense excavations in the hard ground.

But the lads reached their destination in safety; and here, for the first time, Hal and Chester were to come in contact with a new method of fighting.

General Domont, in command at Dead Man's Hill, having read the despatches the lads carried, announced that they would remain with him during the day, acting as members of his staff. He ordered Hal forward with instructions for the troops holding the crest of the hill to the north and Chester was despatched upon a similar mission to the south.

Hardly had Chester delivered his message when a shout told him the German infantry was advancing to the attack. The lad glanced around, and as he did so, a sharp order rang out and a moment later the French troops clamped queer-looking devices over their faces and heads.

Chester knew what they were—gas masks to protect the defenders from the poisonous vapors of German gas bombs, which, had the defenders not been protected by masks, would have killed them instantly. A passing officer said something unintelligible to the lad as he passed and pointed to the ground. Glancing down, the lad perceived a mask and then understood that the officer had meant for him to put it on. Chester did so, though not without some difficulty, for he had trouble adjusting it. But with his nostrils protected at last, Chester turned to watch the approach of the enemy.

The Germans came forward in a dense mass, despite the fearful execution worked in their ranks by the French guns. In the lines of the defenders dropped huge bombs that sent up dense vapors—the deadly gasses of the foe—but they caused little harm, for the French were protected. Now and then a man fell, however; perhaps he had failed to adjust his helmet properly, or perhaps it was not perfect. But for the most part the gas bombs had little effect.

The first concerted attack of the German troops availed little; and after trying for

half an hour to gain a foothold in the French lines they withdrew. But a second attack followed a few moments later. This also was beaten off. A third attack, however, met with better success.

This time the Germans succeeded in gaining a hold in the French lines, and this they retained in spite of repeated counter assaults by the French. Bravely the men charged, but they could make no impression on the positions so recently won by the foe. The troops of the German Crown Prince stood firm.

The French were forced to retreat toward the summit of the hill.

Here the big French guns opened violently upon the enemy, but the invaders remained in spite of the hail of death.

Chester had been carried back with the French retreat and he now found himself almost in the first line. He was sadly disappointed, for he had felt sure that the French effort to repel the attack would be successful.

His men still falling back before the German advance, General Domont determined upon a bold stroke. Orders were given thick and fast. Hal and Chester, returning from their first missions of the day, found themselves again near the front. The orders to the various French divisional commanders were explicit. As the Germans advanced again to the attack, the French, too, all along the line, were to take the offensive.

The men awaited the word eagerly.

At last it came. With a shout the French, still wearing their gas masks, hurled themselves forward with the troops.

Halfway down the hill the lines met with a crash. Rifles and small arms were fired point blank into the very faces of the foe and then the men fell to the work with bayonets. Both sides fought desperately.

Hal and Chester had drawn their swords and found themselves engaged with the troops. So close was the fighting that had it not been for the difference in uniform it would have been practically impossible to distinguish friend from foe.

Hal found himself engaged with a German officer of huge stature, who was endeavoring to bring the lad to earth by fierce sweeping blows of his officer's

sword. Hal was hard pressed to defend himself.

As the German's sword descended in a stroke of extra violence, Hal stepped lightly aside and evaded the blow. Before the German could recover himself, Hal moved quickly forward. There was a sudden, quick movement of his arm and the German officer toppled over, to rise no more.

Hal turned just in time to see a second German officer level a revolver straight at his head. The lad ducked and the ball passed harmlessly over his head. Before the German's finger could press the trigger again Hal had raised his arm and struck.

Chester, in the meantime, had his own hands full. He had accounted for a German trooper who had sought to bring his rifle butt down on the lad's head and was now engaged with two other troopers, who sought to end his career with bayonets.

Chester sprang nimbly back as the two men advanced on him. One tripped and stumbled over a fallen comrade and as he did so Chester took advantage of his misfortune to strike with his sword. But the second German protected his fellow by catching Chester's stroke with his bayonet and for a moment Chester was at a disadvantage.

Even as the bayonet of the first trooper, who had regained his balance, would have pierced him, however, Chester dropped flat on the ground and seized one of the man's legs. The German dropped his bayonet and crashed to the ground. Chester sprang up quickly and jumped to one side to escape the point of the bayonet in the hands of the second trooper.

Chester thrust with his sword, but the effort was futile. The point of the lad's sword fell short. Again the lad was at a disadvantage and the German grinned as he stepped forward to end the combat. His bayonet was pointed straight at the lad's breast and it seemed as though nothing but a miracle could save the boy.

But the miracle happened. Suddenly the German dropped his bayonet with a crash and threw up both arms. He spun on his heel and then fell to the ground without an outcry. A stray bullet had done what Chester had been unable to accomplish, and for the moment the lad was safe.

The second trooper now returned to the attack and engaged Chester fiercely. All

this time the French were gradually being forced back, and of a sudden Chester found himself the center of a mass of German troops.

But the lad had no mind to give up. Throwing caution to the winds, he now struck out swiftly and sharply with his sword. Once or twice the thrusts went home. Chester felt a sting in his left shoulder. The bayonet of a German trooper had pricked him slightly. Chester whirled about and seized the bayonet with his left hand. A powerful wrench and it was wrested from the hands of the German soldier, who had been caught off his guard.

Without taking time to reverse the weapon, Chester hurled it in the faces of the foe who pressed in about him. It struck one man squarely on the forehead and he toppled over with a groan.

Again Chester laid about him with his sword, retreating slowly as he did so. The gas helmet that he wore impeded his progress somewhat, for it was strange to his head and felt uncomfortable. Now the lad realized for the first time that the Germans before him also wore the heavy helmets.

He aimed a blow at one man's breast and it went home. At the same moment a second German brought his rifle butt down upon the lad's sword and the weapon snapped off. Chester felt a second sting in his arm and then he felt a blow across the helmet.

There was a sudden roaring sound, Chester saw a million stars flash through the air; then he threw up his arms, made a move to step forward and crashed to the ground.

The last blow had broken open Chester's gas helmet and the lad was at the mercy of the poisonous vapors!

CHAPTER VII

HAL TO THE RESCUE

At the same moment that Chester fell to the ground, the clear note of a bugle rang out from the German rear, sounding the recall. The attack was to be given up. The resistance of the French had been too much for the foe.

Hal, who had been retreating with the other French troops, turned a second before the recall was sounded just in time to see a single form that had been struggling with a knot of the enemy crash to the ground. Hal gave a loud cry, which was stifled by his gas helmet, for he felt sure that it was Chester.

It was at that moment the German bugle sounded the recall.

Hal dashed toward the spot where Chester had fallen. A score of enemy troops, perceiving his approach, stayed their retreat and offered him battle. Hal was nothing loath. He dashed toward them at top speed.

Other French troops, seeing one of their numbers dashing forward, and perceiving his peril, jumped to the rescue. Still more Germans turned and more French dashed forward. For a moment it seemed that the struggle would be renewed in spite of the order for a German recall.

Hal dashed among the foe with sword flashing aloft. Right and left he slashed and the Germans gave way before his fury. Then they closed in. Almost at the same moment the French troops came to his assistance. Again the recall was sounded from the German rear. The few of the foe who apparently had Hal at their mercy heeded this second call reluctantly. They drew off slowly, opening upon the advancing French with their rifles as they did so. The French returned the fire and the Germans retreated faster.

Apparently it was not the plan of General Domont to follow up the retreating Germans, for there came no order for a charge. Instead, the French commander apparently was satisfied with having broken down the German attack. He had no intention of sacrificing more of his men in a useless pursuit that would bring them again under the mouths of the big German guns.

Quickly Hal bent over Chester. The latter had fallen with his face on the ground, and this fact undoubtedly had saved his life. He was unconscious and his nose was buried in the dirt. He had almost suffocated, but this fact had saved him from the poisonous gases. Hal stripped the gas helmet from a dead French soldier and slipped it over Chester's head. Then he lifted his chum from the ground and started toward the rear, supporting the unconscious figure as well as he could.

Several French troopers ran to his assistance. Hal lowered Chester to the ground and put both hands under his chum's head. He motioned one of the French soldiers to take Chester's feet, and in this manner they carried Chester from the danger zone.

Hal did not rest easily until after a French surgeon had pronounced Chester little the worse for his experience. Two bayonet wounds in the lad's arm were found to be mere scratches.

"He'll pull round in a day or two," said the surgeon. "In the meantime it would be well to keep him as quiet as possible, though he is in no danger."

Hal thanked the surgeon, and leaving Chester in safe hands, sought out General Domont and explained the circumstances to him.

"And I would like to get him back to my own quarters," he concluded.

"Very well," said General Domont. "I shall place an automobile at your disposal."

The French officer was as good as his word and in a high-power motor car Hal and Chester, the latter having regained consciousness, were soon on their way to headquarters, Hal bearing General Domont's report on the morning's encounter.

Hal went first to the quarters of General Petain, where he delivered General Domont's report; then he accompanied Chester to their own quarters, where he

made Chester as comfortable as possible.

He was just about to leave Chester alone, when another figure entered the tent. It was Stubbs.

"Hello, Mr. Stubbs," said Chester from his cot. "Where have you been all summer?"

"Summer?" said Mr. Stubbs, removing his overcoat. "This is the month of February."

"All right; have it your own way," said Chester.

"Well, I've just been having a look around," said Stubbs.

"Find out anything more about the conspiracy?" asked Hal.

"What conspiracy?" demanded Stubbs.

"Why, the one you were telling us about the other night," exclaimed Chester.

Stubbs looked at the lad critically.

"Wounded to-day, weren't you?" he asked.

"A trifle," returned Chester.

"Any fever?" asked Stubbs.

"No," said Hal. "Why?"

"Why? He's dreaming things. What's this conspiracy he's talking about?"

Chester sat up in his cot.

"You don't mean to tell me you don't remember what you told us about it?" he demanded.

Stubbs tapped his head with a significant gesture and nodded to Hal.

"Did you have a surgeon look at him?" he asked.

"Look here, Stubbs—" began Chester angrily.

"Here, here," interposed Hal. "You lie down there, Chester. I'll talk to our friend here."

At this Mr. Stubbs moved toward the outside.

"I've got to be going now," he announced.

"Well, you're not going to go until you tell me what all this foolishness is about," declared Hal.

"Foolishness?"

"Yes, foolishness. You can't deny, can you, that you told us the other night you had unearthed a conspiracy of some kind?"

"I can," said Stubbs, "but I won't. It's my belief that there is something wrong with both of you. What would I know about a conspiracy?"

"That's what I would like to know," returned Chester, from his cot. "If you won't tell us, I've a notion to tell General Petain what you told us."

"I wouldn't if I were you," said Stubbs. "It wouldn't do you any good. He probably would think your wound had affected your mind. That's what I think."

"Oh, no you don't," said Hal. "You are just trying to keep the thing to yourself, whatever it is. Maybe you're going to slip it by the censor to the *Gazette*, eh?"

Stubbs made no reply.

"If I thought that, I would tell General Petain," declared Chester.

"It must be a great thing to have such imaginations," said Stubbs with something like a sigh. "Some of these days, if you like, I'll get you both jobs on the *Gazette*."

"Now look here, Stubbs," said Hal. "Laying all joking aside, are you going to tell us about this thing or not?"

"What thing?" demanded Stubbs.

"By George!" ejaculated Hal in exasperation. "You're the limit, Stubbs."

"Sure I am," was the little man's smiling response. "Otherwise, I wouldn't be in this tent with you."

"Stubbs," said Chester, a sudden idea striking him, "have we done something you don't like?"

"You have," was Stubbs' reply.

"By Jove!" said Hal. "We're sorry for that, Stubbs. We apologize. Will you tell us what we've done?"

Stubbs looked at the lad with a peculiar smile on his face. He was silent several moments before replying:

"You don't know, eh?"

"Of course not."

Stubbs shrugged his shoulders and started out of the tent.

"Say!" Chester called after him, "are you going to tell us or not?"

"Not!" said Stubbs briefly, and was gone.

"Now what do you think of that?" demanded Chester of his chum.

"There's something wrong with him," was Hal's reply. "I haven't any idea what it can be."

"Suppose it is because we were poking fun at him the other night?"

"I don't know. I don't believe he would take a thing like that to heart. However, you can't tell."

"Anyhow," said Chester, "we're not likely to find out what it's all about until he gets good and ready to tell us."

"You're right, there," returned Hal. "He can be as mum as an oyster when he wants to. Well, old boy, I'll leave you alone now and go out and look around a bit. Maybe I can stumble on this conspiracy Stubbs talks about."

"You mean the one he won't talk about," said Chester with a smile. "All right. Go ahead. I'll take a little snooze."

He rolled over on his side as Hal left the tent.

How long Chester slept he did not know, but it was dark in the tent when he opened his eyes.

"Wonder what can be keeping Hal?" he muttered to himself.

He had hardly had spoken the words when a form came through the entrance to the tent. Chester was about to speak, for he thought at first that it was Hal, but something seemed to tell him to remain silent. The lad, therefore, said nothing.

At second glance Chester realized that the figure that had entered the tent was not Hal. Neither was it Stubbs.

"Great Scott!" muttered the lad to himself. "Wonder who he is and what he wants here? He hasn't seen me though. Guess I'll wait and see what happens."

The lad stretched out a hand carefully and drew toward him a camp stool upon which he had laid his clothes before going to bed. Without a sound he secured one of his revolvers and straightened to a sitting posture.

"I'm ready for whatever happens," he told himself.

The intruder had now taken up such a position in the tent as to command a view of the entrance, shielded from sight himself. Chester saw something glisten in the man's hand.

"Gun," said the boy to himself. "Guess I can beat him to it."

Came footsteps without. They stopped just outside the tent. Chester saw the nocturnal visitor in the tent raise his revolver arm. Chester did likewise.

"I'll just shoot that gun out of your hand, my friend," he said quietly.

He took deliberate aim.

CHAPTER VIII

AN UNKNOWN ENEMY

The footsteps outside came nearer the entrance. Chester's finger tightened on the trigger of his revolver, as he saw the stranger in the tent draw himself taut.

At that moment Hal's figure appeared in the entrance.

There were two sharp cracks, so close that they seemed as one, and two spurts of flame in the darkness. Came a cry of pain from the stranger in the tent and Hal dashed forward.

"Quick, Hal! Grab him!" shouted Chester.

But quick as he was, Hal was not quick enough. With a snarl the man jumped toward Hal even as Hal leaped himself. The stranger was of much greater bulk than Hal and the lad was hurled to the ground. When he regained his feet the stranger had disappeared.

Chester, unmindful of his wound, had leaped from his cot and now ran outside. Some distance away he saw a figure disappear in the darkness. The lad did not fire a second shot, for at that distance he could not be sure of a hit and he did not wish further to alarm the camp.

Hal struck a light and the two chums looked at each other.

"Did you get a look at him, Hal?" asked Chester.

"No, did you?"

"No. He was in the tent for some time, but I waited until I was sure what he was going to do before I fired, though I had him covered all the time."

"You must be losing your eye. At that distance you should you should have potted him without trouble."

"I guess I could have done it this time had I tried," returned Chester.
"I shot at his revolver."

"Well, I guess you hit it," said Hal. "There it is, right where he dropped it. But his bullet whistled pretty close to my ear."

"I suppose I shouldn't have taken a chance," said Chester. "Next time I'll shoot to hit something better than a pistol."

"Well, it doesn't make any difference now," said Hal. "He didn't get me. I wonder who he is and what he wanted to shoot me for?"

"You've got me, look at the gun and see if there is any mark of identification on it."

Hal stooped over and picked up the revolver. He examined it carefully and then passed it to Chester.

"Can't find anything," he said.

Chester examined the weapon with no better success.

"Well," he said at last, slowly, "there is one thing certain. You've an enemy of some kind in the camp. It will behoove you to be careful in the future."

"I suppose the bullet was meant for me," said Hal, "although, of course it might have been meant for either you or Stubbs."

"Great Scott! What would anybody want to shoot Stubbs for?"

"Well, you can search me," said Hal with a shrug of his shoulders, "which may not be very good English, but expresses my sentiments just the same."

"How about Stubbs' conspiracy? Maybe one of the conspirators has caught Stubbs nosing about."

"By Jove! It might be that, after all," said Hal. "I wonder!"

"At all events, we shall all have to be on our guard," declared Chester. "We don't know for which of us the bullet was meant. We'll have to warn Stubbs."

"So we shall, and if I mistake not here he comes now."

Hal was right. A moment later the rotund face of the little war correspondent appeared in the tent entrance.

"Stubbs," said Hal gravely, "you missed getting killed by just about five minutes."

The little man started back in alarm.

"Wha—what's that?" he demanded.

"I said you just escaped getting killed."

"But who would want to kill me?" demanded Stubbs, plainly very nervous.

"It might have been one of your conspirators," said Hal. He displayed the weapon from which a bullet had sped toward his own head.

"Hey!" shouted Stubbs. "Put that gun down! Don't shoot!"

The little man was so visibly frightened that Hal looked at him in surprise.

"Surely you didn't think I was going to shoot you, Mr. Stubbs?" he asked in some surprise.

"I don't know," returned Stubbs, wiping a moist brow with his handkerchief. "I don't understand you fellows at all. First you said you wanted to kill me five minutes ago and there you stand with a gun in your hand. What am I to think?"

"Stubbs, you're crazy," said Hal, calmly. "I didn't say I wanted to kill you. When I came into the tent just now there was a man took a shot at me. I don't know whether he wanted to kill me, or whether he wanted to kill you. He may even have been trying to kill Chester. He didn't take time to investigate. He fired at the first figure to enter the tent. I don't know who he was. Have you any enemies?"

"I—I—Why I don't know," said Stubbs.

"How about the conspirators. Do any of them know you?"

"What conspirators?" demanded Stubbs, and added, "I wish you would quit harping on that subject. It's all right to have a little fun with me once in a while. I don't mind it; but enough is enough."

Chester was about to make an angry retort, but Hal stayed him with a word.

"All right, Stubbs," he said. "If you don't know anything about a conspiracy you don't and that's all there is about that. But if you do, I should advise you to be careful. I believe that shot was meant for you."

"I am afraid that this tent is going to be dangerous for me," said Stubbs, slowly. "I shall remain here no longer."

"What! Not going to leave us, Stubbs?" exclaimed Chester.

"Yes," returned the little man quietly. "If I remain here I'm liable to wake up dead some morning, and I wouldn't like that. There's an expression in New York that hits me just right. 'Safety first!' I'm going to get out of this tent, and I'm going to get out right now, while I'm all together."

He hurried to the far side of the tent and got his belongings together. Then he moved toward the door. There he paused a moment, as if undecided, then walked up to Hal and extended a hand.

"Good-bye, Hal," he said quietly. "I may not see you for some time and then again it may be soon."

Hal took the hand as he said:

"Look here, Stubbs, we don't like to lose you."

"I know, I know," said the little man, "but it will be better for all concerned."

He approached Chester and extended a hand to him also.

"Come now, Stubbs," said Chester. "Drop those things back down there and go to bed."

"Not much," replied Stubbs grimly. "I'm going to hunt a safer spot than this."

He released Chester's hand and made his way to the door. There, just before moving away, he turned and spoke.

"Boys," he said, "we've been pretty good friends, the three of us, haven't we?"

"You bet we have, Stubbs," returned Chester warmly.

"We certainly have, Mr. Stubbs," Hal agreed.

"All right, then," said the little man. "You both have been good enough to tell me once or twice that I have been of some service to you."

"You certainly have, Mr. Stubbs," declared Hal, "and anything we can do to repay you—"

"Never mind that," said Stubbs with a wave of the hand. "All I want to say is this: If, at any time, within a day or two or within a month or two, I do anything you don't like, anything that puts you to some inconvenience—you will know that I am doing it for your own good—because I am fond of both of you and don't want to see you get in trouble."

"Say, Stubbs, what on earth are you talking about?" asked Chester in great surprise.

"Never mind what I'm talking about," returned Stubbs, half angrily. "I just want you to remember what I am saying."

"We'll remember, if that will do you any good," said Chester, "but I wish you would tell me what it is all about."

"I may not be talking about anything, and then I may be talking about a whole lot," was Stubbs' enigmatical response. "Time will tell."

"Time will tell what, Mr. Stubbs?" demanded Hal.

"Oh, rats!" said Stubbs. "I haven't time to stay here and talk to you fellows all night. Just remember what I said. That's all."

He stepped out the tent and was gone.

Hal and Chester gazed at one another in the utmost surprise.

"What in the time of the Czar do you suppose he was talking about?" asked Chester.

"I'm not good at conundrums," replied Hal. "He's got something on his mind, all right."

"Providing he has a mind left," agreed Chester.

Hal smiled.

"From the way he talked that fact is open to doubt," he replied.

"I didn't think he was a drinking man," said Chester.

"Oh, he was sober enough. By the way, did you notice his hesitation when I asked him if he had any enemies?"

"By George! I did. He couldn't answer. I'll bet he knows more about the man that fired that shot at you than he is willing to admit."

"It looks like it," Hal agreed. "From his actions, I would judge that the shot was meant for him."

"Exactly," said Chester, "and he knows who it was that fired it."

"Well, there is no use talking about it," declared Hal. "We can't possibly figure it out ourselves. One thing, though, we shall have to be on our guard. The unknown enemy may not know that Stubbs has moved and may try again."

"Right," said Chester. "We'll have to sleep with one eye open."

"Oh, we're safe enough to-night," said Hal. "He'll figure we'll be on the watch and will postpone his next visit for a day or two. By the way, old man, how do you feel?"

"First rate. I'll be as good as new in the morning."

"I hope so. In that event we had better get a little sleep."

"Then you don't think it necessary for one of us to stand watch?"

"No; here goes for bed."

CHAPTER IX

IN THE TRENCHES

In some manner, known only to himself, Anthony Stubbs, war correspondent of the New York *Gazette*, had ingratiated himself with General Petain, the French commander at Verdun. General Petain, upon Stubbs' request, agreed that the little war correspondent should be allowed to make a tour of the city of Verdun and the surrounding fortifications and view for himself the effects of the siege thus far.

An officer of the general staff was assigned by the French commander to show Stubbs about. It was the first time a war correspondent had been admitted to Verdun and the surrounding fortifications; and because of the things that Stubbs learned on the tour, it is fitting that the reader take the trip with him.

The officer first led Stubbs to the highest point on the walls encircling Verdun and there explained the lay-out of the contending forces. From this point of vantage, commanding the battlefield, Verdun looked like the center of a huge saucer, with the town lying very low, while all around rose an even circle of crests forming the outer edge of the saucer.

The dangerous proximity of the Germans was apparent. At the time that Stubbs viewed the battlefield the armies of the Kaiser held a goodly portion of these crests, though the battle of Verdun was less than two weeks old.

An intermittent bombardment was in progress from Fort Tavennes, Fort Soueville, Fort St. Michael and Fort Belleville, which were barking steadily and giving off jets of black smoke. The German cannonade sounded like a distant roar. The shelling of Verdun was continuing.

Three hundred shells a day had been hurled into Verdun itself during the battle,

Stubbs was informed by the French officer, upon one day as many as 750 having been counted; but the average was 300. As the two stood there a French aeroplane was attacked by a German gun, shrapnel bursting all around as the machine turned from the German positions and darted back to French cover.

The terrible course of the destruction was pointed out by the French officer. The town itself had been abandoned by the civil population, and even few troops were to be found there. Such shops and houses as had escaped the shells were closed and barricaded; and the shells continued to fall.

The streets were crumbling ruins, with only jagged walls remaining here and there. The cathedral had two shell holes in the roof; the main altar was a mass of debris and the side altar was littered with broken carvings, statues and chandeliers.

One wing of the handsome military club was torn off and the whole establishment was a wreck. The archbishop's residence had its famous sculptured walls peppered with shell holes and the adjoining College of Marguerite had its delicate stone filigree reduced almost to powder. The houses along the Meuse, flanking the principal bridge, were literally wrecked.

Sixteen great shells had struck the town hall; one corner of the building had been torn off and the clock tower smashed. The mayor's office was being used as an emergency butcher shop.

Stubbs' guide now led him to one of the inner forts of the fortifications, which was still shelling the Germans. From here Stubbs gained a view of the fighting ground of Fleury at close range. Over the entrance of the fort was a notice to the garrison that the fort was to be levelled in extremity and never surrendered.

Fleury, lying to the right of Verdun, showed not a house standing. The great German guns had carried all before them. The whole village was a mass of ruins. At the moment the village was in the hands of the French. It had been occupied twice by the Germans, but only the day before had again been captured by the French. Although Stubbs did not know it, the little village was to change hands a score of times more in the months that were to follow.

As Stubbs' guide pointed out the various points destroyed by German shells, he gave the little man an account of the fighting in each spot. He pointed out the advantages of earthen breastworks as against the solid walls of fortresses. The

effectiveness of the former was very plain.

Stubbs and his guide now returned to the citadel of Verdun, where Stubbs thanked General Petain for being allowed to make the tour of inspection. Gathered about the commander were many members of his staff, who joined in the conversation. Stubbs could not but be impressed by the confidence manifested by the officers that Verdun could be kept from the Germans, and this in the face of the reverses of the past few days. The feeling was summarized in the closing word of General Petain, as he bade Stubbs farewell.

"*Au revoir*, Monsieur Stubbs," he said, "until you come back when our victory is complete!"

By a series of fierce counter assaults, the French now had driven the seasoned veterans of the German Crown Prince from Dead Man's Hill; from Hill No. 265, to the north, from Chattancourt and Charny. Back across the Meuse the Germans fled from the vicious attacks of the French. Second and third line trenches were re-won.

But the French did not stop there. The third day of March found them still pushing the Germans and as darkness fell that night, the troops of General Petain entrenched themselves just to the east of Thiaumont farm and Hill No. 320. A trifle to the south, Fleury was once more in German hands, the opposition in this sector having been too much for the French to overcome. Almost due east, German guns, wheeled into position at Fort Vaux, captured the preceding day, shelled the reconquered positions of the French; but the latter stood firm. All night the artillery duel raged and the coming of morning found both armies ready for the day's work.

The French opened the day by concentrating heavy artillery upon the German positions at Fort Vaux. After a two hours' bombardment, the infantry was ordered to the attack. Fresh troops took the places in the trenches vacated by the attacking forces and heavy guns covered their advance.

A hundred yards or so from the hastily constructed German trenches, the thin French lines charged. Their ranks had been sadly depleted as they marched across the open ground, but they stuck to the work bravely. Clear to the German trenches they ran, a second and still a third line close behind; and then the Germans swarmed out to meet them. A fierce hand-to-hand encounter ensued

with victory crowning German arms. What was left of the French attacking party scurried back to their own lines.

The Germans did not wait for a second attack. German buglers sounded an advance. Again the Germans swarmed out of their trenches in countless thousands and rushed the French trenches.

Hal and Chester at this moment found themselves at the front with orders for respective divisional commanders. They remained as the Germans charged, sheltered by the huge earthen breastworks.

The fate of the German charge was the same as that of the French a short while before. Beaten off after a half hour of fierce fighting, the Germans retired to the shelter of their own lines. The great German guns, silent while the infantry was engaged, opened up anew on the French trenches, dropping shells in profusion.

Hal and Chester stood elbow to elbow watching the destructive work of the giant shells. Of a sudden a shell dropped close to them. Hal uttered a cry of alarm and made a desperate attempt to drag Chester out of harm's way. In this he was partly successful and they had dashed forward a few yards before the shell exploded.

With the fury of the blast, great clouds of earth flew high in the air. Hal and Chester felt the ground open up beneath them and they gasped for breath as they were precipitated into what seemed a bottomless pit. How far they fell they could not tell, but it seemed a long ways; and hardly had they struck bottom when a shower of earth fell upon them.

Fortunately for them, they were in a section of the trench that was protected on either side by artificial abutments of hard dirt and stones thrown up by the troops and these caught heavy beams and rocks and other debris that would have showered down upon them and crushed them to death. A great log, or such it appeared, came down lengthwise and struck the abutments on either side of the pit into which the lads had fallen; a second did likewise and these prevented the shower of rocks and pieces of big guns from going through. It was all that saved the lads.

Then more earth fell and covered these and the pit was effectually sealed. Below there was no light, and when Hal and Chester regained their feet neither could see light above. They groped for each other in the dark and at last clasped hands.

"Great Scott! What's happened?" gasped Chester. "Where are we?"

"We are in a pit caused by the explosion of that shell," said Hal, quietly. "The next question is how to get out."

He put a hand above his head, but could touch nothing. He tried jumping, but with no better success.

"I can't reach the top," he said.

The lads felt around the sides of the pit. The walls were sheer. It was useless to think of getting up that way.

"Well, we're up against it," said Hal. "I don't know how we are to get out of here. By Jove! It's lucky we weren't killed by the shell."

"We might just as well have been as to die down here," said Chester.

"Buck up, old man," said Hal. "We're not dead yet and while there's life there's hope. We've been in some ticklish positions before and pulled through all right."

"We were never in a hole like this before," said Chester.

Hal had made his way to one side of the pit.

"Here," he called to Chester, "you climb up on my shoulders and see if you can reach the top."

Chester did as Hal suggested and his efforts were rewarded by touching something overhead.

"What luck?" asked Hal.

"Good," said Chester. "I have touched something. Feels like a log."

"Can you pull it loose?"

"If I do we're likely to be crushed down here."

"If you don't we're likely to suffocate down here," returned Hal. "I can scarcely get my breath now. We'll have to take a chance."

"Then I'll have a try at it," said Chester. "Be ready to crouch close to the side of the pit when I give the word. I'll come down on top of you and we'll trust to luck that the debris falls clear."

"All right," said Hal. "Yell when you're ready."

Again Chester tested the covering with his hands. At last he struck a spot where he could obtain a grip. He decided to throw his weight on it and see if it would come down. He took a firm hold and then called:

"All right, Hal! Stoop quickly!"

CHAPTER X

UNEXPECTED VISITORS

Came a low, rumbling sound from overhead and a shower of dirt poured down on Hal as he crouched in his corner. Chester still swung to and fro from above. The lad felt something give, and believing that the mass above was about to fall, he dropped quickly alongside Hal and buried his face in his arms.

But nothing happened.

Directly Chester rose to his feet.

"I thought it was coming," he said to Hal. "Guess I didn't hang on long enough. I'll have another try. Lend me your shoulders again."

Hal also stood up and took his position. Chester clambered up and again explored the covering with his fingers. At the first touch there was another shower of earth.

"Won't take a whole lot to move it, I guess," he said.

"Hurry, then," enjoined Hal. "The air is stifling down here."

Chester himself felt that he was suffocating and realized the need for haste.

"All right," he said. "Here's hoping we're not crushed to death. Down when I give the word."

Again his fingers found a hold and he braced himself for the shock.

"Down!" he cried suddenly.

Hal dropped.

A second time came the dull rumbling from above as Chester swayed to and fro in his precarious position. Then the lad felt the covering give. One instant longer he hung on, for he felt that he would have no strength for a third attempt should this fail.

And then, with a roar, the mass of debris above came tumbling down.

Chester swung himself close to the side of the pit even as he felt the covering give and came down a short distance from Hal. He covered his head as well as he could and waited for he knew not what.

It was not long coming.

Something struck the lad a sharp blow upon the shoulder, numbing it. Behind him the lad heard rocks and other debris crashing to the bottom. Holding his breath, he waited for the blow he felt sure must come from above and unconsciously his right hand stretched out toward where he knew Hal to be.

But nothing struck him. After five seconds of the terrible roaring, there was silence. Chester looked up. There was light above. Chester uttered a short prayer of thankfulness and rose to his feet.

"All right, Hal," he said, still looking above, while he rubbed his injured shoulder.

There was no reply.

Chester looked quickly about him. There was no sign of Hal.

"Great Scott! What can have happened to him?" he asked himself anxiously.

Quickly he fell to hands and knees and explored the bottom of the pit. There, where he knew Hal should be, he felt a mound of earth.

"Great Scott! He's buried!" cried Chester.

Frantically he set to work with his bare hands to uncover Hal.

In a few moments his efforts were rewarded. He exposed Hal's arm. From the position the arm was in Chester was able to locate his chum's head. This he uncovered quickly, for he feared that his friend might suffocate. Then he bent over Hal and listened.

Hal was breathing faintly.

Chester uttered a cry of relief and proceeded to uncover the rest of his friend's body. This done, he set about reviving Hal, who was unconscious.

Chester rubbed Hal's hands vigorously, and was at last rewarded by hearing Hal sigh. A moment later Hal spoke.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"Well, it looks like the world caved in on you," returned Chester. "Fortunately, appearances are deceitful. I yanked the log loose from above and you were buried in the dirt. Fortunately, I got you out in time. How do you feel?"

"I don't feel very chipper," was the faint reply; "but I guess I'm all right."

"Can you get up?"

"Don't know; I'll try."

He made the effort, and with Chester's assistance, soon stood leaning against one side of the pit. He looked up.

"Quite a ways up there," he said. "How are we going to make it?"

"Think you can climb up on my shoulders, pull yourself out and then lend me a hand?"

"I don't believe so. Guess I can brace myself while you climb up, though."

"Good, we'll try it."

Once more Chester climbed to Hal's shoulder while the latter braced himself against one wall of the pit. He took a firm hold on the edge above and drew himself up with little difficulty. He was about to reach down and lend Hal a hand

when he happened to look toward the east.

"Good night!" he exclaimed and disappeared into the pit in a hurry.

"What's the matter?" demanded Hal, who had not overheard his friend's ejaculation.

"Matter!" echoed Chester. "There are about ten millions coming this way on the dead run. The French have retreated!"

"Hm-m-m," said Hal; "and what are we going to do?"

"Bide here for a spell, I expect," was Chester's answer.

"Guess you're right. They may not notice us down here. We'll play we're a couple of mice and see how still we can keep."

"Good! Listen! I hear 'em coming!"

Above them, to one side, they could hear the trampling of many feet as the Germans passed the pit.

"Guess we're safe enough so long as we stay down here," said Chester.

"But we're going to have trouble reaching the French lines if the Germans are permitted to camp out hereabouts," declared Hal.

"Well, maybe the French will chase them back again," said Chester, hopefully.

"Maybe," Hal repeated, "and then maybe not. Now, if we—hello!"

He broke off suddenly. From above there had come muttered exclamations of alarm, two bodies came hurtling through space and struck the bottom of the pit with loud thumps.

"Grab 'em, Hal!" shouted Chester, and leaped across the pit.

Hal followed suit, for the two bodies that had tumbled through space were nothing less than German soldiers who had failed to see the opening above.

They were taken by surprise when two forms leaped on them below, but they put

up a fight.

"Tap 'em over the head with your gun!" shouted Chester.

He had drawn his revolver as he leaped forward and now suited the action to the word. The German toppled over with a groan.

Hal, however, had not drawn his weapon, and was now locked in the arms of the second German, as they rolled over and over in the bottom of the pit. Weakened by his recent experience he was getting the worst of it.

Chester took in the situation at a glance and leaped forward. At the moment Hal was on top and the German stared up at Chester. Seeing a second foe he raised a loud cry for help.

This was what Chester had been afraid of. He didn't want any more Germans down there if he could help it.

"Turn him over, Hal!" he cried. "Let me get a whack at him with my gun."

By a desperate effort Hal obeyed and the German rolled on top of him. One more loud cry he gave and then Chester silenced him with a sharp blow of his revolver butt.

Chester stepped back with an exclamation of relief and Hal dragged himself from beneath his now unconscious adversary.

"A tough customer, that fellow," he remarked.

"You'd have done for him if you hadn't been so weak," Chester replied. "I didn't think we might have callers down here."

"Neither did I," returned Hal, "but I'm glad they came."

"Why?" demanded Chester in surprise.

"We can borrow their uniforms if it's necessary," Hal explained.

"By Jove! I hadn't thought of that," exclaimed Chester. "A good plan."

"Of course it may not be necessary," said Hal. "If the Germans should be driven

back it would be unnecessary. We'll wait until after dark and see."

"In the meantime we had better tie these fellows up," said Chester. "One of them is coming to now. He may not know when he's properly licked and want to continue the fight."

"Better gag 'em, too," said Hal. "I noticed that one fellow had pretty good lungs."

The lads removed their belts and with these bound the hands of their captives. They had nothing to tie their legs, but they didn't feel there was much danger of the men crawling out of the pit with their arms bound. They gagged them with their handkerchiefs.

A few moments later one of the Germans staggered to his feet and gazed at the two lads in astonishment. The second also soon regained consciousness and apparently was no less surprised. Both lads kept their revolvers handy, for they weren't sure whether the Germans might not attack them, bound and gagged as they were.

Hal addressed them.

"We expect to keep you company for some time," he said, "and we don't want any foolishness. The first false move will be your last. Get over there in the corner."

The men obeyed, growling to themselves.

Hal and Chester listened for sounds above that would indicate the retreat of the Germans and the advance of the French. No such sounds came; and with the fall of darkness Hal said:

"Well, I guess we had better change clothes with these fellows and make a break for it."

"Good!" agreed Chester. "We'll have to unbind them while they disrobe. We'll strip one at a time. You hold the gun while I do the work."

"Well, I guess everything is all ready," said Chester, when they were at last garbed in the German uniforms and the men were safely tied up again. "We may as well be moving."

"All right," said Hal, "climb up on my shoulders. I'll keep my gun on these two fellows in the meantime. Can't trust 'em."

Chester followed Hal's instructions and a moment later gazed out of the pit. Ahead he could see moving forms, but there was no one close to the pit.

"Coast clear," he called to Hal. "Here I go. Be ready when I reach down for you."

He pulled himself up.

CHAPTER XI

THROUGH THE LINES

"Ready, Hal?"

"All ready."

Hal stretched up his hands, and Chester, leaning far over the pit, seized them and pulled. Hal came slowly upwards.

Suddenly he gave a cry of pain and twisted and squirmed vigorously. Chester became alarmed.

"What's the matter?" he asked quickly.

"One of those fellows bit me in the leg!" exclaimed Hal.

It was true.

As Hal had soared upward, one of the Germans had sprung forward, and being unable to free his hands, had seized the fleshy part of Hal's leg between his teeth. Evidently the gag had not been properly adjusted.

"Kick him loose!" cried Chester.

Hal obeyed instructions. The German uttered a loud cry—another sign that the lads had gagged him too carelessly.

In kicking out at the German, Hal had used too much violence and had jerked loose from Chester's hold. Down into the pit he plunged again. Apparently believing that Hal had come back with the intention of silencing him forever, the ungagged German gave vent to a series of loud cries.

"Quick, Chester!" called Hal. "Pull me out of here before this fellow brings down the whole German army."

Chester leaned over and again seized Hal by the hands and pulled. Once more the German below sprang forward and attempted to sink his teeth in Hal's leg. Hal, realizing what the man was about, kicked out suddenly before the German could obtain his hold, and the lad's heavy shoe caught the man squarely in the mouth. One more cry the German gave and then toppled over.

"Quick Chester!" cried Hal, again.

With an effort Chester dragged Hal from the pit.

Hal stood up and both lads dusted the dirt from their clothes.

"Now the sooner we get away from this spot the better," said Chester.

They advanced directly west toward the extreme German front.

"We'll have to depend on boldness to take us through," said Hal. "It is unlikely that we shall be questioned until we reach the outposts and then we'll have to make a break for it."

"Suits me," said Chester.

They walked along leisurely, passing countless German soldiers standing about; but little attention was paid to them. Occasionally a man nodded to them and the lads returned the salutation.

Gradually they drew away from the main body of troops and neared the outposts. Here German troopers were engaged in throwing up breastworks against a possible attack by the French in the morning.

"Guess we won't have far to go if we can get beyond the outposts," muttered Hal. "These preparations indicate the Germans have just won this ground. The French can't be far away."

Chester nodded in token of assent, and at that moment they came up to the workers. Casually they stood and watched the German soldiers digging for a few moments; then wandered in among them, keeping close together.

"When I give the word!" whispered Hal.

Chester nodded.

"Now!"

Hal gave the word suddenly.

Immediately the two lads took to their heels.

For a moment the Germans were stunned by the very audacity of the two lads. Then entrenching tools dropped to the ground and the men seized their rifles and fired a volley after the two boys. But in the time it had taken them to lay aside their tools and pick up their weapons the lads had disappeared in the darkness and now hurled themselves to the ground, anticipating such a volley.

In the darkness the Germans could hope to hit them only by accident.

Springing to their feet again, the lads ran forward, bearing off slightly to the north, and soon felt they were safe.

They slowed down and approached the French lines cautiously. Presently they beheld the first French entrenchment. As they drew close a French soldier poked up his head and levelled a rifle at them.

"Halt!" he cried. "Who goes there?"

"Friends!" returned Hal.

"Advance friends," came the soldier's next words while he still held his rifle ready.

Hal and Chester advanced to the very edge of the trench. There the soldier took a good look at their faces and noticed the German uniforms. Up went his rifle again and he would have pulled the trigger with the gun aimed squarely at Hal had not Chester leaped quickly forward and struck up the weapon.

The two clinched.

"You fool!" cried Chester. "We are not Germans!"

Other soldiers now came running up. They gathered about the two figures in German uniforms. An officer approached. Fortunately, he recognized the two boys and waved the men away.

"These men are all right," he said.

The soldiers drew off, satisfied, all but the man who would have fired point blank at Hal. He stood there and eyed the lad sullenly. Then, for the first time, Hal obtained a good look at him. The lad recognized him instantly. He was the same man who had directed the hazing of young Jules Clemenceau a short time before.

As the Frenchman leered at him evilly, Hal walked close to him.

"It's my belief you knew me all the time," he declared quietly.

"What of it?" the Frenchman demanded.

"Why," said Hal, "only that if I were sure, I'd pull your nose for you."

"Ha!" exclaimed the Frenchman. "I'd like to see you try it. You caught me off my guard the other night. You can't do it again."

"I don't particularly care to do it," returned Hal, quietly, "because you're not worth it; but if I start I'll probably go through with it."

Again the Frenchman sneered at him.

Further conversation was prevented by the appearance of a French lieutenant who had observed the trouble.

"Matin!" he ordered. "Back to your post at once, sir."

The latter saluted respectfully enough, but he gave Hal another evil look as he walked away.

"He's no friend of yours, that's sure," said the young French officer to Hal, with a smile.

"I am glad to say he's not," replied Hal, quietly. "I don't believe I'd care for a

friend like that."

"I don't blame you," was the young officer's response. "Matin has a bad reputation and I would advise you to keep your eye on him."

"Thanks," said Hal. "I shall remember that. By the way, can you tell me just where we are?"

"Thiaumont farm," returned the French officer; "or, rather, I should say, just east of Thiaumont farm. You two fellows look somewhat done up. If you will go to the farm you will find a place to sleep in the farmhouse. By some trick of fate the house and barn still stand, although everything else in this vicinity has been knocked to pieces by the big guns."

"Thanks," said Hal, again. "We shall take your advice. We are pretty tired and a sleep will help out. It's too far back to our own quarters when there is a place to bunk so handy."

The two lads left the young officer and made their way to the farmhouse. Here they found a number of French officers already installed, but the latter gladly made room for them.

"No beds," said one with a laugh, "but there is plenty of room on the floor."

"I guess a bed would be too much to expect," said Chester, also laughing. "Besides, it's been so long since I slept in one I don't believe I could rest."

"The floor is plenty good enough for me," Hal agreed.

"Help yourselves then. You can pick out your own room."

"Guess we'll go upstairs then," said Hal. "It'll probably be more quiet up there. These fellows down here are having too much fun to care about sleep," and he waved his arm toward one corner of the room, where a group of young French officers were engaged in a game of cards.

The two boys made their way upstairs and found a room to their liking in the rear of the house. Here they stretched themselves out on the floor and were asleep immediately. There were no other occupants of the room.

Outside the moon was shining, and it cast a beam of light into the room where the two chums lay asleep. Several hours after the boys had closed their eyes in sleep, the figure of a man appeared in the window without. After some experimenting he opened the window softly and came in. He closed the window gently behind him.

Chester stirred in his sleep and the man shrank back against the wall in the darkness. For perhaps five minutes he remained there, and then, as there was no further move by the sleeper, he advanced into the center of the room. The light fell upon his face, and had the boys been awake, they would have recognized in the intruder, Matin, the man who had attempted to shoot Hal a short time before.

Matin approached the two sleepers quietly, seeking to make sure which was Hal. He examined each closely and then grinned as he stepped back a pace or two, apparently satisfied.

From the next room there came the sound of footsteps and again Matin shrank back against the wall. Directly the footsteps moved away and Matin drew a breath of relief.

From his pocket now he produced a knife, examined it carefully and grinned again. Looking carefully about to make sure that there was no one in the room to observe him, he stepped forward.

Had he turned his head at that moment he would have seen a second figure lowering itself just inside the room. But so intent was Matin upon the dark deed ahead of him that, after his one observation of the room, he did not look again.

The second figure was creeping after Matin now. He was not far behind, but still he was not close enough to touch the first intruder. Matin took two quick steps forward and raised his arm. Then he bent on one knee.

The arm flashed down!

CHAPTER XII

THE BATTLE OF THIAUMONT FARM

But the knife never reached its mark.

There came a sudden loud report, a flash of flame and the knife clattered to the floor. Matin reeled and fell backward, and as he did so the second intruder pounced upon him and pinned him down.

Hal arose to his feet slowly. In his hand he held a smoking revolver. Chester, awakened by the shot, leaped quickly to his feet and his revolver flashed in his hand.

"What's happened?" he exclaimed.

"My friend Matin here tried to do for me," said Hal, pointing. "I shot him."

Chester rushed to the side of the two figures across the room. Then, for the first time, the identity of the second figure was established. It was Jules Clemenceau.

Hal also approached and bent over. He took Jules by the arm.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I followed Matin," replied Jules, rising to his feet. "I saw you when you entered the trench from the German lines. After you had gone I heard Matin threaten to kill you. We were relieved at the same time, and suspecting that he might be up to some mischief, I followed him. I was too far behind to do any good. I was so frightened that I could not cry out."

"How did you happen to see him, Hal?" asked Chester.

"I don't know," was Hal's reply. "I was awakened just as Jules here came through the window. I was about to call out when I saw Matin coming toward me with drawn knife. I drew my revolver quietly and waited. I wanted him to get close enough so I would not miss. My arm was doubled under me and I wasn't certain at that distance."

"Is he dead?" asked Chester as Hal bent over the body.

"No," said Hal. "I didn't shoot to kill him. I shot him through the shoulder."

"Then he should regain consciousness pretty quick," declared Chester.

"Oh, he's conscious right now," said Hal. "He's just shamming a bit. Isn't that so, Matin?"

Matin sat up.

"What of it?" he demanded.

"Nothing," returned Hal, "except that the next time you come near me, except in the performance of duty, you will not get off so lightly."

"Are you going to let him go?" asked Jules, in surprise.

"What did you expect me to do with him?" demanded Hal.

"Shoot him again."

Hal was forced to smile at the grimness of the boy's tones.

"No," he said quietly, "I have done him injury enough for one time. Let him go."

"But he will try to kill you again!"

"If he does, he will wish he hadn't," was Hal's reply.

He turned and prodded Matin with the toe of his boot. "Get up and get out of here," he said sharply.

Cringingly, Matin obeyed. He slunk out of the room without a word.

"Now I can breath easier," declared Hal. "His presence contaminated the air."

"I am afraid you let him off too easily, Hal," said Chester. "You at least should report him and have him put in a safe place."

"I guess I am big enough to fight my own battles, Chester," said Hal.

"The French officers have enough to do without worrying about men like Martin. Besides, I don't really believe he will bother me again."

And so the subject was dismissed. Jules took his departure and Hal and Chester again lay down to sleep. Chester was just about to doze when a sudden thought struck him.

"I say, Hal," he called.

"What's the trouble now?"

"Do you suppose it could have been Martin who shot at you that night in our quarters?"

"I don't know. I hardly think so, though. I believe that gentleman called to pay his respects to Stubbs."

"But—"

"Come, Chester," said Hal, "it's getting late and I am going to get six good hours' sleep."

But Hal was mistaken. There was to be yet another interruption to the slumber of the two lads. It came suddenly and unexpectedly.

It was still an hour before dawn when the German artillery broke forth afresh, thousands of guns hurling death upon the sleeping French lines. The men were awake in an instant and rushed to their positions. Out of the first confusion order came promptly as officers issued sharp commands. Officers and men had the same thought. The heavy bombardment presaged a new German assault.

Hal and Chester had sprung from the floor at the sound of the first salvo. Rushing from the farmhouse, they watched the troops form and move forward. The defenders of the first line trenches already were engaged by the German

infantry when Hal and Chester reached the open, and reinforcements were being rushed forward as rapidly as possible.

Unassigned for the moment, Hal and Chester were undecided as to what to do. Chester settled the matter.

"We'll stay here," he decided. "There is no need of our going forward. We will only be in the way now. If we are needed, of course, it will be different."

Hal agreed with his chum and the two remained where they were.

The terrible thunder of the great guns ceased now and there broke out the crash of rifle fire. This told Hal and Chester that the German infantry was charging the trenches.

And this was indeed the case. In great waves of humanity the German assault poured on. Into the trenches the men threw themselves, dying by the hundreds; but there were always more to take their places. While the attack had not been exactly a surprise, the French nevertheless had been caught off their guard and the first advantage was with the Germans.

As wave after wave of humanity poured into the trenches, the French broke and fled. Toward Hal and Chester they came, making for the protection of the next line of entrenchments just beyond Thiaumont farm. Hal and Chester stepped within the farmhouse to watch the flight.

"We can't remain here long," Chester shouted to make himself heard above the din and crash of musketry.

Hal nodded his understanding and turned again to the window.

At that moment a body of French infantry, perhaps 200 strong, dashed directly for the farmhouse. Through the doors they poured and rushed to the windows and manned them.

Some rushed upstairs, under the direction of the single officer with them and others descended into the basement.

"By Jove! They are going to make a stand here!" cried Chester.

"Right!" Hal agreed. "Here is a chance for us to do some good. We'll offer our services to this officer."

The lads had discarded their German uniforms soon after their return to the French lines and were again attired in regulation French costume, with which they had been provided. They now approached the French officer who was busy directing the disposition of his men.

"We would be glad, sir," said Hal, "if you would put us to work."

The officer glanced at them keenly.

"Officers, I perceive," he said. "Your names, please?"

The boys gave them.

"Good," said the Frenchman. "Lieutenant Paine, you shall take charge of the second floor. Lieutenant Crawford, you will command in the basement. I have orders to hold this position, come what may."

"Very good, sir."

The two boys saluted.

"To your posts, then!"

Hal dashed upstairs and Chester descended quickly below.

Hal gazed quickly about the front room upstairs as he entered it. There were three windows. It was the only room facing east. There were two other rooms on the floor, and Hal quickly posted men at the windows of each.

In the basement Chester found that the only two windows fronted east. He had not much to guard. He gazed upon the men under his command and quickly selected five.

"The rest of you go upstairs," he commanded. "Six of us will be enough here. The hard fighting will be done above, if it is done at all."

The five men selected nodded their approval of the boys' understanding of the

situation. They could see he was young in years, but from the way in which he issued orders they realized that he was old in experience.

A moment later the French officer in command came downstairs. He approached Chester.

"In the excitement," he said, "I forgot to tell you my name. I am Captain Leroux. I came down to see if you are all ready."

"All ready, sir," said Chester, saluting.

"Good!" The officer took his departure.

On the first floor he attended to several important details in the matter of placing his men to best advantage and then ascended to where Hal was in command. He gave his name to the latter and commended the manner in which Hal had stationed his men.

"Very good, Lieutenant Paine," he said. "I see that I may depend upon you."

"And upon my friend below, sir," replied Hal; "and upon the men with me here."

The soldiers gave a cheer at these words and Hal knew that they would fight to the last.

Captain Leroux peered from the window.

"Not in sight yet," he muttered. He turned again to Hal. "Two hours, Lieutenant," he said.

"We'll hold 'em, sir," was Hal's quiet response. "We'll hold them if it can be done."

"My instructions," returned the captain, "are that they must be held."

"Very well, sir. Then they shall be held."

Hal saluted and turned to the window.

And now there hove into sight in the early morning light countless numbers of German infantrymen at a charge. They had discovered the fact that the French

held the farmhouse, and although their officers had no means of ascertaining the French strength at that point, they realized that it must be won before there could be a general advance. So they ordered the charge.

"Here they come, sir," said Hal, quietly.

Captain Leroux dashed down the stairs without making reply.

"Let them come close, men," ordered Hal, "and when I give the word let them have it for all you're worth. Make every shot count."

His words were greeted with a cheer. Each man was in position. Each man's finger was on the trigger. A moment of silence and then Hal ordered:

"Fire!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE FIGHT

The front of the farmhouse broke into a sheet of flame.

At almost the same moment, Captain Leroux on the floor below, and Chester in the basement, gave the command to fire and the first line of approaching Germans seemed to crumple up.

But the men behind came on.

Again and again effective volleys were fired from the farmhouse; but despite their heavy losses and urged on by commands of their officers, the Germans pressed forward until they were at the very side of the house.

As they approached they fired volley after volley at the windows behind which the defenders stood calmly; and the French had not gone unscathed.

In the basement, where Chester was in command, no German bullet had gone so far, but Hal had lost three men and Captain Leroux five. As quickly as these fell others took their places at the windows and continued to fire steadily into the German ranks.

Came a heavy battering at the front door. A force of Germans had reached this point in spite of the fire of the French and now were attempting to batter it down. Without exposing themselves too recklessly the French could not reach this party of Germans with rifle fire.

Captain Leroux quickly told off ten men to guard the entrance the moment the door should give beneath the kicks and blows of the enemy.

"Ten men should be as good as a hundred there," he explained. "Pick them off as

they rush through. Aim carefully and make every shot count."

He turned back to the work of directing the fire from the windows.

The battering at the door continued. One of the defenders, thinking to dispose of a member of the enemy in such close proximity, stuck his head out and brought his rifle to bear upon the foe in the doorway; but before he could accomplish his object he fell back inside with a groan. A German bullet had done its work.

"No more of that!" ordered Captain Leroux, sharply. "I need every man I have. No need to expose yourselves uselessly."

After that no French head appeared above the window sill farther than was necessary to aim and fire.

In the basement Chester and his men had had little to do so far. True, they had been able to pick off a German or two, but their position was such that they could be of little value at the moment. Their time was to come later.

On the top floor Hal, because of his position, was better able to command a view of the open field ahead than Captain Leroux in the room below. The fire of Hal's men, therefore, was more effective than of the French on the ground floor.

Below there was a crash as the door splintered beneath the battering tactics brought into play by the Germans who had gained the shelter of the house and were able to continue work without molestation. The ten Frenchmen told off by Captain Leroux to defend the entrance held their rifles ready, waiting for the first German head to appear in the opening.

But the door was of stout oak, and though it seemed on the point of giving under each succeeding blow, it still held. Hoarse guttural cries from without indicated that the Germans were becoming impatient to get at the French within. Came an extra violent crash and the door suddenly gave way. Three Germans, who had been leaning against the door, caught off their balance, were precipitated headlong into the room. It was unfortunate—for them.

Before they could scramble to their feet, the French had placed them beyond all hopes of further fighting. Their days of war were over.

But other Germans poured into the door behind them and leaped forward over

the prostrate forms of their comrades. Calmly, the ten French soldiers, far back against the wall and a little to one side, so as to be out of direct line of fire from the open doorway, fired into the surging mass of humanity. And their fire was deadly and effective. In almost less time than it takes to tell it the doorway was choked with German dead.

It was a gruesome sight and even the French soldiers, used as they were to such spectacles, shuddered inwardly. It seemed foolhardy for the enemy to seek entrance to the house through that blocked door. Even the Germans realized it and would have drawn back but for the fact that their officers, farther back, urged them on with cries and imprecations.

Again there was a concerted rush for the door.

The pile of prostrate German forms served as a shield for the defenders and behind this barrier of bodies the men took their posts and poured a withering fire into the ranks of the attackers. This deadly fire was more than the Germans could face, and in spite of the frantic efforts of their officers, they drew off.

"I didn't think they could make it," shouted Captain Leroux. "Good work, men!"

A cheer went up from the defenders. But the men knew the calibre of these German veterans and they realized that the attack had not been given up. They knew that the Germans, with their superior numbers, would not desist and that eventually they must be overwhelmed.

"Two hours!" Captain Leroux had said.

Hardly a quarter of that time had flown and in it had been crowded desperate work that well would have been enough for the day. The men were tired, but they were not willing to admit it. Each had told himself that he would die at his post rather than surrender.

There came a lull in the fighting.

To the war-seasoned veterans of France this lull told a story of its own. It presaged a new and more violent attempt on the part of the Germans to force the farmhouse. Captain Leroux knew it. So did Hal and Chester, and at their various stations they gave quick commands to their men.

Taking care not to expose himself too much, he gazed from the window. His action did not even bring a shot. This increased the lad's suspicions.

"Trying to draw us out," he muttered. "Want us to think they have given up the attempt. Never mind, Mr. German, you are not shrewd enough."

The defenders waited patiently; and presently the Germans again advanced to the attack, even as Hal and Chester had known they would.

Forward came the Teuton horde in a charge. From a distance of perhaps 500 yards, they dashed across the open at full speed, apparently bent upon overawing the defenders by the very appearance of such numbers.

But the French did not quail. The weight of numbers meant nothing to them. It was not the first time they had stood firmly against overwhelming odds, and there was not a man in the farmhouse who did not fully expect to survive the present battle and be ready to face overwhelming odds again. Each man knew well enough that before the fighting was over it was ten to one that there would be but a handful of the defenders left, but each man was confident he would be one of that number.

They poured a galling fire into the ranks of the Germans as they advanced to the charge.

The effect of this steady stream of rifle fire, accurate and deadly at such close range, was bound to tell. In spite of the urging of their officers, the Germans wavered. The lines behind the first surged forward, however, pushing the men in front closer to the deadly fire of the French. Those in front pushed back and for a moment there was wild confusion without.

In vain German officers rushed in among the troops, trying to rally them. It was too late. The Germans had become demoralized. A moment and they broke and fled. It was every man for himself.

The French within the farmhouse raised a wild cheer and poured volley after volley into the fleeing Germans. Men tumbled right and left. The German losses in the retreat were greater even than they had been in the advance.

Hal, who had been working like a Trojan, wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead with his shirt sleeve—the work had become so hot that the lad had

removed his coat, though it was still cold without—and spoke words of encouragement to his men.

"Good work, boys," he said quietly. "A few more like that and they will bother us no more."

Even as he spoke the lad knew that his words meant nothing. He knew the Germans would not give up until they had captured the farmhouse or had been driven back by the weight of superior numbers, and at that moment it did not appear that reinforcements would arrive.

The troops also knew that Hal's words meant nothing, but they cheered him anyhow. They realized that he had spoken as he did merely to encourage them; and they liked the spirit that inspired the words. They knew that Hal was fully competent of judging the hopelessness of the task ahead of them.

"The captain said to hold them two hours, sir," said one grizzled old veteran to Hal. "How long has it been now, sir?"

Hal glanced at his watch. "One hour exactly."

"Good!" exclaimed the French soldier. "One half of the work done and most of us are still here. We'll hold them!"

"Of course we'll hold them, Francois," exclaimed another. "Surely you didn't think we couldn't do it?"

"Well," was the reply. "It's a pretty big job and—"

"But we were ordered to hold them for two hours," protested the other.

"Of course," returned the man addressed as Francois. "That settles it. Two hours are two hours."

"Right," said the other. "Also two hours are only two hours, which makes it that much better."

"But at the end of two hours, then what?" asked a third soldier.

The man who had first engaged Francois in conversation shrugged his shoulders.

"That," he said, "is not for us to decide. But we will not be forgotten, you may be sure of that. Our general will see that we are relieved."

"You may rest assured on that score," Hal agreed. "Having picked you as the men to defend this important position, it is not to be expected that he will see you all sacrificed."

There was another cheer from the men, followed a moment later by a shout from one at the front window.

"Here they come again, sir!"

CHAPTER XIV

HAL LEADS A SORTIE

Hal sprang forward and gave a quick look at the enemy.

Apparently, the assault was to be made on the same plan as before. After the last retreat of the enemy, their officers had succeeded in re-forming them beyond the zone of French fire and now were about to hurl the troops forward in another grand offensive against the farmhouse. The Germans moved forward silently and doggedly.

"It'll be a little warmer this time," Hal muttered to himself.

And the lad was right.

Straight on came the Germans at the charge in spite of the withering fire poured in among them by the French; straight up to the side of the house they rushed, though there were many men who did not get that far; and then the German troops deployed.

While perhaps a hundred men remained at the front of the house, apparently to seek entrance through the doorway blocked with their own dead, the others divided and dashed round the house, some to the right and some to the left.

Now, for the first time, French troops who had not been posted at the front windows came into action.

As the Germans rushed around the house, these French troops leaned from their windows on the side of the house and poured volley after volley into the German ranks. They were almost directly above the Germans and the latter were at a great disadvantage; for they could not return the fire of the French without

pausing in their mad rush; and when they did pause and bring their rifles to bear upon the windows above, there were no French heads to be seen there.

But when they dashed on again, the French heads reappeared and again the Germans fell in large numbers.

But the losses of the French by this time, in spite of the comparative safety afforded by their position, had been extremely heavy, considering the size of the original force. Chester, in the basement, still had suffered no casualties, but fully a third of the men on the two floors above had been killed or wounded.

And there had been no time to care for these wounded, except for the brief respites occasioned by the retreat of the Germans. Now that the fighting was on again the wounded were left to shift for themselves; and the air was filled with moans and groans.

The Germans in front of the house again had tried in vain to force a passage of the doorway, choked with their own dead and dying. This had failed, for the French, under the direction of Captain Leroux, had poured in such a galling fire that the Germans dropped as fast as they appeared in the doorway.

From above, the defenders at the front of the house, also, had done heavy execution among the enemy below. Again the Germans wavered; then retreated; and the French mowed them down as they ran.

Suddenly Hal bethought himself of a daring plan. Dashing down stairs he confided it to Captain Leroux. The latter clapped his hands in approval.

"You shall direct the move," he exclaimed. "I'll take your post and see that the Germans in front continue to fall back; also I shall be able to cover you to some extent."

He ran quickly upstairs.

Quickly Hal picked fifty men.

"Clear away those bodies," he said, pointing to the German dead that blocked the doorway.

It was the work of but a few minutes.

"Now," said Hal, "when we go out the door, I want half of you to go around the house to the left. The others follow me."

He divided the men into two squads.

"We'll catch the fellows who got behind us by surprise," the lad explained. "They are still engaged with the men at the windows above. We can't afford to be surrounded. We must drive them off."

Silently, the men filed from the house.

The strategy of Hal's plan was at once apparent. The Germans who had circled the house, after dividing after the grand assault, still were unaware of the retreat of their fellows. They did not know that this support had been lost to them. Therefore, they were sure to be at a great disadvantage when attacked from a position that they believed to be held by their comrades.

Above, the defenders still continued to fire rapidly, seeking to keep up the delusion.

There was only one thing that worried Hal—one thing that he felt possibly might bring disaster following his surprise attack. He knew that the Germans who had recently retreated from before the farmhouse would understand his plan the minute he led his men from the farmhouse. This would mean another grand assault. The question in Hal's mind was whether he could get his men back inside the house before the main force of the enemy could advance and cut him off.

But he was depending upon the French still within the house to hold the foe off until he could get back.

As the French dashed suddenly around the house, there came a wild cry from the distant German lines to the east. The ruse had been discovered and Hal realized that the bulk of the enemy would be upon them before long. Therefore, he knew he must hurry.

"Quick!" he cried to his men.

The latter needed no urging.

Swiftly they dashed around the house in either direction and fell upon the Germans, who had sought shelter at the far side, with their bayonets. The enemy, taken completely by surprise, uttered cries of consternation and sought to retreat; for their officers had no means of telling the numbers of these new foes.

But the French pressed them closely. Although the Germans were taken at a great disadvantage because of the suddenness of the attack, they, nevertheless fought bravely.

No quarter was asked.

For safety's sake the enemy pressed close to the French, engaging them hand-to-hand. In this was their only hope of success, for every time a man strayed from the struggling mass, a keen-eyed French soldier above dropped him with a rifle bullet.

But the struggle could have only one end. Bewildered by the sudden appearance of the French, the Germans never gained time to recover themselves. The French pushed the fighting; and soon it was all over.

There remained now only half a score of Germans standing.

"Surrender!" called Hal.

With the exception of one, the men threw down their weapons. The exception was a German officer, who evidently had been in command. He sprang toward Hal with a cry and thrust with his sword.

The move had been so unexpected that the lad was caught completely off his guard and the sword must have pierced him had it not been for the quickness of a French soldier who stood near. Without taking thought to his own danger, this man sprang forward and grappled with the German.

The latter hurled the French soldier from him with a sudden powerful move and again advanced on Hal. But now the lad was ready for him and his sword met the sword of the German officer neatly.

In vain the German officer sought to break down Hal's guard. Hal foiled him at every turn. The German was furiously angry, but Hal was smiling easily. The lad realized that he probably owed his life to the German's anger, for at the first

touch of swords the lad had realized that the German was clearly his master. Therefore, the lad jeered at the officer as he fought.

Hal became more certain of the outcome of the duel as it continued, for with every thrust and parry the German became more and more angry because he could not overcome this boy. Perspiration rolled down his face and he panted with rage.

"I'll get you!" he cried.

"Oh, not for some time yet," Hal grinned back at him.

The German swore.

"Now! Now!" said Hal. "That's no way for a nice German officer to do. What would the emperor say?"

The duel was interrupted at this point by a sudden cry from the farmhouse.

"Never mind him, Lieutenant! Back into the house quickly!"

It was the voice of Captain Leroux and the tone told Hal how urgent was the call. Taking a quick step forward, he caused the German officer to retreat a few paces. Then Hal lowered his sword, and calling to his men to follow him, dashed toward the front of the house.

Behind, the German officer broke into a torrent of abuse and would have continued it had not a French soldier, who cared nothing for the etiquette of duelling, put an end to him with a rifle bullet.

To the half score of men who had thrown down their arms, Hal cried:

"Back to your own lines quickly or you shall be shot down! No," pausing and levelling his revolver as one of the Germans sought to stoop and pick up his discarded rifle, "never mind the gun. Another move like that and you'll all be shot down. Move, now!"

The Germans wasted no further time and made for the shelter of their own lines at top speed.

And their own lines were advancing rapidly to meet them.

"Quick, men!" cried Hal. "Into the house!"

They had now reached the front door again and Hal stood to one side that his men might enter first.

Above, the fire of the defenders had broken out afresh, but the Germans rushed forward in spite of it. Bullets hummed close about Hal's head as he stood beside the doorway, but none struck him; and at last all the men were inside.

Hal went in after them.

From without came a cry of rage as the advancing Germans realized that, for the moment, at least, they had been deprived of their prey.

"Guard the door there, men!" shouted Hal. "Get back and to one side out of the line of fire. Save your bullets until they cross the threshold, then shoot them down."

The men moved into position. Hal glanced quickly around to make sure that all was in readiness and at that moment Captain Leroux descended the stairs.

"Good work, Mr. Paine," he said quietly. "If I live, I shall report this piece of work. I will take command here now. Return to your post above."

Hal saluted and did as commanded.

Hardly had he reached position above when he heard Captain Leroux below give the command:

"Fire!"

CHAPTER XV

LEFT BEHIND

The Germans had drawn off again.

The last assault had met with no better success than had the attacks that had gone before. True, the defenders had suffered considerably, for the German fire had been accurate; but the losses of the French had been as nothing compared with those of the Teutons.

This last assault had been more severe than the others. The Germans had shown even greater tenacity and courage than before. In vain had their officers sought to hold them to the attack. Once, twice, thrice had the human sea surged against the farmhouse, only to be thrown back; so at last the Germans had withdrawn.

Dead and wounded men strewed the floor. There were still some who had not been touched by the bullets of the foe, but the majority of the defenders of the top floor lay prone.

Hal shook his head sadly.

"Don't believe we can withstand another such charge," he said aloud.

"How long yet, sir?" asked the grizzled old veteran, Francois, who, though he had kept his place at the window through the last attack, had escaped the German bullets.

Again Hal gazed closely at his watch.

"Twelve minutes to go," he said quietly.

The face of Francois brightened.

"Then we are all right, sir," he said. "They will hardly attack again in that time, sir."

Hal shook his head.

"They are likely to attack at any moment," he replied slowly. "Besides, if we do succeed in beating them off once more, there is nothing to assure us that we will be relieved then."

"Nothing sir," returned Francois, "except Captain Leroux's word that we have only to hold this house two hours, sir."

"True," said Hal, brightening visibly. "I shouldn't have spoken as I did. We must trust to the others, and if they fail, why, we'll know it is not their fault."

"Right, sir," said Francois. "If they fail, it will not be their fault."

He returned to his place at the window.

On the floor below Captain Leroux also had taken account of his casualties. Merely a handful of men remained unwounded. Some of the men who had felt the effects of the German fire were still in condition to continue the fight should their services be necessary, but their number was few.

The captain shook his head dubiously as he glanced at his watch.

"Ten minutes," he muttered. "Well, we'll hold it that long, but afterwards I can't be held accountable, there will be none of us left."

In the basement Chester and his five men still were unmarked. Though they had stood at the small windows and fired at whatever German forms came within view, they had had little work to do, the men were beginning to murmur among themselves.

"We're not needed down here," said one. "We should be upstairs where the fighting is being done. No Germans will seek to come in here."

"That's right," said another, "we might do some good above. Here we are doing nothing at all. Why, we have hardly seen a German. I don't believe any of the enemy have spotted this opening yet, either."

"Nor I; wish they had let me stay upstairs."

"What's all this?" demanded Chester, suddenly. "You men have been in the ranks long enough to know better than to question your officers' orders. You have been posted here and here you shall remain until I get orders to the contrary."

"But, sir," said one of the men, "we would like—"

"Silence!" said Chester. "Back to your places."

The men obeyed, though they continued to murmur. Chester softened a few minutes later and again addressed his men.

"I have no doubt you fellows will have all the fighting you want before this thing is over," he said quietly. "As nearly as I can make out from here the men upstairs must be about done for. I question whether they will be able to beat off another attack."

"And are the two hours up, sir," asked one of the men.

Chester glanced at his watch.

"Not quite," he returned.

"How much to go, sir?"

"A little more than five minutes."

The man's face darkened.

"And we'll be relieved at the end of that time without having done any fighting," he said. "Here we sit down here in the dark and the other fellows have all the fun."

"You're liable to get yours yet," said Chester. "If I mistake not, the Germans are returning to the attack. I hear the sounds of firing from above."

Chester was right. The Germans again had advanced to the charge.

Above, Hal and Captain Leroux were issuing orders to their men for what each believed would be the final effort. Should this attack be repulsed, both had some

slight hopes that they would not be compelled to face another—that French reinforcements would arrive before the Germans could advance again. But, also, neither was sure in his own mind that the approaching attack of the foe could be beaten off.

And this time the Germans seemed to be advancing in even greater numbers than before.

"Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!" came the spatter of German bullets against the side of the house; and occasionally a bullet struck home and left no sound, unless it was the sound of a man toppling over backwards to the floor, or a man as he clapped his hand to his head. The rifle bombardment was having its effect.

The sharp crack of French rifles answered the challenge of the Germans, though, because of the fact that the ranks of the defenders had been sadly depleted, their weapons spoke not so often. But when they did speak, men fell; for, at this crucial stage of the battle, they were making every shot count.

But this time, it seemed, the Germans were not to be denied. Men as well as officers understood the slowness of the French fire. The Germans were flushed with the spirit of victory, despite the fact that the field on all sides of the farmhouse was covered with their own dead and dying. The German soldiers realized, as did their officers, that the end of the courageous defense was near. Another effort and the farmhouse would be theirs.

For some reason, in spite of the fact that the German troops appeared to be making fair progress, their advance was suddenly stayed. At some distance they halted and continued to pepper the house with rifle bullets, doing little damage at that distance.

Horses dashed suddenly into view, dragging behind them a rapid-fire gun.

Hal guessed the answer.

"That's to mow us down when we try to run," he told himself. "Well—"

He broke off and shrugged his shoulders.

Now the Germans came on again, the rapid-fire gun covering their advance. A

moment later the side of the farmhouse resembled a sieve, it was so full of holes. For a man to stick his head out the window meant instant death.

But as the Germans drew closer, the rapid firer became silent, for, without risking the lives of Germans as well as French, it was of no value now. At the same moment the heads of the defenders again appeared at the windows and renewed the work of picking off the Germans as they charged.

For some reason Hal took the time to glance at his watch once more.

"Time's up!" he told himself gravely, "and no help in sight."

But the lad was wrong; for, could he have looked from the rear of the house at that moment, he would have seen advancing several columns of French cavalry, coming to their relief.

The Germans saw the approach of reinforcements and redoubled their efforts to gain the farmhouse before the reinforcements could arrive. But it was too late. With wild cries, the French cavalymen swept down and about the house. Cheers from the defenders greeted them. The men left their places at the windows and ran from the house. Hurriedly the wounded were carried out and the retreat begun.

And at that moment the Germans, also reinforced, charged again. Greatly outnumbered the French retreated, firing as they went.

Then, for the first time, Hal noticed Chester's absence.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed to Captain Leroux, "we have come away without notifying the men in the basement."

Quickly the two made their way to the French commander and laid the situation before him. The latter shook his head sadly.

"It's too late now," he said quietly. "Look at the number of the foe. We could not make headway against them."

He was deaf to all Hal's entreaties that he make the effort.

In the basement, Chester and his five men had been unable to ascertain the cause

of the increased firing at one moment and the lull a moment later. Chester had about decided that the defenders had given up and that he and his men in the cellar were all that remained.

From his window he could see the Germans only when they came into a certain position; and what went on above he had no means of telling. But that the others would go and leave him and his men behind had not entered his head. Therefore, he decided to remain quiet with his men.

But when an hour had passed and there came no more sounds of firing from above, Chester decided it was time to investigate. Accordingly, he ascended the steps quietly.

There was no one above. The lad gazed about quickly. Except for the dead, there was no Frenchman in the house. Bloodstains on the floor showed that the wounded had been removed.

Then Chester realized what had happened.

Quickly he ran to the door and peered out. Far in the rear he could see the French retreating, pursued by the foe. Chester uttered an exclamation of dismay and called to his men. He explained the situation to them. All were dumbfounded.

At that moment Chester espied an object a short distance from the farmhouse. There was no living form near. With a sudden cry of hope, Chester dashed from the house.

"Come on, men!" he called over his shoulder.

CHAPTER XVI

CHESTER'S GALLANT FEAT

The object upon which Chester's eyes had fallen and which was the cause of the sudden activity on the lad's part was nothing less than the rapid-fire gun the Germans so recently had brought up to bombard the farmhouse and cut off the retreat of its French defenders. Its crew had been killed, picked off by the accurate shooting of the French before they abandoned the house, and the gun had not been remanned. Apparently the Germans had overlooked the small field piece in their haste to give chase to the retreating French.

The horses were standing a short distance away, unhurt, as Chester could see. The lad dashed toward the gun at top speed, his five men following him as fast as they could run.

There was a light of anticipation on Chester's face as he reached the gun and examined it carefully.

"Plenty of ammunition," he said with a grin, as his men came up to him.

The others grinned also.

"What are you going to do with it, sir?" asked one.

Chester waved his arm in the direction of the retreating French and pursuing Germans.

"Give those fellows a little surprise party when they turn back," he said.

The men caught the idea and were immediately filled with enthusiasm.

"We'd better get away from here before we're discovered, though," said

Chester. "Catch those horses, some of you."

This was an easy matter, for the horses stood still as two of the French soldiers approached them.

"Hook 'em up," cried Chester.

This, too, was the work of a moment.

"I'll do the driving," said Chester. "You fellows climb aboard."

The others needed no urging and a moment later this strange battery moved toward the French lines at a gallop.

The Germans in pursuit of the French were still in plain view and Chester intended to keep close behind. He reasoned that the distance was too great for the Germans to make out the uniforms of the men on the gun and he intended to turn off the roadway at the first sign that the Germans were ready to give up the chase.

Along the road ran a fringe of trees, sparse in some places and thicker in others. It was Chester's plan to wheel the gun in among the trees at the proper moment and open on the foe when they came back.

And the plan was to be put in execution sooner than the lad had hoped for.

Chester saw the Germans slow down. Then they turned and came toward him. The lad could not make out at once the cause of their sudden decision to retreat, but it came to him a moment later with the sound of heavy rifle firing. Apparently, French infantry had advanced to the support of the cavalry and the Germans were not strong enough in numbers to contest effectively.

Immediately, Chester swung the horses to the right in among the trees, which, fortunately, happened to be dense at this particular point.

"Guess we'll give 'em a little surprise," said Chester, with a grin.

Dismounting, he motioned the men to unhitch the horses, which was done. Then the gun was whirled into position where it commanded the roadway.

"We're ready for them," said Chester, quietly.

The Germans drew on apace. Suddenly a thought struck Chester.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "I can't shoot them down in cold blood, I'll have to give them a chance. Here!" he motioned to one of his men and the latter approached. "Take this gun," the lad commanded. "I'm going to give these fellows a chance to surrender. If they refuse I'll duck back here and you let them have it. I'll keep out of range, but don't turn this gun until I get back. Understand?"

The man signified that he did.

Chester walked some distance back to where the road curved a bit. He was out of the direct line of fire, but still in such position to make his demand for the surrender of the Germans without allowing them to pass the sweep of the rapid-firer.

With the Germans still some distance down the road, Chester stepped directly into the highway and raised a hand.

The leading Germans pulled up and an officer demanded:

"What's the matter?"

"Surrender!" exclaimed Chester, "or you shall all be killed."

The German officer gave a great laugh.

"Hear the boy talk," he exclaimed. "He asks us to surrender when we have just chased all the French back to their own lines."

There was a roar of laughter from the troop.

"Surrender!" called Chester again.

Again there was a laugh and the German officer called:

"Throw up your hands, boy, or you shall be shot!"

"Well," said Chester, "I've done all I can. I've warned you. Your blood be upon

your own heads."

With a sudden leap he disappeared among the trees. With a fierce cry, the German officer made after him, firing as he did so.

At the same moment there was a crash as of a thousand rifles. Germans fell from their saddles like chaff before a storm. Horses reared, screamed, stampeded and fell down dead, crushing their riders beneath them.

By this time Chester had returned to his men and took charge of the rapid-fire gun himself. He turned it this way and that, sweeping the roadway clear, where the foe was in range.

And from far behind the German line at this moment broke out the crack of rifles. The French infantry had advanced in pursuit of the Germans, a squadron of cavalry showing the way.

The Germans were caught between two fires.

Unable to estimate the number of men in the force that had ambushed them, the Germans threw down their arms.

"We surrender!" cried a German officer.

Instantly the fire of the machine gun ceased and Chester advanced to the road again. The same German officer who, a moment ago, had scorned the lad's warning, now advanced and tendered his sword to Chester.

"Tell your men to throw down their arms," commanded Chester.

The officer did so, and swords and pistols rattled to the ground.

"Now," said Chester, "you will about face and march toward the French lines. There must be no foolishness. My army here is rather small, but we still have the rapid-fire gun and it will be trained upon you until you are safe."

The lad signalled to his men, who had already hitched up the horses, and these now advanced.

"What!" exclaimed the German officer, when he had taken a glance at

Chester's "army," "are these all the men you had when you attacked us?"

"They seemed to be enough," said Chester, with a smile.

"No wonder we haven't beaten you a long while ago," the German officer mumbled to himself. "When five men and one a boy perform a feat like this, I begin to have my doubts as to the outcome of this war."

"Well," said Chester, "I don't have any such doubts. But come, now; forward march."

Slowly the German troopers marched ahead, Chester and his machine gun bringing up the rear.

And in this manner they came directly upon the French cavalry and infantry advancing in pursuit of the Germans.

Great were the exclamations among the French troops when it was found that five men and a young officer had made such an important capture, to say nothing of the terrible execution inflicted upon the enemy with their own rapid-fire gun. The French officers were loud in the praises of Chester's gallantry.

And with the troop of French cavalry Chester found Hal and Captain Leroux.

"By Jove! I'm glad to see you, Chester," said Hal, advancing with outstretched hand. "I was afraid we wouldn't get back in time."

"I guess you wouldn't have, if we had waited for you," said Chester, dryly. "I wasn't going to take any more chances if I could help it. When you left us there by ourselves, I was sure if we wanted to come away, we'd have to do it by ourselves."

"We didn't do it intentionally," said Captain Leroux.

"Who said you did?" demanded Chester, somewhat angrily.

The French captain flushed. He drew himself up, seemed about to make an angry reply; then cooled down and said:

"I'm sorry."

With that he walked away.

"Look here, Chester," said Hal, "you know that I wouldn't have left you behind for anything if I had only thought of it. But in the excitement and—"

"That's it," said Chester. "There was too much excitement and you were having it all. I get buried down in a cellar with five men and sit there in the dark till the fun's all over. Then you don't even take the trouble to tell me it's time to go home. I don't like it."

"Great Scott! You're not mad, are you, Chester?"

"Mad? Sure I'm mad. Next time you get in a hole I'm going to walk away and leave you there."

Hal smiled.

"Oh, I guess not," he returned.

"You do, eh? Well, you try it and see what happens."

"Come, now, Chester, you know how this thing happened," said Hal. "We didn't do it purposely."

Chester seemed about to make an angry retort; but a moment later a smile broke over his face and he extended a hand to his chum.

"I know you didn't," he replied, "but can't a fellow have a little fun?"

Hal took the hand as he exclaimed:

"You've offended Captain Leroux."

"Well," said Chester, "Captain Leroux has offended me."

CHAPTER XVII

A QUEER SITUATION

"Somebody following us, Hal!"

"That so?" said Hal; "and why should we be followed along here?"

"I don't know," was Chester's reply, "but I have noticed a shadow following us wherever we go."

"We'll see about it," was Hal's rejoinder.

It was the night succeeding the day on which the lads had taken part in the defense of Thiaumont farmhouse. They had returned to their quarters late in the day, had reported to General Petain and had been relieved of duty until the following morning. It was now after 8 o'clock and they were strolling about the camp.

They had made their way well back into the heart of the armed settlement when Chester had made the announcement that they were being followed.

With Hal to reach a decision was to act. Chester let his friend do the leading in this instance.

Hal quickened his steps and walked quickly down the row of tents, which, well back of the trenches, were laid out in the form of streets, and which, in fact, were called streets by the soldiers themselves. Chester followed.

At the first cross street, for so they may be called, Hal led the way sharply to the left and stopped suddenly. A moment later a figure came slinking around after them. Hal reached out an arm and grabbed him.

"Here," he said, "what are you following us for?"

The man tried to free himself, but Hal held him tight.

"If you'll let me loose, I'll explain," he said finally.

Hal considered this a moment; then with a shrug of his shoulders released his hold.

"Stand behind him, Chester," he said.

Chester followed Hal's injunction, but the man made no effort to escape.

"Well?" said Hal, questioningly.

The man thrust a hand into his pocket.

"Hold on there!" cried Hal, sharply, producing his revolver. "No tricks now."

The man smiled and withdrew his hand from his pocket.

"I wasn't after a gun," he said.

He opened his hand and in the palm Hal saw a little round object.

"Can you match that?" the man demanded.

Hal peered closer and made out the nature of the object in the man's hand.

"A black pea!" he exclaimed. "Yes, I can match it."

He thrust a hand in his pocket and produced a black pea, which not many days before had rolled from the pocket of Jules Clemenceau.

The stranger looked at it closely.

"All right," he said. He turned to Chester. "And you?" he demanded.

Chester's reply was to produce his black pea, which he exhibited to the man.

"Good!" said the stranger. "Follow me."

"Follow you where?" Chester wanted to know.

"Yes; what's all this funny business, anyhow?" demanded Hal.

The man smiled enigmatically.

"Best to be careful," he said. "Come on."

Chester looked at Hal and the latter nodded.

"Might as well see what it's all about," said the latter.

They fell into step behind the stranger.

With many turns and twists the man walked for perhaps half an hour. Apparently he was bent on beclouding the lads' sense of direction.

"I say!" Hal called a halt finally. "Where are you taking us?"

"It's not much farther," the man protested, "and I have been instructed to bring you."

"Instructed to bring us?" echoed Chester, "and by whom?"

"You'll learn that later," was the stranger's response. "Are you coming?"

Again Hal and Chester exchanged glances. The latter shrugged.

"We've started; may as well see it through," he said.

"All right," Hal agreed and turned to the stranger, "but cut out all this winding about," he demanded. "There is a quicker way of reaching our destination, wherever it may be."

The stranger smiled, but made no reply. He moved off and the boys followed him, and at last they came to their journey's end.

Before an army tent the man stopped a few moments later.

"In here," he said.

He entered and Hal and Chester paused long enough to look at each other.

"I guess it's all right," said Hal. "Can't much happen right in the heart of the camp. Come on."

He entered the tent with Chester close behind him.

Within powerful arms seized them and dragged them down; and before they could cry out gags were stuffed in their mouths. In vain the lads struggled to free themselves. They were soon safely bound.

Up to this time the tent had been in darkness, but now someone struck a light. Hal and Chester gazed at their captors. All were attired in regulation army uniforms, but their faces were masked. One man, who seemed to be the leader, was short and chunky. The others were taller. The small man approached the lads and spoke.

"If you will give me your words to make no outcry, I shall have the gags removed," he said in a shrill, quavering voice, plainly disguised.

Hal considered this point a moment; then nodded his head in token of assent. Chester did likewise.

"All right," said the little man and beckoned the others to remove the gags.

Their mouths free of the evil-tasting cloths, Hal and Chester breathed easier.

"Now," said Chester, "perhaps you will explain what this is all about."

The little man shook his head.

"No," he replied, "all I can tell you is this! You shall be kept confined here until your removal to Paris can be arranged. Then you will be sent to London and put aboard a vessel for New York. That's all I can say."

"But what for?" demanded Hal, angrily.

"That you will not be told," was the reply, "although I guess you don't need to be told."

"By George!" exclaimed Chester, "I don't know what you are talking about, but you can take my word that somebody is going to suffer for this night's work. How long do you intend to hold us here?"

"I can't say. Possibly a day or two; at all events, until your removal can be arranged."

"Do you know who we are?" demanded Hal.

The little man nodded.

"Perfectly," he replied.

"You know that we are attached to the staff of General Petain?"

Again their captor nodded.

"And still you've got the nerve to hold us here?"

"Yes, I've got the nerve."

"Don't you know you shall suffer for this?"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"At least I shall have done my duty," he replied.

"Duty! Great Scott! Duty! What are you talking about?" demanded Hal, angrily.
"Are you a German sympathizer?"

"No, my sympathies are French," was the reply.

"Well, if you call this doing your duty," said Chester, sarcastically, "let's hope you don't have too many duties to perform in the service of France. For if you do, the Germans certainly will win."

"Well," said their captor, "I guess I shall have to leave you now. I must make my report."

"Who are you going to report to?" demanded Hal, suddenly, thinking to take the man off his guard.

The latter only grinned.

"I'm too old a bird for that trick," he said, showing that he understood what had been in Hal's mind. "I'm going to report to the proper person."

"Improper person, I guess you mean," Chester growled.

"At any rate, I must report," said their captor. "Now if you'll promise to make no outcry while I'm gone, I will not have the gags replaced in your mouths. Otherwise, I am afraid—"

He closed with a shrug of the shoulders.

"You put one of those things in my mouth again, and I'll make you eat it—some day," said Chester.

"Not for some time to come, I'm afraid," was the little man's rejoinder. "I believe I can guarantee you will be kept out of mischief for the duration of the war."

Hal had been gazing at the little man closely.

"Seems to me," he said at last, "that I have seen you some place before. There is something familiar about you."

"You've probably seen me," was the reply. "I've been around here for some time."

Chester was now struck with a sudden thought.

"Is Martin mixed up in this thing?" he demanded, believing that, after all, the capture might have been concocted by the French soldier who had sought to kill Hal.

"Matin? Who is Matin?" asked their captor.

Chester explained.

"No, he has nothing to do with it," was the reply.

"Then, in the name of the Great Czar, what's it all about?"

"I can't tell you," was the firm reply.

Chester groaned.

"Of all the fool predicaments," he said, "this is the worst."

The little man had now moved toward the door of the tent.

"I go now," he said, "to make my report. Pleasant dreams to you."

"Hold on a minute," shouted Hal.

"No; I think I had better go. Good-bye, boys!"

There was such a familiar ring to these words that Hal was struck with a great light. He uttered a loud exclamation, so loud, in fact, that the little man came running back in the tent.

Even Chester was surprised—but for a moment only—for the words that escaped Hal were these:

"By all that's holy! If it isn't Stubbs!"

CHAPTER XVIII

STUBBS REFUSES TO EXPLAIN

With two bounds the little man covered the distance to Hal's side and bent over. Quickly he placed a hand across Hal's mouth and whispered:

"Sh-h-h. Not so loud!"

Hal shook his head free—his hands were tied—and exclaimed:

"So! This is the thanks we get from you, eh! Why, you little fat—"

"Names won't help any," said Anthony Stubbs, quietly. "I've got you here and, as I told you, here you are going to stay until I arrange for your transportation back to the good old town where stands the *Gazette*."

"New York, eh?" said Chester. "But why, Stubbs, that's what I want to know. Come on, be a good fellow and tell us what this is all about."

"If I wasn't so sure you know, I might be tempted to do so," said Stubbs.

"But you do know and there is no need to ask me again. I refuse."

"But I tell you, Stubbs, we don't know," declared Hal. "What's gone wrong with you? Are you in the employ of the Kaiser?"

"Not by a long shot," was the answer. "That's one reason I want to get you away from here. I want to see the Kaiser licked properly."

"You don't mean to insinuate—"

"That you are aiding the Kaiser?" Stubbs broke in. "I guess not. But you know as well as I do that with you here something is sure to go wrong. No sir. You've got

to go back to the old U.S.A. and you're going to go if it lies in my power to get you there."

"By Jove!" said Chester, suddenly. "I know the answer."

"Well, you're a good guesser if you do," said Hal, dryly. "Let's hear it."

"Uncle John is the answer," declared Chester. "In some manner he has learned we are here; he has come up from Italy and bribed Stubbs to get us sent home."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Hal. "Is that it, Stubbs?"

Stubbs grinned at them.

"Come," he said, "I'm too old to be fooled with such innocence as that. You know what you're here for and that's all there is about it. Now I'm going to arrange for your removal."

"Stubbs," said Hal, quietly, "I wonder if you could guess what I think of you?"

"I'm afraid I could," returned the little man seriously. "But now let me ask you something. Do you remember, not so many nights ago, that I told you both that if ever you found me doing something you didn't approve of, I would be doing it for your own good—because I am fond of you? Do you remember that?"

"You bet I remember it," declared Hal; "and all I've got to say is that if you call this thing for our own good you're mightily mistaken. If we don't report to General Petain to-morrow morning we're likely to be court martialed."

"Oh, no, you're not," said Stubbs.

"Oh, yes we are."

"I say you're not."

"Say," said Hal, "you talk like you knew something about it."

"I do," returned Stubbs.

"Well, Stubbs," interposed Chester, "if you are bent on showing your fondness for us in this manner all right; but I want to say that, for my part, you can take all

your affection and go hang with it."

"Same here," growled Hal.

"I'm sorry you feel that way about it, boys," said Stubbs, seriously, "but I know that some time you will forgive me. Of course, you are angry now because I have spoiled your plans, but some time you will overlook it."

"But where do you come in for all this fairy godfather stuff, Stubbs?" demanded Chester. "What iron have you in the fire? You've got some reason besides just trying to keep us out of trouble, now haven't you?"

"Why, yes, I have," was Stubbs' quiet reply.

"I thought so. Would you mind telling me what it is?"

"I've already told you. I want to see the Kaiser properly licked."

Chester was about to make an angry retort; then changed his mind and gave a snort of pure disgust.

"Stubbs," said Hal, "I know what it's all about. If I ask you a question will you answer it?"

"Depends on the question," was the reply. "Let's hear it."

"Well, here it is, and I think it's the answer to the whole thing: Are you crazy?"

Stubbs gave a snort.

"Crazy!" he shouted. "No, I'm not crazy! Who says I'm crazy?"

"I do, Stubbs," declared Hal.

"And I agree with him," exclaimed Chester.

The little war correspondent became suddenly very angry. He stamped up and down the tent muttering to himself. Then he whirled on the lads.

"You make me tired!" he exclaimed. "Here I've gone and got myself in a mess just to keep you two out of trouble and what thanks do I get for it?"

You say I'm crazy! Why, you ought to bow down and thank me for doing what I am doing. You both make me sick."

"Well, we're not going to do any bowing down to you, Stubbs," said Hal; "but there is one thing I'll promise you."

"What's that?" demanded Stubbs, eagerly.

"That, Mr. Stubbs," said Hal, "is a good first-class thrashing when I get hold of you again."

"Guess we had better make it two," declared Chester. "Remember he's got me here with you, Hal."

"All right, Chester. We'll make it a double-handed affair. Hear that, Stubbs?"

Stubbs snapped his fingers at them.

"You can do what you please when you get free," he declared. "But I'm going to make it a point to see that you don't get free on this side of the English Channel. Now, good-night."

The little man turned, ordered his men out ahead of him and disappeared from the tent.

For some moments Hal and Chester lay silent without a word. Then Hal said:

"Chester, if you can tell me what's at the bottom of all this, I'll give you a million dollars."

"If you had the million, Hal, you'd lose."

"You don't mean to tell me—"

"Of course I know. I thought you did by this time. There are two things at the bottom of this and they are—two little black peas!"

"Well, by Jove!" said Hal, "and to think I didn't get that through my head sooner. Then you think these peas—"

"Yes; there is some kind of a conspiracy brewing and Stubbs thinks we have a

hand in it. Whatever it is, he's against it. You remember how he shut up in the middle of his tale that night when he first saw the peas in our possession?"

"By Jove! That's so!"

"Sure; but have you any idea what the conspiracy may be?"

"Not the slightest; but if we can get out of here we'll have a look. We know one of the band, I think."

"You mean?"

"Jules Clemenceau. I don't suppose he ever missed the two peas. He probably had more. At the first opportunity we'll display our peas where he can see them and then maybe he will say something that will tip us off where to look next."

"Not a bad idea; but he seems to be so young to be mixed up in such a thing."

"He's no younger than we are; and we've been mixed up in a whole lot of things."

"That's so, too. I would like to know, though, what this plot is. I don't believe it has anything to do with treachery."

"Depends upon what you mean by treachery. I suppose you mean nothing that will aid the Germans to defeat us?"

"Exactly; then, too, don't you remember, when Stubbs was telling us about the conspiracy, that he said he had reason to believe there were plotters in the German ranks as well as the British and French?"

"He didn't say it just that way, I think, but I remember what you mean. By Jove! I wonder what it can all be about?"

"Well, it's too deep for me; and unless something happens, I am half afraid Stubbs may be as good as his word and have us sent back to New York."

"By George! We can't stand for that."

"I should say not. See if you can wiggle your hands loose."

Hal tried. So did Chester.

"They did a pretty fair job, if you ask me," said the latter.

"I should say they did. However, we'll keep trying. Something may give. Perseverance is a great medicine, you know."

And they did keep trying; but here was one place where it seemed that perseverance was about to fail. An hour's tugging at their bonds failed to loosen them to any noticeable degree.

"I guess it's no use, Chester," said Hal.

"I'm not having much luck, either," was Chester's reply.

They took a brief rest and then fell to tugging at their bonds again. But they had no better luck than before.

"Well, it's no use," said Chester at last. "I'm going to sleep."

Hal was also forced to admit that he was unable to loosen his own bonds and he followed Chester's example and sought repose.

How long they slept neither knew, but both were awakened by a hand on their shoulders. Looking up in the darkness the lads saw a form bending over them. They could not distinguish the features.

"Hello!" said Hal, in a whisper. "We have company, Chester."

"So we have," was the latter's reply. "Wonder what he wants?"

The figure in the darkness explained his presence in the tent in a few words.

"Come with me!" he whispered.

"Can't. We're tied up," said Hal.

"I have unloosened your bonds," said the voice in a whisper. "Come, and make no noise."

The lads found that their deliverer had told the truth. They were no longer

bound. They got to their feet and followed him from the tent. They had not recognized the voice that had called them; but as they passed without, Hal caught sight of the man's features.

"Jules Clemenceau!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CONSPIRATORS

Chester, who had been unable to catch a sight of their deliverer's face, was surprised.

"Great Scott! Jules," he exclaimed. "You have a knack of turning up in the nick of time."

"Sh-h-h!" whispered Jules. "No talk until we get away from here."

The others obeyed this injunction to keep silence and followed the young Frenchman without further words.

Jules approached his own quarters and led the way inside.

"Make yourselves at home," he said with a wave of his hand. "In here we may talk."

Hal and Chester found seats and then the former asked a question.

"How did you happen to find us, Jules?"

"I chanced to be near when the stranger showed you his pea," returned Jules. "I knew that there had been no summons sent out for an immediate meeting and that something must be wrong. Therefore, I followed you. Having learned where you were held I returned later to release you. That's all."

"Well, we certainly thank you," said Chester. "There is no telling what would have happened to us."

"I was never more surprised," said Jules, "than when I saw you both exhibit black peas. I had no idea that you were with us."

"Then you, too," said Hal, "are—"

"Yes," Jules interrupted. "I am one of you. I suppose you have received the summons?"

"Summons? What summons?" asked Chester.

"Why, for the meeting to-night, or, rather, I should say in the morning."

"No, we have received no summons," said Hal.

"Then it is twice good that I arrived," said Jules. "You shall accompany me."

"And where is the rendezvous?" asked Chester.

"I'll show you," said Jules. He drew his watch from his pocket and glanced at it in the semi-light of the tent. "Twelve fifteen," he said. "We have forty-five minutes still, but it will do no harm if we are a few minutes early. Come."

He picked up his cap from the cot where he had thrown it and led the way from the tent. Hal and Chester followed without a word. The same thought was in the mind of each. At last they would be able to learn the nature of the conspiracy which, although they knew nothing of it, had caused them so much trouble.

After a walk of perhaps twenty minutes, in which time they had not been challenged, Jules pulled up before a tent somewhat larger than the rest.

"General Pombrey's quarters," he said, "and for that reason comparatively safe."

"You mean that the general is one of us?" demanded Hal in no little surprise.

"Yes," said Jules, briefly.

Chester gave a low whistle. Evidently this conspiracy, whatever it might be, was more widespread than he had imagined.

Jules entered the tent and the two lads followed him.

Inside a large number of men already had assembled. Apparently, their anticipation had been so great that they had been unable to control their impatience until nearer the appointed hour. The lads were impressed with one peculiar feature. Unlike most plotters—and Hal and Chester already had come into contact with many—these men wore no masks. Apparently, they were not afraid of their identities being known by their fellow conspirators.

There were no remarks when Jules and Hal and Chester entered the tent. The former led the way to the far side and there stood quietly in the half light. Hal and Chester took their places beside him.

As time passed other men appeared in the tent and Hal and Chester were surprised to see that some were officers of high rank; but neither lad said anything aloud.

Came the voice of a sentry without:

"One o'clock and all's well!"

A moment later the apathy that had gripped the interior of the tent where the conspirators were assembled disappeared. General Pombrey addressed the others.

"I am glad to see so many of you here to-night," he said earnestly. "I note several new faces amongst us and I am pleased to know that others are joining this great movement every day. It shows that even in the midst of this warlike camp the spirit of peace has not died."

His words were greeted with a murmur of approval, though no man spoke.

The general continued:

"Now, I have to inform you that the crisis is near. I have had word from the enemy's lines that the spirit of peace there has grown. It would appear that we are on the eve of success. Another battle or two—a few thousand more lives lost—and this great war may end. When the spirit of peace has overcome the spirit of war in the ranks, then will the war end. I have called you together to-night to instruct you to sound even deeper than you have done the sentiment of the men who stand by your side. The time to stop this war is almost at hand."

Again there was a murmur of approval as the general became silent. He gazed upon the faces about him a few moments in silence, and then spoke again:

"I need not caution you to silence. A false move and all would be lost. But if we can command 10,000 more men when the crisis arrives, men who, like the rest of us, will refuse to fight more when the word is given, we shall be strong enough; and if I told you how many already are pledged you could scarcely believe me. Now here," the general exposed to view a large box, "I have many more of the little peas that are our bond of membership. I want each of you to take as many as you please; and pass them around when you have convinced yourselves the men you approach are acting in good faith."

One after another the men in the tent stepped forward and dipped a hand into the box of peas and put the little round pellets into their own pockets. Then the general signified that he had yet a few remarks to make. The men stood about respectfully as he addressed them.

"Men," he said, "there may be some among you who question the justice of this move. To those I say that we are engaged in a great effort. To prevent further war and bloodshed among ourselves and our enemies is a great duty; for nothing can possibly be gained by the loss of millions of lives and the destruction of billions of dollars worth of property. However, if there are any among you who would draw out of this movement, I would ask that you do so now."

The general paused and looked keenly at the faces about him. No man spoke.

"Good," said the general, "then I know you are with me."

"And the time? When will the time come?" asked one man in the crowd.

"That I cannot say," responded the general, quietly. "But I can assure you that it will be before long. You will all be notified by the messengers, that you may be ready. Now are there any other questions?"

"If we fail, then what?" asked another man.

General Pombrey shrugged his shoulders.

"Probably court martial and a firing squad," he said indifferently. "But you will have died in a glorious cause, whereas now—"

A glimpse of happiness stole over the general's face. To Hal and Chester it meant but one thing. General Pombrey was a fanatic; and the men who had come under his spell were fanatics. In that instant Hal and Chester both realized that this matter must be brought to General Petain immediately.

After some few other words, General Pombrey signified that the meeting was over, and the men filed from the tent singly and in pairs, discussing the matter in low tones.

Outside Hal and Chester were accosted again by Jules Clemenceau.

"And what do you think of General Pombrey?" asked the young Frenchman, his face shining.

For a moment Hal considered what was best to say. Should he try and convince Jules that his present course was wrong; that there was to be considered the honor of his country rather than the opinion of General Pombrey? The lad decided on the side of caution.

"A good man," he replied quietly. "A man who will face a firing squad without a tremor, secure in the belief he is dying for a good cause."

"And do you not think the cause good, and just?" demanded Jules, anxiously.

"If not, why should I be the bearer of a pocket-full of black peas?" was Hal's reply.

Jules, apparently, was satisfied.

Alone in their own quarters later Hal and Chester discussed the situation seriously.

"To tell the truth," said Chester, "I am half inclined to agree with General Pombrey. But if for no other reason, there is one thing that would make me reveal this plot to General Petain."

"And that?" asked Hal.

"That," said Chester, "is the fact that General Pombrey and the others engaged in this conspiracy are lacking upon the German troops to throw down their arms

and refuse to fight at the same moment the French and British do."

"Well?" asked Hal, but he was beginning to catch Chester's drift.

"Well," said Chester, "you and I know the Germans won't do that. It's a ten to one bet that the German general staff knows all about this conspiracy. The peace talk has been carried from one army to the other by the prisoners. The Germans will take advantage of it. Should the French really follow General Pombrey's plan, they would be slaughtered by the thousands. The Germans could not keep faith. You know that."

"Yes, I know it," said Hal with a nod of his head. "They have never kept faith in this war, save in individual cases. It doesn't seem to be in them."

"Exactly," agreed Chester. "Then, if for no other reason than to save these deluded French and British soldiers, the matter must be brought to the attention of General Petain, that he may act promptly and not only save them, but the whole army of France; and the cause of the Allies."

"Good!" Hal agreed. "Then we shall see that it's brought to his attention."

"The first thing in the morning," said Chester.

"Right you are, Chester. The first thing in the morning."

CHAPTER XX

UNDER ARREST

It was morning. Hal and Chester, refreshed by a good night's rest, had just completed their toilets and were about to repair to the quarters of General Petain, there to report for the day's duty and also to inform the French commander of what they had learned the night before. But, as it transpired, their good intentions were to go for naught and they were to be ushered into the presence of General Petain in a manner that neither would have believed possible.

Came the sound of many footsteps approaching without. They stopped before the boys' tent. A French officer thrust his head in the entrance.

"Lieutenant Crawford! Lieutenant Paine!" he said sharply.

"Sir!" exclaimed both lads in a single breath.

They stepped from the tent.

"You are under arrest!" were the French officer's next words.

Hal and Chester stepped back in complete bewilderment.

"Wha—what's that, sir?" asked Hal, believing that he could not have heard aright.

"You are under arrest," was the sharp reply. "I am ordered to conduct you before General Petain at once."

Both lads had recovered themselves by this time; they stepped forward coolly enough, in spite of the fact that their hearts were fluttering strangely.

"The general might have spared himself the trouble of sending for us," said Hal, quietly. "Even now we were about to report to him."

The French officer said nothing. He motioned to the file of soldiers whom he commanded and Hal and Chester stepped in between the men.

"One moment," said the French soldier.

He approached the lads.

"I must ask for your swords and revolvers," he said.

Without a word the lads surrendered their weapons.

"Good!" said the French officer. Then to his men: "Forward, march!"

And in this manner Hal and Chester came before the French commander at Verdun. The latter was busy with a pile of papers when they entered his quarters and did not look up immediately. For perhaps fifteen minutes the lads stood there, firmly erect, their eyes upon the general.

Suddenly General Petain wheeled about.

"Leave these men with me," he instructed the French officer who had escorted the lads to his tent; "but attend me outside within call, Captain."

The French officer saluted and withdrew.

General Petain gazed frowningly at Hal and Chester for perhaps a full minute. The lads returned his look without flinching, though there was nothing that might be construed as defiance in their manner; rather, nothing but respectful attention.

"So!" said General Petain at last. "So! I find you two lads, whom I have trusted, among a band of conspirators, eh?"

"Among them, sir," said Hal, quietly, "but not of them."

"What's that?" demanded the general. "You admit you were with them and then claim innocence? Impossible!"

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Hal, "but it is not impossible. It is the truth."

"But I have it on high authority," returned the general, "that you have been the possessors of the emblem of the conspirators for some days now."

"That is true enough, sir," Hal agreed; "but we came into the possession of those black peas accidentally and with no thought of their significance."

The general sniffed contemptuously.

"My information regarding you boys comes from a source that I am afraid I must believe," he said.

"Will you tell us the source, sir?" asked Hal.

General Petain shook his head.

"It would do no good," he returned. "It would not alter the facts in the case. Now, I know you boys have been of great value to the cause of the Allies. My informant is authority for that statement also. You have accomplished much and France and the other allied countries must thank you. But it appears now that you have been led from the proper way of thinking; and my informant in your case says, and rightly, that from young men who have done much to advance the cause of the Allies, there is much to be feared when they embark upon some other venture.

"You are both resourceful; I know that. That is the reason that I have had you placed under arrest—that you may not turn your energies against us. I shall have you sent to Paris, thence to London, and I hope that before long you will be back in your own country, the United States."

"Pardon me, sir," said Hal, respectfully, "but I do not need to ask you again to name the man who has caused us to be in this predicament. His name is Stubbs."

"Well, I see no need to deny it," said General Petain.

"General," said Chester, now stepping forward, "I would be glad if you would give me an opportunity to explain this matter."

"It shall not be said that I denied any man a hearing," was the general's reply.

"Proceed."

As briefly as possible Chester recounted the manner in which they had come into possession of the two peas; of why they decided to keep them; of their capture the night before by Anthony Stubbs and of their escape; and last, of their attendance at the meeting of the conspirators, where, for the first time, they learned the true significance of the little black peas.

As Chester proceeded with his story the general listened attentively. When Chester spoke of being captured by Stubbs, the general smiled quietly, and Hal, noting the smile, guessed rightly that General Petain had had a hand in the capture himself—or rather, that he at least had sanctioned it; and when Chester spoke of the meeting of the conspirators and mentioned the name of General Pombrey, General Petain frowned.

"So," he said when Chester had concluded, "General Pombrey is mixed up in this thing, eh?"

"He seems to be the leader of the movement, sir," replied Chester. "I should say that he is without doubt the directing hand."

"And what do you hope to gain by telling me all this?" asked General Petain, eyeing the lad shrewdly.

"I hope to see the conspiracy crushed, sir, before it gains further momentum," was Chester's reply.

General Petain eyed the lad peculiarly.

"Can it be that I have been misinformed?" he muttered to himself.

Hal's keen ears caught the words.

"I can assure you that you have been misinformed, sir," he replied firmly.

For several moments more the general eyed the lads sternly and they returned his gaze without flinching. Suddenly the general clapped his hands together. The French officer who had arrested the two lads entered the tent and saluted.

"Captain," said General Petain. "my compliments to Mr. Anthony Stubbs and say

that I desire his presence here at once."

The French officer saluted and took his departure.

The hearts of the two lads beat high now. Apparently General Petain had been convinced of the truth of their stories. They believed that when Stubbs confronted them he would weaken.

"I don't know what to think about this matter," said General Petain as they waited for Stubbs' arrival. "I am loath to believe you would be mixed up in anything of this nature."

"How did Mr. Stubbs happen to mention us as being implicated in this conspiracy, sir?" asked Chester.

"He said he wanted to see you get home safely and not be mixed up in anything that might mean a firing squad," said General Petain, calmly. "I promised him your safe return to America for his news of the conspiracy."

"I see," said Chester.

At this moment Stubbs was announced. General Petain looked at him sharply.

"These officers," he said, indicating Hal and Chester with a wave of his hand, "deny the charges you have made against them, sir."

"Surely, you didn't expect them to admit it, sir?" questioned Stubbs, shifting from one foot to another, as Hal and Chester bent their gaze on him.

"Well, no, I didn't," was General Petain's reply, "but they tell such a straightforward story that I am of the opinion you must be mistaken as to their part in this conspiracy."

"But the peas," said Stubbs. "They had them."

"Well, somebody might have slipped one into your pocket, as far as that goes," said General Petain; "and then you might be standing here under suspicion."

"Tha—that's so, too," Stubbs stammered. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Well, you should have thought of it," exclaimed General Petain. "It's no small thing to cast suspicion upon a man and then be able to prove nothing."

"But the peas—"

"Never mind about the peas," stormed the general. "By any chance, when you had these officers in your tent last night, did they admit connection with the plot?"

"No, sir; they professed ignorance. But they had the peas—"

"*Mon Dieu!* Can't you think of anything but peas? What kind of a war correspondent are you, anyhow?"

Stubbs was offended. He drew himself up and would have made reply, but General Petain silenced him with a gesture.

"I don't question your loyalty," he said, "and I know that you acted with the good of these lads at heart. But I am convinced you have been mistaken. I am going to release these boys. Lieutenant Paine! Lieutenant Crawford! you are—"

"Sir!" exclaimed Stubbs at this juncture.

The general eyed him closely.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Please, General, do not let them go until I have a few moments' start. I don't know what they will do to me." Stubbs looked nervous.

"Very well," said General Petain with a smile. "Then hurry and take your departure, Mr. Stubbs."

Stubbs needed no urging and he disappeared from the general's tent with agility; and Hal called after him:

"Better hunt a hole, Mr. Stubbs; we'll be on your trail in a few minutes!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE TURNING OF THE TIDE

In the days immediately following their interview with General Petain, the lads saw much fighting; and with the close of each day there came bitterness to them, to the French troops, their officers and to the people of France and of all the allied nations.

For the armies of the German Crown Prince continued to advance steadily in spite of the heroic resistance of the French; and it began to appear that the "Gateway to France" must ere long fall into alien hands.

Day after day the Germans hurled themselves forward in herculean efforts to break the French lines; and most every day found them fighting a little nearer to Verdun. In vain the French attempted to stem the onslaught of the invading forces; the Germans were not to be denied.

On the days when the fiercest of the German assaults were made, it was learned that the Emperor of Germany had directed the assaults in person. From the top of a small hill, surrounded by his staff, the Kaiser looked down upon the battlefield for days at a time, showing no signs of emotion as his countrymen fell right and left, that the German flag might be planted a few yards—sometimes only a few feet—farther westward.

While the German losses were something terrible in this continuous fighting, the French suffered untold hardships. The effect of the great German shells, which fell within the French lines almost incessantly, was tremendous. It did not seem that flesh and blood could survive their deadly effect—and yet the French fought back gamely.

At last the Germans reached a point only three miles and a half from the city of

Verdun itself.

Then began the fiercest of the fighting.

After having been pushed back many miles by the German hordes, the French now braced suddenly and gave as good as they received. Instead of waiting for the German attacks, General Petain launched offensives of his own. At first these broke down easily under the German shells, but as they continued, the drives began to meet with more and more success. It became apparent that at this point the advantage usually rested with the attacking party.

Battles—or what would have been called battles in any other war of history, but now, in the official reports were merely referred to as skirmishes—raged for hours at a stretch, some of the most important continuing for days, first with advantage to one side and then to the other.

In vain the German Crown Prince hurled his men forward to pierce the French lines that now separated him from Verdun, less than four miles away.

While the German guns still continued to shell the city and the fortifications, there was little they could accomplish now. All walls and houses in the path of the great guns had crumbled under their terrible fire days ago; there was nothing left to destroy, except at intervals where a small fort still stood and breathed defiance to the enemy.

But the German guns served one purpose. They afforded protection for the infantry as it advanced to the attack. Only when the Germans advanced close enough to come to hand grips with the French did the big guns become silent.

But now came the turning of the tide.

From far back the French threw out reinforcements to the hard pressed men in front. Huge new field guns were brought up. Great masses of ammunition, which the French had been storing up for just such a chance, were rushed to the front. Soon the French guns were speaking as loudly and as often as the great German 42-centimetres themselves.

The first work of the new French offensive was to clear the Germans from Dead Man's Hill, Hill No. 320 and Hill No. 304. These battles, among the fiercest of all history, however, were really little more than skirmishes, when the entire

movement was taken into consideration. Terrible though they were, after all they were nothing more than small parts of the great battle of Verdun itself.

From Dead Man's Hill and the other two elevations captured by the French, the Germans now were pushed clear back to the banks of the river Meuse; and then they were driven beyond. Thiaumont farm, where Hal and Chester had seen hard fighting, came once more beneath the French tricolor; and the German eagle went back farther still.

There was little or no rest for the men in the trenches on either side. Out would rush the Germans from their trenches in a grand attack upon the trenches of the French. Hand-to-hand fighting would ensue. Perhaps the Germans would be driven back. If they were they would make a new effort an hour or so later.

Perhaps the French would give way and the Germans would occupy the trenches. A short time later the French would re-form under the very rifles of the enemy, and, by a grand charge, oust the Germans from their newly won positions. Then came the work of concentrating and fortifying the trenches all over again.

It was terrible work, these days before Verdun.

Hal and Chester played no small part in the advance of the French army. More than once they were despatched upon important missions; and their fortune had been of the best. Not once had they failed to accomplish a piece of work entrusted to them. General Petain began to look upon them as among his best men. Many a piece of work that, a month before, he would have entrusted to an older head now fell to the lot of either Hal or Chester; and the boys did not complain. In fact, the more they had to do the better they liked it.

Nor, for the matter of that, was there complaint from any of the men in the French army, officers or men. They stood to their work bravely and never flinched under fire. Nor did they protest when they were forced to go for long hours without sleep, other than that they could catch between the battles that raged almost incessantly and seemed to be nothing less than one continuous struggle.

Now came the day when the Germans had been pushed far east of the Meuse. For the moment the French, flushed with victory, paused for a breathing spell. It had been work well done, in the days that had just passed, and men and officers

alike realized it. Preparing their lines against attacks, under the command of General Petain, the French paused for breath.

The German Crown Prince, realizing the cause of this lull by the French, thought to take advantage of the foe, and launched assault after assault; but, tired out as the French were, there was still energy and courage enough among them to resist successfully the fierce charges of the foe.

And after awhile the Crown Prince gave up these attacks, realizing that he could not hope, at that moment, to penetrate the French positions, and, for once, doing away with the needless sacrifice of men.

Upon an afternoon when the battle of Verdun was a little more than three months old, Hal and Chester were summoned to the quarters of General Petain. They went eagerly, for they realized that there was important work ahead.

"Boys," said General Petain, for thus he had come to address them when alone, after the official salutes had been returned, "I have here a piece of work, that, because of the danger attached, I hesitate to select a man, or men, to perform."

Hal and Chester both smiled.

"And you want to give us the first chance at it, sir?" said Hal.

"Yes; I know that if you accept the mission it is more certain of success than if I entrusted it to other hands."

"We shall be glad of the chance, sir," said Chester, quietly.

General Petain clapped his hands in satisfaction.

"I knew it," he said, "and yet I did not like to order you to perform it. You boys are true blue."

Both lads flushed with pleasure at this remark, but they made no reply. They stood quietly waiting until the general should tell them what was required.

"Boys," said the general, "it is absolutely essential to the success of this campaign that I have a more accurate knowledge of the enemy's lines and strength. My aviators have been sent in search of such information, but they

have met with little success. The only man who got close enough to learn what I am after, according to others who followed him, was shot down. He failed to return. What he learned, of course, I do not know. But it is that which I must know. Do you think you can gain this information for me?"

"We can at least have a try at it," said Chester, with a smile.

"We'll get it if it is humanly possible," agreed Hal.

"I am more confident of success than I would be if the mission were in other hands," said General Petain, quietly.

"And when do you wish us to start, sir?" asked Hal.

"Immediately," was the reply, "though I believe it would be better to wait until dark."

"And you would suggest an aeroplane?" asked Hal.

"I leave the means to you," returned the general. "I'll give you a written order that will put anything in the French lines at your disposal, aeroplane, automobile or horses. You may take your choice."

The general turned to his desk and scribbled on a piece of paper. To what he had written he affixed his signature and then passed the paper to Hal.

"I have no further instructions," he said. "But, be as quick as you can, and be careful."

He arose and extended a hand to each lad. He had come to be very fond of them, and he patted each on the back affectionately.

"May good fortune attend you," he said quietly.

The lads drew themselves up, saluted and left the tent. The general stepped to the door and gazed after them.

"Good boys, those," he said quietly to himself. "May they return safely!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE PARTY IS INCREASED

"I guess an aeroplane is the best way after all," said Hal, when they were back in their own quarters.

"Sure," Chester agreed. "It's swifter, and if we have any luck at all, it's a pretty good contraption to get away in after we have gained our information. Now about clothes. Shall we keep on these uniforms?"

"What would you suggest?"

"Well, I don't know. Thought maybe we would take some German clothes along."

"Might not be a bad idea, though we won't put them on unless we have to. I don't want to be shot as a spy if I can help it."

"Nor I. Don't suppose there would be any use in taking civilian costumes?"

"I don't know. Guess it wouldn't do any harm, though. The more clothes the better. We may need a change of costume most any time."

"All right. We'll load up, if we can find what we want."

"I guess there won't be any trouble about that."

The lad was right. Soon they had a large army plane at their disposal and had stocked it with all they thought they would need in the way of clothing and food. Then they returned to their own quarters. Hal glanced at his watch.

"Only five o'clock," he said. "We've a good three hours yet. We don't want to go

up until well after dark. Let's go out and have a look around."

Chester was agreeable and they made their way from the tent. They had walked about for probably an hour, when suddenly Hal took Chester by the coat sleeve.

"Look there!" he exclaimed.

Chester looked; and there, perhaps fifty yards away, was Anthony Stubbs, slinking along, now and then casting an eye at Hal and Chester.

"He's seen us," said Chester. "Let's have a little talk with him. Maybe we can have some fun."

It was the first time they had seen the little war correspondent since the talk in General Petain's tent more than two months before.

"Come on, then," said Hal.

They increased their stride; but Stubbs, with a quick glance over his shoulder, observed this and also increased his pace.

"He doesn't want to see us, Hal," said Chester, with a grin.

"I see he doesn't," Hal grinned back. "Well, we want to see him." He raised his voice in a shout "Hey, there, Stubbs!"

The little man glanced quickly back over his shoulder. Then, seeing that Hal and Chester were gaining on him, he broke into a run.

"After him, Hal!" cried Chester, and also broke into a run.

Hal followed suit.

Around turn after turn they darted after the little man, who was making the best time his short legs would permit. At a word from Hal, Chester slowed down, for they didn't want to catch Stubbs too easily.

"Let him run himself out," Hal said.

And that was what the little man was doing. His tongue was literally hanging out as Hal and Chester continued to gain slowly. He was puffing like a locomotive

and his arms were working like pistons. Once or twice he staggered and it seemed to him that he could not run another step. But he set his teeth and plodded on.

"I've got to get away," he told himself. "There is no knowing what these young ruffians will do to me."

In vain he tried to increase his pace. It could not be done. Every step cost him an effort and it seemed that he could not take another. He waddled crazily from one side to the other; and at last he came to a stop, and with what strength remained, he faced his pursuers and threw up his hands in an attitude of defense.

At arm's length, Hal and Chester came to a pause.

"So we have you at last, eh!" said the former.

"You—you keep a-away from me," gasped Stubbs, panting for breath. "I don't want to have any tro—trouble with you."

"Perhaps not, Mr. Stubbs," said Chester, "but we want to have a little trouble with you."

"Let me a-alone," gasped Stubbs.

Hal moved a step closer.

"Remember what you did to us?" he asked.

Stubbs stepped backward quickly.

"Don't you come any closer," he gasped. "Let me alone."

"Had us tied up, didn't you, Stubbs?" demanded Chester.

"Yes; but it was for your own good!" Stubbs had regained his wind now.

"For our own good, eh? Well, we have come after you for your own good."

"What have you got to say for yourself, Stubbs?" demanded Hal.

"Nothing," snapped the little man angrily, "except that I want to be let alone. You

hoodwinked the general, all right, but you can't hoodwink me. Now go on away from here."

Again Chester stepped forward, and this time the lad was treated to an unpleasant surprise. Instead of moving backward, Stubbs suddenly lowered his head and charged Chester.

Taken by surprise, the lad was unable to get out of the way and the top of Stubbs' head rammed him squarely in the stomach. Chester doubled up and fell to the ground with a cry of pain.

Stubbs turned and started to run; but before he had taken half a dozen steps, Hal had reached him and taken him by the arm. In vain the little man struggled to shake off the lad's grasp.

"Hey, Stubbs!" cried Hal, laughing at the predicament in which Chester found himself, "what's the matter that you've turned so pugnacious all of a sudden? Getting to be a regular fighter, aren't you?"

"Well, he was just about to swat me," declared Stubbs.

Chester had now picked himself up and advanced upon Stubbs, threateningly.

"Say!" he exclaimed; "what do you mean by using your head as a battering ram on me?"

"I told you to keep away," returned Stubbs.

"I know you did; but that's no sign you should try to kill me. I wasn't going to hurt you."

"Maybe not," said Stubbs, "but I wasn't going to take any more chances. Now you keep away from me."

"Oh, Chester won't hurt you," said Hal, with a laugh. "You treated him just right, Stubbs. He's got no kick coming."

"No, that's right, Stubbs," said Chester, with a grin. "No hard feelings, I'm sure. You're all right. Put her there."

The lad extended a hand. Stubbs advanced doubtfully, but at last grasped Chester's hand.

Immediately he began to dance about wildly, shouting:

"Leggo! Leggo my hand! Ouch!"

At last Chester relaxed his grip.

"That makes it square all around, Stubbs," he said with a grin.

For a moment Stubbs gazed at him angrily, the while he worked his fingers back and fro to chase away the stiffness. Then he smiled.

"All right," he said. "Now we're square."

"Where you bound, Stubbs?" asked Hal.

"Hunting news," returned Stubbs.

"By Jove!" said Chester. "Why not take him along with us, Hal?"

"Suits me," was Hal's answer, "if he wants to go."

"Where you going?" demanded Stubbs.

"Sailing," returned Chester. "Sailing over the German lines. Want to go along?"

"Not me," said Stubbs, briefly.

"Come now, Stubbs, don't be afraid. Nothing is going to hurt you, and we might need you."

"That's what I thought," said Stubbs. "I knew there was some reason you wanted me to go along. I knew you didn't just want to take me along to show me the sights. Want me to stand in the gap when the trouble comes up. I know you."

"I assure you I had no such thoughts."

"Well, maybe you didn't have them, but that is what would happen all the same."

"Stubbs," said Hal, quietly. "It's my belief that you're afraid."

"Hal," said Stubbs, "you can bet your life I'm afraid to go up in the air with you two."

"Come on, Stubbs," said Chester, seriously. "Honestly, we would be glad of your company. We haven't seen much of you for some time."

"I know you haven't," returned Stubbs, "and that's why my health happens to be so good right now. But what are you going to do over the German lines?"

"Get the lay of the land," said Hal. "Find out the German strength and a few other things, if possible."

"Hm-m-m," muttered Stubbs. "Ought to be some news for the *Gazette* over there, don't you think?"

"Lots of it, Stubbs," replied Chester.

"The only trouble," said Stubbs, "is that if I go after it, will I be able to come back and tell the *Gazette* about it?"

"If you don't mind, Mr. Stubbs," said Hal, "one of us will take it upon himself to see that the *Gazette* gets the news."

"After my job, are you?" said Stubbs, with a smile.

"Well, not exactly. We just offered to help you out."

"I can't see where that would do me any good. However, I guess I'll take you up on this bet. I might be able to learn something of importance. The next thing would be to get it by the censor."

"Why, Stubbs," said Chester, "with your pull with General Petain, I can't see that you should have any trouble."

"My pull, eh?" said Stubbs, with rather a sickly grin. "You two went and smashed my pull all to smithereens."

"Oh, well," said Hal, "a newspaper man always finds a way."

Stubbs looked at Hal, suspiciously.

"If you're making fun of me—" he began.

"Far from it, Mr. Stubbs," replied Hal. "I was just stating a fact. Why, you've told us that yourself."

"Come, come, Stubbs," said Chester. "Are you going along or not? It's time to be moving."

The little war correspondent made his decision.

"I'll go," he said quietly.

CHAPTER XXIII

FLYING

"You know I don't think much of these contraptions," said Stubbs.

With Hal and Chester he was flying aloft in a large army biplane. The little war correspondent had climbed into the machine with the same trepidation he always manifested when about to ascend into the air, but he had not spoken until the machine was a full half mile aloft and Hal had sent it moving swiftly toward the distant German lines.

"Just sit tight and you will be all right," Chester replied.

"Never fear, I'll sit tight," returned Stubbs and became silent.

It was very dark aloft. Because he feared he might encounter an air craft of the enemy, Hal had not turned on the searchlight with which the machine was equipped. He had taken his bearings before making a start and was now trusting to his judgment of distances to guide him to the spot he had selected to return to the ground.

This point, which Hal and Chester had decided upon after some deliberation, was well behind the most advanced German lines. According to Hal's calculations, it was possible that at the place selected there would be few German troops. He had figured to descend between the German lines. Under the cover of darkness he felt there was little to fear should they avoid all enemy aircraft.

Accordingly, it was about an hour later when Hal reduced the speed of the biplane and then shut off the motor altogether. A moment later the machine began to glide slowly to earth.

Chester, peering over the side of the aeroplane, was the first to see the ground below.

"Land below!" he called to Hal.

"Anything in sight?" asked Hal.

"Not a thing. Coast seems to be perfectly clear. Trees near, too; so we can hide the plane, if you go almost straight down."

Hal followed directions and a moment later the biplane came to rest upon the ground as lightly as a bird.

Hal, Chester and Stubbs climbed out quickly.

"Guess we had better run the machine back among the trees," said Hal.

"Lend me a hand here."

It was the work of but a few moments. Hal walked some distance away and surveyed the spot where the machine had been rolled. He walked around it on all sides.

"O.K.," he said. "You wouldn't know it was there unless you happened to be looking for it."

"Well, what now?" asked Chester.

"Guess we had better don those German uniforms and prowl about a bit."

"Snoop, eh," said Stubbs.

"Now look here, Stubbs," said Hal, "you just keep quiet and get into this uniform we brought along for you."

Mumbling to himself, Stubbs obeyed.

Arrayed in the German uniforms—the attire of lieutenants—the three advanced toward where they felt sure the main German entrenchments must be. Hal glanced at his watch in the moonlight.

"Ten o'clock," he said. "Within three hours we should have learned all we need

to. As soon as we reach the German lines we shall separate. We'll meet here again at two o'clock. Is that satisfactory?"

"Suits me," said Chester.

"Want to lose me, do you?" grumbled Stubbs. "Never mind, though. I'll be here by the time you are."

"Pick up every scrap of information possible," Hal enjoined his companions. "Don't take the trouble to write it down. Just impress it on your memory."

The others nodded their understanding.

The three came now upon a light in the distance.

"Germans ahead, I guess," Chester whispered. "Careful and let all further conversation be in German."

The lad was right. Advancing two hundred yards farther, the three friends came upon the outlying sections of the big German camp. Sentinels moved about in the darkness, their forms lighted up now and then by the flare of campfires—for the night was very cold.

Once they were challenged by a sentry, but when the man looked at their uniforms in the moonlight, he lowered his rifle and passed on.

"I'll go straight ahead," said Chester in a low voice. "Hal, you go north and let Stubbs go south."

And thus it was arranged without further talk. The three friends separated.

Walking between the rows of German tents, Chester, after perhaps half an hour, was arrested by the sound of voices in a tent that seemed, in the darkness, to be much larger than the ones which surrounded it. He paused and listened attentively.

"Then everything is in readiness," came a voice.

"Everything. When the French see that we have weakened our lines on the left wing, they naturally will press forward in masses. The pressure on the right wing

probably will be lessened. Also in the center. General Petain, in all probabilities, will seek to take advantage of what he will believe is our carelessness."

"And then?" asked the first voice.

"Why, then we shall push forward in the center and on the right, leaving enough men on the left to make a show of force. Taken at a disadvantage, the French will be cut off on our left, and our center, sweeping around, suddenly, will envelop them. As I estimate it, the French wing, which will be thus enveloped, will be 100,000 strong. It will be a telling blow."

Chester, while this conversation was in progress, had shrunk close up against the tent. Now, thinking to gain a view of the occupants, he drew his knife from his pocket and made a little slit in the canvas. To this opening he applied his eye; and then gave an exclamation under his breath.

In the center of the group of officers in the tent was none other than the German Crown Prince, the directing head of the German attack on Verdun, and son of the Emperor himself.

The conversation continued and the lad stored up mentally the knowledge he gained by listening to the conversation.

The gathering within now seemed about to break up; but Chester delayed in his precarious position, thinking to gather every possible iota of information. And this almost proved his undoing.

Although Chester did not know it, one of the German officers had, for some moments, been gazing at the little slit in the tent made by the point of Chester's knife. Now, with a murmured apology to the other officers, he strode from the tent. Chester still had his eyes glued to the opening and did not hear soft footsteps behind him.

A harsh voice sounded in the lad's ear.

"Get up from there!"

Chester did not lose his nerve, although he realized immediately that he was in a ticklish position, indeed. His hand reached for his pocket as he rose slowly to his feet.

But one glance at the figure that confronted him told the lad that it would be useless for him to attempt to draw his revolver; for the German held a pistol in a steady hand and it was levelled straight at Chester's head.

"What are you doing here?" was the officer's next question.

"Why, I heard voices," said Chester, "and I thought I would see what was going on."

"Curiosity has got a man into trouble many a time," said the German quietly. "March on ahead of me."

There was nothing for it but to obey. Under the muzzle of the German officer's revolver, Chester was marched around to the front of the tent and then inside.

"Hello!" It was the Crown Prince who spoke. "What have we here?"

"I caught this man eavesdropping outside the tent," replied the man who had captured Chester.

"So!" said the Crown Prince in an angry tone. He whirled upon Chester. "And what were you doing there, sir?" he asked.

"I—why, I—" Chester stammered.

The lad was thankful in that minute for his German uniform; though he knew it probably would go hard with him anyhow, he believed that the fact that he was, ostensibly, a German lieutenant would give him more time; possibly it would give Hal enough time to find and rescue him. At least, it would preclude a search for more possible French spies.

"To what regiment are you attached?" asked the Crown Prince.

Chester took a long chance.

"Fortieth Hussars, sir," he replied quietly.

"Then what are you doing here?" demanded the Crown Prince, but continued without giving Chester time to reply: "Surely you know the penalty of such

actions?"

"All I can say, sir," the lad declared, "is that my curiosity overcame me."

For a moment it seemed that the face of the Crown Prince softened. Then it became stern again.

"I can see that you are little more than a boy," he said, "but that is no excuse. You are a soldier and you know a soldier's duty. That is not prying into the business of your superiors." He turned to the group of officers. "What do you say, sirs," he said, "shall I have this man court martialed, or shall I have him returned to his regiment with a warning?"

But there was no mercy on the faces of the others and Chester realized it.

"He should be court martialed and shot," said one.

"I agree with you," said another.

"I'm not so sure," said the Crown Prince. "The lad is young. How do I know what I would have done in his place? No; I am tempted to have him returned to his regiment and placed under arrest indefinitely."

"Lieutenant Hollsein, I shall leave this man in your charge. See that he is returned to his regiment immediately."

Chester breathed a sigh of relief. He realized that he was still in a perilous situation, for when he should be taken to the commander of the Fortieth Hussars, his deception must be learned. But at least it gave him more time.

But Chester's sigh of relief came too soon.

"Hold on!" said one of the German officers. "This man is no German!"

CHAPTER XXIV

STUBBS AS A STRATEGIST

Anthony Stubbs, after leaving Hal and Chester, pushed off to the south slowly, absolutely unconscious of the adventures that were to come his way. Mindful of the fact that there was a certain degree of safety in the German uniform he wore, and rather proud of himself thus attired, Stubbs walked on more boldly than he would have done otherwise.

And thus it was that, without warning, he walked suddenly into the midst of a group of German officers who sat about a campfire a short distance from where he had left his two young friends.

Stubbs pulled up suddenly and would have drawn back had not one of the German officers sprung suddenly to his feet.

"Here, Hans, is another man now!" exclaimed the officer. "A moment ago you were bemoaning the fact that there was not another man to take a hand in a game of cards. Here is one come in answer to your prayers."

Two other German officers sprang to their feet.

"Four of us; that's enough," said one. He turned to Stubbs. "What do you say?"

"Say to what?" asked Stubbs, bravely.

"A game of cards."

"What kind of a game of cards?"

"An American game," was the reply. "Hans learned it when he was in the United States and has taught us something about it. It's called poker."

"I've played it," said Stubbs.

"Good! Then you will join us?"

"I should be elsewhere," said Stubbs, hesitatingly.

Be it known that Anthony Stubbs, war correspondent of the *New York Gazette*, had, in his day, liked to play a game of poker, whether it was right or whether it was wrong. Even to this day the lure of the game held, and in spite of the danger such a game entailed, Stubbs was not loath to play. Besides, the little man bethought himself that while the game was in progress he might learn something of value, so he said:

"All right. I'll play."

The man called Hans now sprang to his feet.

"I want to warn you," he said, "that I am extremely lucky at this game."

"Well, I used to be fairly lucky myself," said Stubbs. To himself he said:
"Whoever heard of a German trying to play the American game of poker?"

The man called Hans now led the way to his quarters, where he produced a table, chairs and a pack of cards. The four men ranged themselves around the table.

As the game progressed there was considerable talk of the status of the opposing armies and Stubbs gained much information that he felt would be of use. As time passed other officers dropped in to witness the game; and chancing to look over his shoulder, Stubbs was startled to see the face of Hal. He gave a slight start, but quickly covered this up as he saw a look of annoyance on Hal's face.

"Hal objects to my gambling, I guess," Stubbs muttered to himself. "But what do I care? I'm glad to gather in a few German coins. Fortunate that I had some in my pocket."

The manner in which Hal came to be in the tent was very simple. He had walked north for some distance, and finding nothing that would prove of value, he had turned back. He had been attracted by the sound of conversation and had joined the group of German officers near the tent where the game of poker was in progress. When one of the officers had suggested going in and watching the

game Hal had acquiesced. That is how he found himself standing behind Stubbs and scanning the latter's cards.

At that moment Stubbs had lost a hand to the man called Hans. Stubbs was considerably nettled, for he felt sure he should have won. He turned an eye on Hal, who stood directly behind him.

"Don't stand behind me," the little man snapped.

"What's the matter?" demanded Hal. "Superstitious?"

"Yes, if you want to call it that," Stubbs answered.

Hal shifted his position slightly.

Again Stubbs scanned a hand that he felt sure would win. Hans was the dealer. As he drew two more cards, Stubbs suddenly gave a start. He had seen Hans slip a card from his sleeve.

Now Stubbs was not a fighter. He had shown that on more than one occasion. But the little man objected to being imposed upon. Also he had always stood for a square deal in a friendly game of cards. He had proven that more than once in his younger days. And now, seeing the man called Hans cheating made Stubbs' blood boil.

Quietly he leaned across the table and spoke.

"You," he said, shaking his forefinger in the man's face, "no wonder you say you are lucky."

"Why, what do you mean?" demanded Hans, his face turning pale, for he well realized the import of Stubbs' words.

"I mean," said Stubbs, and at that moment his hand dropped to his revolver butt, "I mean that you are a cheat!"

Stubbs produced his revolver and levelled it straight at Hans. Then he swept the circle of surprised faces about him with his eyes.

"Sir!" exclaimed Hans, "I demand an apology for those words."

"Well, you won't get it," returned Stubbs, decisively. He turned to the man next to Hans. "Reach up his sleeve there," he said, "and if you don't find a card or two I'll make you a present of all the money I have in my pocket."

Surprised, the other obeyed and the result vindicated Stubbs. Two cards fluttered from Hans' sleeve. Stubbs got to his feet.

"You see, gentlemen," he said, "with what kind of a man you have been playing. No wonder he calls himself lucky."

The others were very angry. Seeing that the matter would be taken out of his hands, Stubbs restored his revolver to its place.

Hans stood up.

"If you think I have cheated," he said, "you are welcome to all the money I have won. As for you," he turned on Stubbs, "you shall die!"

A revolver appeared in his hand as if by magic and Stubbs shrank back.

But before the man could fire Hal leaped quickly forward and struck up the weapon.

"You are not only a cheat but a coward!" said the lad quietly.

"And who are you?" screamed Hans, now beside himself with rage. "What have you to do with this?"

"Nothing more than to prevent murder," replied Hal.

Now the other German officers took a hand in the trouble.

"Lieutenant Darnhart," said one. "I wish you never to speak to me again."

"Nor to me," from the other man who had taken part in the game, and added: "If you are wise, you will know what to do."

For a moment Hans gazed at them hardly knowing what to say. Then, slowly, he emptied the contents of his pockets upon the table.

"You are right, gentlemen," he said quietly. "I have cheated. Therefore, this

money belongs to you. And do not fear that I do not know what to do. The honor of the regiment shall be kept clean."

With that he bowed low to the others and stalked from the tent. The others stood stiffly erect until he had disappeared; then turned to Stubbs.

"We have to thank you, sir," said one, "for opening our eyes. Long we have wondered why Darnhart was so lucky, why he always arose from the game the only winner. Now we know."

"Well," said Stubbs, "I used to play considerably when I lived in the United States, and for that reason, I guess, I was on my guard."

"At all events," said the second German, "you have done us a service and we wish to thank you."

"Why, that's all right," said Stubbs. "I am sure either of you would have done the same thing under the circumstances. And with your permission, I shall leave you now."

The others bowed and Stubbs turned toward the door.

"If you will wait a moment, sir, I shall accompany you," said a voice.

It was Hal who spoke and Stubbs waited obediently.

"First," said Hal, "I have something else to do." He addressed the Germans: "Which of you is upon the staff of General Ludwig?"

"Why, I am," said one of the men, stepping forward.

"Good!" said Hal. "I would have spoken sooner, but I was absorbed in the game. I did not remember your name, but I was sent for you. Will you follow me?"

The German nodded his head.

"Very well," said Hal. "Come."

He led the way from the tent and the German and Stubbs followed. The latter was astonished at Hal's words, but he did not show his surprise in his actions. He

walked after the others without a word.

"Something up," he muttered to himself. "I guess I had better keep my gun handy."

Outside, they walked along slowly.

Five minutes later, when they reached a place that was somewhat secluded, Hal suddenly produced his revolver and pressed it against the German's head.

"You will give me immediately what papers you have in your pockets," the lad said quietly. "If you make an outcry I shall be compelled to shoot you."

The German stared aghast.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"It means that I must have whatever papers you possess," said Hal, calmly, "even if I have to shoot you to get them."

"Ah!" cried the German, "I see! A spy!"

He made a move as though to seize Hal, but the lad was too quick for him.

With his left hand he grabbed the German's elbow in a tight grip and squeezed. Then, even before the man had time to cry out, the lad released his hold, reversed his revolver quickly and brought the butt down on the German's head with all his force.

The man crumpled up without a word and lay still.

Stubbs, who had witnessed this proceeding in open-eyed wonder, now uttered an exclamation.

"What are you doing? Trying to get us both killed?" he demanded.

Hal did not reply. Stooping over the prostrate German he ran his hand quickly through the man's pockets. Then he straightened up, and by the soft light of the moon, ran through the papers hurriedly. He gave an exclamation of satisfaction.

"I thought I should find something," he muttered. "Come on now,

Stubbs!" he said.

The little war correspondent hurried after him without another word.

CHAPTER XXV

IN GRAVE PERIL

Chester's sigh of relief almost choked in his throat. But he determined to brave out the situation as well as he could.

"No," exclaimed the man who had spoken, "this boy is no German!"

Even the Crown Prince was surprised.

"Not a German!" he exclaimed. "Then what is he? A—"

"A spy!" the other concluded for him.

"Impossible!" declared the Crown Prince. "How could there be a spy among us?"

"Well, he's here. Surely you can look at the boy and tell he is not a German."

The Crown Prince approached Chester and scrutinized him closely.

"Who are you?" he demanded at length.

"I have told you, sir," replied Chester, quietly.

"But you have not told the truth," was the Crown Prince's reply. "I can see you are not French. Are you British?"

"No, sir."

"Then what?"

"Well," said Chester, at length, realizing that subterfuge was useless,

"I am an American."

"With the French army, eh?" said the Crown Prince.

Chester did not reply. He could see no reason for incriminating himself, though he realized, too, that it made no particular difference whether he replied or remained silent. He was convicted either way.

"You don't answer," exclaimed the Crown Prince. "That is evidence sufficient of your guilt."

Chester shrugged his shoulders. The Crown Prince eyed him angrily.

"You are one of these indifferent ones, are you?" he said. "Well, we know how to cure that. Do you realize what is in store for you?"

"Perfectly," replied Chester. "The firing squad."

"No; you are wrong," was the Crown Prince's answer. "The firing squad is too good for spies. You have been captured within our lines in disguise; therefore, there can be no doubt that you are a spy. You shall be hanged."

Chester took a step backward. He had realized what his fate would be should he fall into the hands of the enemy, but this was more than he had bargained for. And at that moment there seemed little possibility that Hal would find and be able to rescue him.

"Looks like the end of my rope," the lad muttered.

He made no reply to the Crown Prince's words. He knew a reply would be useless.

"So you decline to talk?" said the Crown Prince. "Well, it matters not." He motioned to one of his staff. "See that this prisoner is hanged by the neck at sunrise," he said.

The officer saluted and motioned to Chester to precede him from the tent. There was nothing for it but to obey and the lad walked out.

Now it happened that in some unaccountable manner the Germans had neglected

to relieve Chester of his revolvers. The lad's right hand rested upon the weapon in his belt. But he was unable at this moment to draw with any degree of hope, for the German officer was directly behind him and Chester knew he would be shot down before he could turn and fire. Also, should he succeed in gaining the drop on the German by a quick move, he was in the very heart of the German camp and the sound of a shot would bring a thousand men on his heels.

The lad bided his time.

Perhaps half a mile from the quarters of the German Crown Prince, Chester's captor motioned him into a tent. Chester entered without a word. What hopes he might have had of suddenly flashing his revolver on his captor disappeared, for the man entered close behind him.

He clapped his hands.

A moment later a second officer appeared in the tent and stood at attention.

"Call a guard of four men and have this tent surrounded," instructed Chester's captor.

The man saluted and left the tent. He was back within a few moments, however, and saluting said:

"The tent is surrounded, sir."

"Very well," said Chester's captor. "You may go."

Again the man left the tent; then Chester's captor said:

"Now, I guess you will be safe here until morning; after that you will be safe for all time."

"Thanks," said Chester, dryly.

The German left the tent.

Chester now took stock of his surroundings. Outside he could hear his guards pacing up and down.

"If I could get one of them in here at a time," the lad told himself, "perhaps I could dispose of them. I'll try it."

Approaching the entrance, he poked his head out.

"Get back inside there," a gruff voice exclaimed, and Chester beheld a large German soldier with his rifle pointed squarely at his head.

"Look here," said Chester. "I want a drink of water."

"Get back inside," was the sharp reply. "I'll get it for you."

Chester moved back in the tent. Five minutes later the German soldier stuck his head inside.

"Here's your water," he said, holding forth a tin cup.

Chester's right hand rested on his belt as he extended his left to take the cup. The German had lowered his gun at that moment; and he paid dearly for his carelessness.

Chester made a sudden movement and the cup of water went clattering to the ground. At the same moment Chester brought the butt of his revolver down on the head of the German soldier with a crunch. The man fell to the ground.

Hastily now Chester seized the man by the feet and dragged him inside. Then the lad quickly stripped him of his clothes and donned them himself. They were large, but Chester made them fit by turning up the trousers and drawing his belt tight. Then he picked up the German's gun and stepped from the tent.

The lad had intended to move away from the tent immediately, but even as he would have walked off a second of the guards approached and engaged him in conversation. Chester muffled his voice as well as possible and imitated the hoarse tones of the man he had disposed of.

"Nice night," said the German.

"Nice night," Chester agreed.

"What is to be done with the prisoner inside?"

"Hang him in the morning," said Chester.

"Good! It's the way all spies should be treated."

"Of course; unless they chance to be German spies."

"That's different," muttered the guard.

"Of course it is," Chester agreed and added: "You'd better get back to your place. The prisoner might escape under your nose."

"Not much chance," was the reply. "I wouldn't care if he did try, though. I'd like to have a shot at him."

"Nice pleasant sort of a customer," Chester muttered to himself. Aloud, he said: "Well, I was just giving you a word of warning. You can't tell about these fellows. They're pretty slippery customers."

"Well, this one won't slip out of our clutches," declared the guard. "I wonder if I hadn't better go in and have a look at him?"

"Can't be done," said Chester. "My instructions are to let no one pass."

"So are mine, but what has that to do with it?"

"A whole lot. I'm on guard in front here and I say you can't go in."

"Come now, be a good fellow, I want to have a look at the prisoner."

"Can't be done," returned Chester.

"You are a deucedly uncivil sort of a fellow," said the guard. "I don't seem to know you. What's your name?"

"None of your business," returned Chester.

"Is that so? Suppose I make it some of my business," and the guard took a threatening step forward.

"You'll be sorry, that's all."

"Think so, do you? Let me tell you something. I'm going to hunt you up in the morning and have it out with you."

"All right," said Chester. "You can suit yourself about that. But wait until morning. Remember we're guarding this prisoner now."

"Well, I've a notion to settle with you right now, prisoner or no prisoner. I don't like you."

"To tell the truth, I don't think a whole lot of you," said Chester. "I would a great deal rather be without your company. You had better get back where you belong."

"Think so, do you? Well, I'll show you."

With these words the German guard forgot all about the prisoner supposed to be inside and everything else save that he wanted to get at Chester. He dropped his rifle with a clatter and struck at Chester with his right fist.

"Well, if you must have it," Chester muttered to himself.

He, too, dropped his gun and his right fist shot forth. The German staggered back with a grunt; but Chester's blow had not reached a vital spot and the guard leaped forward again.

This time Chester timed his blow a little more carefully.

"Smack!"

The lad's fist landed flush on the guard's jaw. The man rolled over like a log.

Chester looked around quickly.

"Now to get out of this," he muttered.

He picked up his rifle and turned to move away. But even as he would have started the sound of hurrying footsteps halted him; and he began to pace up and down in front of the tent.

Two figures dashed toward him; behind them came the sound of shots.

"Hello!" said Chester to himself. "More trouble in camp. Wonder what's up now?"

The answer was to come sooner than he could have expected. As the two figures came closer, other figures appeared in the distance. There came the sound of revolver shots.

"This way!" cried a voice.

Chester raised his rifle, ready to take a hand in the proceedings himself should the occasion demand.

"This thing is getting rather complicated," he told himself.

The two approaching figures came closer rapidly. Chester gave an exclamation of pure astonishment.

CHAPTER XXVI

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET

When Hal and Stubbs took to their heels after the former had relieved the German officer of his papers, they had run some distance before coming across anyone in the darkness. Then they came upon another figure so suddenly that it almost resulted in their capture.

Hal, in the lead, had been just about to slacken his pace, when, rounding a corner suddenly, he had crashed into a form in the night. The two went down in a heap; and Stubbs, turning a moment later, had stumbled over the pair of struggling forms before he could check himself. In a moment he found himself mixed up in the struggling mass.

A fist struck Stubbs squarely upon the nose.

"Hey! Quit that," said Stubbs, and struck out with his right.

This blow came almost ending the fight right there and in a manner not at all advantageous to Stubbs and Hal. In the darkness the little war correspondent had been unable to distinguish friend from foe and his fist caught Hal just above the right eye.

Now Anthony Stubbs had considerable power in his right arm and for a moment Hal was dazed by the blow. Before he could clear his head, his opponent had struck him a heavy blow on the other side of the neck and leaped to his feet.

At that instant Stubbs realized what he had done and a sickening sensation struck him in the pit of the stomach; but the little man determined to give the best that was in him to undo his work.

With an angry bellow he charged his German opponent. The latter stepped back a pace and sought to draw his revolver, but Stubbs was too quick for him. Almost at the moment that Stubbs crashed into his foe he lowered his head, as would a steer, and his head caught the German in the region of the belt.

Came a gasp from the German as he doubled up and collapsed. He rolled over upon the ground several times in a vain attempt to gain his breath; then lay still.

The victory was with Stubbs!

Hal had now regained consciousness and sat up just in time to see the effect of Stubbs' charge.

"Good work, Stubbs!" the lad cried. "Now lend me a hand and we'll get away from here!"

Stubbs did as requested and a moment later Hal was on his feet. The lad felt the bump over his eye tenderly.

"Stubbs," he said, "it was rather dark and we were so mixed up on the ground that I couldn't see, but I would be willing to wager a whole lot that it wasn't a German who gave me this crack over the eye. Now was it?"

"Well," said Stubbs, "I—I—"

"Just as I thought," declared Hal. "So you tried to do me up as well as the German, eh?"

"It was an accident," declared Stubbs. "You know I wouldn't have done it on purpose, Hal."

"It came very near being a costly accident, Stubbs. Suppose the German had laid you out? Then what? We would have been nabbed, sure."

"I'll be more careful next time," said Stubbs, apologetically.

"You won't have to be," said Hal. "Next time I'm going to get in the first blow. Then we'll see how you like it. But come. We must be moving away from here. See. The German is regaining consciousness. I don't want to kill him, and we mustn't be here when he comes to. Come now."

Hal led the way rapidly along the row of tents.

"Looks as though we should be safe enough now," the lad said, after they had walked for perhaps fifteen minutes.

The lad produced his watch, and by the soft light of the moon, took note of the time.

"By Jove! half past one o'clock," he said. "We shall have to hurry back or Chester will be worried."

"Let's hope Chester will be there when we arrive," said Stubbs.

"Oh, he'll be there, all right. Come on."

"Say," said Stubbs as they walked along, "what I want to know is how you knew the German officer you knocked down had any valuable papers?"

"That's easy," was Hal's response. "Before entering the tent where your little game was in progress, I overheard one of the officers without mention the fact that an aide of General Ludwig's was in the tent and that he carried important papers. The rest was very simple."

"I see," said Stubbs. "Now what—look there, Hal."

The little man broke off suddenly and pointed directly ahead. Advancing toward them were perhaps a dozen German soldiers, with an officer at their head.

"We'll have to get out of the way," said Hal, quietly. "We haven't time to answer questions now."

He turned between the rows of tents and hurried on, with Stubbs close behind him. And from the German officer came the command to halt.

Instead, Hal increased his speed and a moment later he and Stubbs were running quietly between the rows of German tents. Behind came the sound of pursuing footsteps.

"We're in for it now, Stubbs," panted Hal. "I was a fool to run. They know now that there is something wrong and they won't rest until they have scoured the

entire camp."

"Then we are done for!" exclaimed Anthony Stubbs.

"Not yet!" replied Hal. "While there's life there's hope. Never say die, Stubbs."

The little man did not reply. He saved all the breath he had left for running purposes, for he felt that he was likely to have to run the rest of the night.

Suddenly, making another short turn, Hal pulled up. Stubbs did likewise and both listened attentively.

The footsteps were some distance back.

"We've gained a bit, Stubbs," said Hal.

"Well, what's the use of waiting here then?" demanded the war correspondent.
"Let's gain a bit more."

"Hold on!" exclaimed Hal, as Stubbs would have taken to his heels again. "We can't run clear through the German camp like this, you know. We're bound to be caught if we try it. It must be strategy rather than fleetness of foot if we hope to get out of this situation safely."

"All right," Stubbs agreed. "Whatever you say suits me. But if it is strategy that is going to get us out of this, tell me some strategy real quick."

Hal considered a moment. Every second the pursuing footsteps were coming closer. Stubbs squirmed about uneasily.

"Say," he said at last; "hear those fellows coming? I'm going to get away from here."

Again he took to his heels; and there was nothing for Hal to do but follow, for he did not wish to lose sight of the little man. Besides, in that moment's pause, Hal had decided upon a plan that he believed had a fair chance of success.

For perhaps five minutes more they ran on, Hal fearful at every moment that German soldiers would pour from their tents and interrupt their flight. Fortunately, this did not happen, however.

Hal, fleet of foot as he was, was hard pressed to catch up with Stubbs, who had gained a slight lead and was covering the ground with rapid strides. But at last the lad overtook him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Slow down, there," he commanded. "First thing you know you'll have the whole camp after us. Those shoes of yours must be at least number elevens. They shake the whole earth when you run."

"Well, they have come in pretty handy to-night," said Stubbs. "What are you stopping here for?"

"Because I don't want to arouse every German in the camp. I'll tell you about that strategy now."

"Well, let's hear it real quick," said Stubbs, impatiently. "I want to get away from here."

"So do I," said Hal, "but I want to get away all in one piece. Here's my plan: We can't hope to get away by running. Sooner or later, before we are clear of the German lines, we are certain to bump into some one. That would settle it. We'll go ahead a little more, then we'll enter one of these tents, tap the occupants on the head with our revolver butts and crawl into their cots. Then when our pursuers have gone by we'll go back."

"By Jove!" said Stubbs, "that's not half bad. Wonder why I can't think of things like that?"

"Because you're too busy running," returned Hal.

The first of the pursuers came into sight at that moment and uttered a cry. This told the others following that the prey had been sighted and they dashed forward.

"Come as fast as you can, Stubbs," shouted Hal. "We've got to get out of sight."

In the distance Hal saw a solitary figure standing before a tent. He knew that this figure had seen him and decided that the man must be disposed of before he could give the alarm. Therefore, he headed straight for him.

As he ran, Hal expected every moment that the figure before the tent would open fire on him and his own revolver was held ready should the man's first shot go

wild. Hal did not wish to fire if he could possibly avoid it.

Close behind Hal, Stubbs panted and puffed along. Once Hal was forced to reduce his speed in order that Stubbs might keep up with him. The little man was doing his best, but his short legs were not built to maintain a pace that Hal could set. Besides, he had long since lost his youthfulness and he could not run as he had done in his earlier days.

"I can't go much farther, Hal," he gasped.

"Just a little ways, Stubbs," Hal urged him on. "See that man in the tent there? That's where we'll hide. I'll knock him out if he doesn't get me first. The fool! He is taking a long chance. He should fire."

At that moment there came a fusillade of shots from behind.

In his anxiousness to get the man in the door of the tent out of the way, Hal had continued a straight course longer than he had realized; and this had allowed the pursuers to come within sight again. There was nothing to do but make the best of it now.

Hal dashed straight for the figure in the tent.

Drawing close, Hal raised his revolver, reversed, and held it ready to bring down on the figure's head the moment they should come together. There was a sudden exclamation from the figure in the tent; and with it Hal dropped his arm; the exclamation was a single word:

"Hal!"

CHAPTER XXVII

A HARD BLOW TO THE ENEMY

It was the voice of Chester.

Hal stopped abruptly. Stubbs also panted up and came to a halt.

"What on earth are you doing here, Chester?" asked Hal.

For answer Chester pointed to the men who were pursuing his friends.

"Are those fellows after you?" he asked.

"Yes," was Hal's answer.

"Then let's get away from here," said Chester. "Come on."

He took to his heels and Hal and Stubbs followed him. Gaining his friend's side, Hal, in a few quick words, explained his plan as he had outlined it to Stubbs only a few moments before.

"Then we shall have to get out of sight of our pursuers," said Chester. "Come, Stubbs," he called back over his shoulder, "a little spurt now and we shall be safe."

Stubbs tried to respond to this command; and he did succeed in getting up a little more speed as he turned about a tent after Hal and Chester. Twice more the three doubled on their tracks and then Hal pulled up before a tent.

"This will do as well as another, I guess," he said.

"Waste no time," said Chester. "Revolvers ready and come on."

With weapons reversed the three entered the tent quietly. Deep snores within led the friends to the cots of the occupants of the tent.

"I hate to do this," said Chester, as he stood over a German soldier, "but there is no help for it."

His arm rose and fell.

Across the tent Hal performed a similar operation. Then they explored carefully in the darkness for signs of another figure.

There was none.

"Only two cots, Hal," whispered Chester. "Now let's get to bed until things have quieted down."

Quickly the three threw off their clothes and clambered into the cots, first throwing the men they had overcome beneath them. Stubbs had a cot to himself, while Hal and Chester climbed in together.

"When they fail to find trace of us they likely will come back and ask if we have been seen," said Hal. "We must pretend to be asleep."

A few moments later the sound of their pursuers' feet were audible as they passed the tent on the run. Then they died away in the distance.

"Had we better wait or try to get out before they come back?" asked Chester.

Hal was undecided, but the question was answered for him.

Only a few minutes had passed when there came the sound of returning footsteps. The boys could hear them stop before the different tents and also the sound of voices. Directly a man poked his head into the tent.

"Awake in here?" he asked.

There was no answer.

The man advanced into the tent and approached Stubbs' cot which was nearest the entrance. He laid a hand on Stubbs' shoulder and shook him.

"Hello," said the little man sleepily. "What's the matter. Time to get up already?"

"No," was the reply. "Have you seen anything of three men, whose appearance would indicate they had been running?"

"I've been asleep," protested Stubbs. "I had a dream. But I guess the men I saw in my dreams are not the ones you want."

"These are not dream men," was the response. "I thought possibly you might have heard them run by this tent."

"No," said Stubbs, truthfully, "I didn't hear them run by this tent."

"All right," said the German and withdrew.

For perhaps an hour the three fugitives lay in the shelter of the German tent. From time to time they heard voices without but after awhile these died away. After there had been absolute silence without for perhaps fifteen minutes, Chester slipped from the cot.

"May as well move, I guess," he whispered.

Hal also arose.

"All right," he said. "Come, Stubbs."

There was no reply from Stubbs' cot. Hal walked quickly across the tent, laid a hand on Stubbs' shoulder and shook him vigorously.

"Come, Stubbs!" he exclaimed. "Time to get out of here."

Stubbs muttered something unintelligible and turned over.

"By Jove! if he isn't asleep," said Chester, who came to Hal's side now.

"That's what he is," agreed Hal. "Well, we've got to get him up. Grab hold of his feet."

Chester did so and together the boys picked the little man up bodily.

"I say!" said Stubbs, sleepily, "let me alone, will you? I want to sleep a little

more."

"You'll find an eternal sleep if you don't get out of here, Stubbs," said Hal. "Don't you know you are in a German tent and that you'll be shot if you're found here?"

This awoke Stubbs instantly. He stood up and rubbed his eyes.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "How on earth did I go to sleep in a predicament like this?"

"I don't know how you did it," returned Hal, "but you did. Come on, Chester, let's get out of here while we have a chance."

He led the way cautiously to the door of the tent and poked his head carefully outside.

"Coast seems to be clear," he announced. "Come on and walk quietly."

The others followed him.

Hal made a direct line for the place where they had hidden the large army aeroplane. Fortunately, the lad was blessed with an almost uncanny sense of direction and he knew the course he laid out would take them to the hiding spot of the plane as directly as if he could see the huge machine from where he stood.

All was silence in the big camp as the lads walked cautiously along, stopping now and then and straining their ears for a sound that would indicate the presence of a watchful German sentry. No such sound came and the three had almost reached the outskirts of the camp when Hal, who was leading, stopped and pointed to an object that loomed up large in the darkness a short distance away.

"What is it?" asked Stubbs in a hoarse whisper.

"Looks to me like a place where ammunition might be stored," said Hal, quietly. "I shall have a look."

"Let it alone, Hal," said Stubbs, anxiously. "Don't go fooling around there. You're likely to blow us all up."

"I guess not," returned Hal, "but I wouldn't mind blowing all the ammunition up that the place may contain."

"By Jove!" said Chester. "A good idea! I'm with you."

"Well, I'm not," declared Stubbs. "I know where our aeroplane is and that's where I'm going right this minute. I don't know how to fly the thing, and if you fellows go fooling around that ammunition depot I'll probably have to hunt another pilot; but Anthony Stubbs is not going to be blown up with his eyes open when he can help it."

"Better wait here, Stubbs," said Chester.

"Not me," returned the little man, decisively. "You'll find me at the plane when you get there; or if you get there, I should say."

"But there is nothing sure that the building contains ammunition," said Hal. "I just guessed at it, Stubbs. Come and have a look."

"Oh, it contains ammunition, all right."

"How do you know?" demanded Chester.

"Well, if it didn't you fellows wouldn't have spied it. You call it good luck. I call it hard luck. I tell you that every time I go any place with you I risk my neck. Sure the building contains ammunition! It was put there for the sole purpose of having you blow it up. That's the way it looks to me. But I can see all the fireworks I want to from a distance. Good-bye."

"All right, Stubbs, if you are such a coward," said Chester, somewhat nettled.

"I'd rather be a live coward than a dead fool," was Stubbs' reply.

He walked off.

"Come on, Chester," said Hal. "We'll have a look at this place."

He led the way close to the building. Going slowly and cautiously they advanced to within a short distance of the building without being observed, although they could see an occasional dark shape as it moved about in front of the building.

"Guards there," said Hal, briefly.

"Sure," said Chester. "I believe you have guessed right. I am sure the place is filled with ammunition. Now if we could just dispose of the guards and place a time fuse—"

"It would be a hard blow to the Germans," Hal agreed. "We'll try it."

Still cautiously they approached. A guard arose from in front of the building. He stretched his arms. Apparently he had been asleep. Then he sat down again.

"We'll wait a minute," Hal whispered. "Perhaps he'll doze again."

Fortune was with the boys. A few moments later there came the sound of a gentle snore. The man was asleep. Immediately the lads sprang to action. Quickly they dashed across the open space to the side of the large building, which was made of wood and seemed to be nothing more than a huge barn.

Chester stopped beside the guard and raised his revolver. He hesitated a moment and then lowered the weapon.

"Let him be," he muttered. "He won't be with us long anyhow."

Hal, in the meantime, had been exploring the barn. Coming back he picked up the guard's rifle.

"I can pry a board loose with this," he told Chester, in a whisper.

This proved easier work than it looked. The board came loose without much trouble. Hal disappeared inside.

"Ammunition?" Chester asked, as he poked his head in.

"Yes," Hal whispered back.

"Find a fuse?" asked Chester.

Again Hal's reply was in the affirmative.

"Stretch it out here then, and hurry," ordered Chester.

Hal appeared on the outside a moment later, carrying a fuse. One end still remained in the barn. The other Hal carried some distance.

"Guess you'd better dispose of that guard first," he said. "He might wake up and extinguish the fuse."

It was the work of but a moment, much as Chester hated to perform it.

Then Hal struck a light, shielding the match with his cap. He applied the match to the fuse. Then he sprang to his feet and called to Chester:

"Run!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

FLIGHT

Both lads fled through the night knowing that their lives depended upon it. For safety's sake it was absolutely necessary that they put as great a distance as possible between them and the barn.

According to Hal's calculations, the spot where the aeroplane was hidden was far enough away so that the machine would not be disabled by the force of the explosion; and it was for this point that the lads made at full speed.

They reached there safely; and still there had been no explosion.

"How much time did you allow, Hal?" asked Chester.

"Ten minutes, as nearly as I could judge," was the reply.

"Then we still have a few minutes, I guess. Had we better wait here until after the blast, or shall we run out the machine and get up in the air."

"We'd better stay here," returned Hal, positively, "I don't know how much ammunition there is in that barn. It's going to kick up a terrible fuss. My advice is that we lay flat on the ground, hold our ears and bury our faces. Immediately after the blast we'll run the machine out and get up as swiftly as possible."

"I can imagine the effect of the explosion," said Chester.

"Well, I can't," returned Hal; "nor can you. How many men it may kill, how many it may maim and what damage it will do cannot be estimated. But one thing sure, immediately afterwards every sleepy German soldier within fifty miles will be on the alert. The Germans will know it was not an accident. They will attribute the explosion to a bomb dropped from the air. We may have trouble

reaching our lines."

"I wish you hadn't done it, Hal," mumbled Stubbs, whom the lads had found hiding beside the aeroplane. "It will dig a hole a mile deep in the ground. Rocks, guns and everything will come down like hail. We may be killed."

"Quiet, Stubbs!" ordered Hal. "Flat on the ground with you now. Hold your ears and bury your faces until I tell you to get up."

He suited the action to the word. Chester and Stubbs followed his example.

For long moments, it seemed to them, they waited for the sound of the blast that would shake the country. Each was anxious, for there was no telling what the result of the explosion might be. Stubbs squirmed uneasily as he burrowed in the ground, while Chester and Hal were by no means easy in their minds.

So long did they wait that it seemed to Chester something must have gone wrong. Perhaps the fuse had gone out. Perhaps another German guard had discovered it in time and pinched out the fire. There were many possibilities, and the lad considered them all as he lay prostrate on the ground.

He was about to raise his head and ask Hal a question, when, suddenly, the blast came.

There was, at first, a long grumbling roar, which, it seemed, would never end. Gradually the roar increased until it reached such proportions as to be beyond all description; it was a roar the like of which neither of the three figures who lay there had ever heard before—probably never would hear again.

Louder and louder it grew and then ended in a final blast that was louder than many thousand times the loudest peal of thunder—louder than the simultaneous firing of thousands of guns.

Then it became suddenly quiet—so quiet that Hal, Chester and Stubbs, who had now leaped to their feet, felt a queer sensation hovering all about them; so quiet that it was, for the moment, impossible to hear.

Then something descended not five yards from where the three stood with a terrible roar. Instinctively, all fell to the ground again, crowding themselves into the smallest possible space.

For the rain of debris had begun. And for several minutes it continued. Pieces of guns, of rocks and of all objects imaginable fell upon all sides of the three; but, fortunately, none struck them. Then the rain of debris ceased.

In the great German camp all was hideous confusion. Thousands of lives had been snuffed out by the force of the titanic blast; thousands of others had perished in the rain of steel and iron and rock that followed. It was the greatest catastrophe that had befallen the Germans for many a long day. The effect of the explosion was appalling.

Hal's first thought after the rain of steel and iron had ceased was for the aeroplane. If it had been smashed they were, indeed, in a serious situation. If it had gone through the storm safely they were comparatively safe.

Together the three friends rushed toward the machine. Quickly they rolled it out into the open. Hal examined the engine and steering apparatus carefully.

"All right, Hal?" asked Chester, anxiously.

Hal shook his head.

"Something wrong with the engine."

"Can you fix it?"

"I haven't been able to determine just what's wrong yet."

Hal worked rapidly; and at last he gave an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Find it?" asked Chester.

"Yes; I'll have it fixed in a quarter of an hour."

"If we're not away from here in five minutes we're likely to be dead," said Stubbs, plaintively.

"Don't croak, Stubbs," said Chester. "We've done a good day's work and you should be proud to have a hand in it."

"Should I?" said Stubbs. "Well, all right, if you say so; but I would be a whole

lot more proud if I could get back and tell somebody about it."

"A man deserves no particular credit for doing his duty," said Chester, quietly.

"Maybe not," agreed Stubbs. "But I haven't done mine yet."

"Why—"

"My duty," said Stubbs, "is to get back to some place where I can send an account of this feat to the *New York Gazette*. Believe me, it will be some scoop."

"Scoop?"

"Yes. I mean no other paper will have the facts as I have them."

"All right, Stubbs," said Chester. "I hope you get your scoop."

"I'm going to get it," said Stubbs, excitedly, "if I have to walk over the body of the Kaiser himself to do it."

"That's the way to talk," said Chester. "Confidence is the greatest asset in the world."

"It's not confidence," said Stubbs. "I've just got to do it. Why, if my boss knew I had something like this in my hands and I didn't get it to him I'd lose my job."

Chester made no reply to this; instead, he bent over Hal who was still tinkering with the engine of the aeroplane.

"How are you making it?" he asked.

"I don't seem to be able to fix it," returned Hal. "Say! you two fellows walk away a bit and keep an eye open for possible enemies. We don't want to be caught off our guard here."

Chester and Stubbs did as Hal directed, though the latter mumbled to himself as he took his position some distance away.

"That's the trouble with these contraptions," he said. "Always out of whack. If a man had a good horse now—"

He broke off and continued to mumble something unintelligible to himself.

"I've found it," cried Hal now, from the aeroplane. "I was working on the wrong part. I'll have it fixed in a jiffy."

Chester made no reply, but Stubbs brightened up wonderfully.

"That's the talk!" he cried. "Fix her up, Hal, and get a move on."

Hal smiled to himself as he tinkered with the engine.

Hal was deep in his work when his attention was attracted by a sudden cry of alarm from Stubbs.

"Germans!" cried the little man, and without stopping to look again, he dashed toward Hal.

At almost the same moment Chester saw a force of the enemy advancing toward him. He, too, uttered a cry of alarm and dashed toward the place where Hal still bent over the aeroplane.

Stubbs danced up and down and chanted excitedly:

"Hurry up, Hal! Hurry up! Here they come!"

"Shut up, Stubbs!" exclaimed Hal, straining all his energies to fix the break in the plane. "I'll have it in a minute."

"A minute will be too late!" cried Stubbs.

"Be still, Stubbs!" said Chester, quietly. "Give Hal a chance. There is still time to run if it's necessary."

And at that moment Hal sprang to his feet.

"Fixed!" he cried joyfully. "Climb in here, quickly!"

The others needed no urging and soon all were in their places. It was now that Hal thanked his stars that the plane was one of the few that could rise from the ground.

Slowly the large army plane gathered headway as he moved along the ground. Hal increased the speed slowly in spite of the close proximity, for he realized that too great haste might spell disaster, and he wished to test the engine carefully before soaring into the air.

"Up, Hal!" cried Stubbs. "Here they come!"

Hal paid no heed to this frantic exclamation. Instead, for a moment, he reduced the speed of the craft as something seemed not to be working exactly right. Calmly he bent over the engine and tinkered with it a moment later. Then he sat straight and exclaimed:

"All right now!"

Stubbs gave a great sigh of relief.

Hal increased the speed of the machine until it fairly flew over the ground. And then his hand touched the elevating lever.

Immediately the plane soared in the air like a big bird.

And from the ground came exclamations of surprise; for it was not until that moment that the Germans who had been advancing toward the friends had discovered their presence; although they had been espied by Chester and Stubbs some moments before.

A volley of rifle bullets was fired at the rapidly rising machine.

One flew by Stubbs' ear and he dropped to the bottom of the car with a howl of fright.

A moment later, however, the machine was beyond reach of the rifles of the German troops, and Hal laid the craft out on a straightaway course, heading directly west.

"Nothing can stop us now but enemy aeroplanes," he said quietly.

He increased his speed. The big army plane flew toward the distant French lines with a speed greater than that of the fastest express train.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE END OF MATIN

"You have done well, sirs. President Poincare shall hear of this."

The speaker was General Petain. Before him stood Hal, Chester and Anthony Stubbs. Hal, acting as spokesman, had just concluded an account of their adventures within the enemy lines, a venture from which they had returned successfully and safely only an hour before.

For, after the aeroplane had descended above the French lines and headed for the French positions, the journey had been without important event. True, there had been a brush with one enemy aircraft; but this had been worsted. A second, which had given chase, was distanced with ease and the three friends had returned to the French lines unscathed.

"So!" said General Petain, "you blew up the enemy's ammunition depot, eh? The explosion was felt even here. We knew the foe had suffered some hard blow, but I had no idea that it had been delivered by your hand."

Both lads flushed at the praise of General Petain. Stubbs was pleased.

"Now tell me what else you did, if anything," said the general. "Did you get the information after which you went?"

"We did, sir," returned Hal.

He passed to the general the documents he had taken from the young German aide. General Petain scanned them carefully.

"These will be invaluable to me," he said quietly.

Then Chester told the French commander of the conversation he had overheard in the quarters of the German Crown Prince.

"Now that I have escaped," the lad concluded, "it may be possible, of course, that the German plans will be altered."

"You have done well," said the general again, "and as I have said, your work shall be brought to the personal attention of the President." He turned to Stubbs. "You, sir," he said, "are not a soldier, yet I have to thank you for your part in this mission."

Stubbs blushed like a school boy.

"I didn't do anything deserving of credit, sir," he said. "My young friends here were the directing heads and performed all the dangerous work."

"Nevertheless," returned the general, "you are deserving of praise and if there is anything I can do for you, you have but to ask it."

Stubbs hesitated. There was something he wanted very much but he did not know whether to make the request or not. General Petain saw the little man's indecision, and said with a smile:

"You have something on your mind, sir. Come, out with it. Be sure it will be granted if it lies in my power."

Still Stubbs hesitated. Chester stepped forward, smiling.

"I believe I can tell you what it is, sir," he said.

"Speak," said the general.

"Why, sir," said Chester, "Mr. Stubbs would have your permission to send an account of the great explosion to his newspaper uncensored. He would have the people of the United States know, through his paper, of the severe blow the enemy has suffered."

"H-m-m-m," muttered the general. "The United States will hear of the disaster, of course. Mr. Stubbs, with the other correspondents, will be allowed to file his despatches after the official report has been made."

"But that's the point, sir," said Stubbs, stepping forward. "I would like to have my paper get the news first."

"Oho! I see," exclaimed General Petain. "You want for your paper what you Americans' call a—a—a—"

"Scoop."

Chester supplied the word.

"Exactly," said Stubbs.

The general considered the matter for a moment. Then he threw wide his arms in a gesture of consent.

"It shall be done," he said.

"Thank you, General," said Stubbs. "Then, with your permission, I will retire to my own quarters to prepare my despatches."

"One minute, Stubbs," said Chester. "You may perhaps remember that until a short time ago you shared quarters with Hal and me. We would like to have you come back."

Stubbs grinned.

"That was before the discovery of the great conspiracy," he said. "By the way, General, may I make so bold as to ask what has been done toward crushing the move?"

"It has been crushed, sir," replied General Petain, quietly. "That shall have to suffice. And, by the way, Mr. Stubbs, I must tell you that if you refer to that matter in your despatches they will be strictly censored."

"I shall not mention the matter, General."

Stubbs bowed and took his departure, first stopping to say to Hal and Chester:

"You'll find me back in our old quarters when you arrive."

"Now, boys," said General Petain, after Stubbs had gone, "you are relieved of

duty for the rest of the day. To-morrow morning, however, I shall have need of you; for to-morrow—and I am telling you something few know—we shall launch a new drive, basing our attacks upon the information which you have just now furnished me. Good-bye until to-morrow."

The general walked to the door of the tent with the two boys and waved a hand to them as they turned away.

"Well," said Hal, as they walked along, "we apparently have accomplished something worth while."

"To hear the general talk you would think we had," agreed Chester, "and still we didn't do so much, after all."

"That's what I think."

"By the way," said Chester, "I'm going to hunt up Stubbs' old quarters. Perhaps he hasn't moved his things yet. I'll lend a hand."

"All right," said Hal. "I'll go along without you. I'll probably be taking a nap when you reach our quarters. Don't awaken me. I'm tired."

The lads parted and Hal continued on his way to his quarters.

Stubbs had not yet arrived. Hal sat down on the edge of his cot to remove his shoes. As he did so he thought he heard a sound from behind him. He whirled suddenly and there, a few feet away, his revolver trained right upon Hal's heart, stood Matin, the French soldier who already had tried once to kill him.

"A visitor, I see," said Hal, quietly. "You will pardon me a moment while I remove my shoes. That is what I started to do and when I start a thing I always like to finish it."

"Take them off if you want to," returned Matin, grinning evilly. "You won't need to put them on again."

"Think not?" said Hal. "You never can tell about those things, Matin."

"Trying to be funny, are you?" returned Matin. "Well, go ahead. You won't lie funny long—not to anyone but me. I'm going to shoot you."

"Don't suppose you would let me draw my own gun first, would you?" asked Hal.

"No. What do you think I am?"

"Just a coward; that's all," said Hal, quietly.

"Coward, am I?" exclaimed Matin, taking a quick step forward.

"Correct," replied Hal. "It's about your size to shoot a man in the back. I have had dealings with your kind before. You're afraid to take an even chance."

"It's not that I'm afraid," said Matin. "It's just that I want to make sure. I failed twice before."

"Then it was you who tried to shoot me in here one night, eh?" asked Hal.

"Yes; and I would have succeeded had it not been for your friend. When I have disposed of you I shall settle with him also."

"I don't think so, Matin."

"You don't? What's to prevent me?"

"Why," said Hal, "when I am through with you, you will be in no condition to settle with anyone. Now, if you will take my advice, you'll put that gun in your pocket and leave this tent."

"Talk pretty big, don't you?" said Matin, with a sneer. "Well, I'll show you!"

He raised his revolver so that the muzzle pointed squarely between Hal's eyes. His finger tightened on the trigger.

"One moment, Matin," said Hal, quietly. "Don't you know that before you can pull the trigger my friend in the doorway will kill you?"

A look of fright and disappointment passed over Matin's face. Slowly he lowered his revolver and turned toward the doorway. It was the moment for which Hal had been waiting.

With a bound he leaped upon Matin and with his left hand seized Matin's right

wrist. Matin uttered a snarl of rage.

"Tricked me, did you?" he shouted. "You shall pay for it."

It had been Hal's intention at first simply to wrest the revolver from his opponent's hands and then turn the man over to the officer of the guard.

But Matin's strength was greater than the lad had imagined; also he was wild with rage. With his free hand he struck viciously at Hal, while he kicked with his feet and sought to bury his teeth in Hal's arm.

But Hal held him back.

Vainly, Matin sought to move his right arm around so as to bring the muzzle upon Hal's heart. With a quick move Hal suddenly released his hold upon Matin's pistol wrist and seized the pistol hand. His finger covered Matin's finger on the trigger.

Matin's hand at that moment was extended straight from him. Slowly now, as Hal exerted his utmost pressure, the arm described a semicircle. Now it pointed almost straight forward. Then, as Hal brought more strength into play, the arm curved inward; and directly the revolver pointed squarely at Matin's heart.

The perspiration stood out in great beads on Matin's forehead. He was panting and gasping for breath. Hal was breathing easily, though the manner in which the sinews on his forehead and arms stood out showed to what extent he had extended himself.

When the mouth of the revolver pointed at Matin's heart, Hal said quietly:

"Now, Matin, if you will release your hold on this gun I will let you go free."

Matin's answer was a snarl of rage.

Whether the man went suddenly insane or whether he knew fully what he was about, Hal can not say to this day; but under his own finger, the finger on the trigger tightened. There was a flash, a muffled report and the form of Matin fell limp in the lad's arms. Hal stepped back and Matin slid to the floor. Hal stooped over and laid a hand over the man's heart.

"Dead!" the lad exclaimed, and added: "but not by my hand. He pressed the trigger himself!"

CHAPTER XXX

THE ADVANCE

A bugle sounded.

The sleeping French camp sprang suddenly to life. Men, half dressed, sprang from their cots—they had not disrobed entirely the night before—and hurried to their positions, adjusting their clothing as they did so. Regiments formed hurriedly in the darkness that is always more intense just before dawn. Officers shouted and swore; horses whinnied from the distance, indicating that the French cavalry, as well as the infantry was forming.

A second bugle sounded; then many more. More commands from the various officers. Aides rushed hither and yon delivering sharp orders to division commanders. The men stood quietly in line. Came other sharp commands all down the line:

"En avant!"

The troops began to move.

Overhead, screaming French shells from the big guns in the rear flew as they raced for the distant German lines. This was no new sound. For more than twenty-four hours now these big guns had been hurling shells into the German ranks; and the men had become so used to the sounds of their voices that they would have been almost unable to sleep had they become silent.

This bombardment, continuing for more than twenty-four hours as it had, was the opening of the greatest offensive by the French at Verdun—an offensive by which General Petain, the French commander, hoped to drive back the foe that for months had pressed on so hard, and thus to insure the safety of Verdun, "The

gateway to France," against the German invader for all time to come.

Each move of this gigantic effort had been thought out well in advance. All contingencies had been provided for and against. The blow was to be struck at the psychological moment, when it would be deemed by the French general staff that it was sure of success.

And now this moment had come.

The information placed in the hands of General Petain days before by Hal and Chester had been the one link in the chain that had been missing. Now the general staff felt sure of the success of this great effort, though there was not a man who had taken part in the preparations who did not know that the victory—if victory there should be—would be won at tremendous cost.

But, with the fate of Verdun in the balance, it had been the opinion of each member of the general staff that now was no time to hesitate.

So, upon this morning in June, just before dawn, the French advanced all along their entire front.

Under the protection of their big guns they would be able to progress for some time; and as they attacked the German first line trenches in a charge, the fire of the big guns would continue, firing overhead at the German second and third line trenches beyond.

And it was in this manner that the advance was made.

The day dawned while the French were still some distance from the German first line trenches; and the German guns, far to the east, and the German defenders in the trenches opened on them with a vengeance. But the French were prepared for this. There had been no thought of a surprise attack in the plans of the general staff. It was known that the Germans would realize what was about to happen when the duel of big guns began more than twenty-four hours before.

Before sun-up the French infantry sprang forward in its first charge. It was thrown back. Immediately a second charge was ordered. This met the same fate as had the first. A third brought no better results.

On the next charge, as the French advanced the Germans left their trenches and

sprang forward to meet them. The big German guns became still as the infantry struggled hand to hand.

There issued from the French left at this juncture, heavy bodies of French cavalry. Into the thick of the struggling mass the horsemen charged. This attack had been a surprise. The Germans were cut down in large numbers. As they scrambled back to the protection of their trenches, French troops scrambled over with them. Again the infantry alone was engaged, but this time in the enemy trenches.

Whole squadrons of cavalry were ordered from their horses and also sprang into the German trenches. Reinforcements were hurried up. The Germans also rushed up supports; but they had delayed too long.

The Germans broke and fled for safety to the second line trenches.

Immediately the French turned the field pieces captured with the German trenches upon the fleeing enemy and mowed them down in great numbers. Others of the French troops fell to work consolidating the newly won trenches. The big German guns opened again; but by this time the French were pretty well secured against this arm of fire.

More French reinforcements were rushed up to hold the captured trenches. Batteries of field guns braved the German shell fire and dashed across the open to the captured trenches. Immediately these guns were brought into position, they opened upon the German second line of defense.

From their posts of vantage, mounted upon slight elevations, and from behind trees and other secure places, the great French guns protected the advance of the cavalry and infantry.

Hal and Chester, who had stood close to General Petain during most of this battling, had watched the conflict with the greatest interest.

"Look at them fall!" exclaimed Chester, as through his glasses, he witnessed the last desperate attack of the French.

"It's a terrible sight," agreed Hal, "and yet there will be many more just as terrible before this war is won."

"Indeed there will," agreed Chester.

"Lieutenant Crawford! Lieutenant Paine!"

It was General Petain who spoke.

"My compliments to General Bordeaux, Lieutenant Paine, and tell him that the left of the newly won trenches must be held at all hazards!"

Hal sprang upon a nearby motorcycle and soon was speeding toward the front.

"Lieutenant Crawford! The same instructions to General Ducal on the right!"

A moment later Chester was speeding forward.

His message delivered, Hal stopped for a moment to gaze about the trenches won at such terrible cost.

There had been no time to bury the dead, or even to have the bodies removed; and the trenches were piled high with French and German dead. In between the rows of corpses, which had hurriedly been pushed to one side, the other troops worked, apparently without thought of their fallen comrades. Red Cross physicians and nurses were working among the wounded, lightening the suffering.

Hal looked at his watch.

"Twelve o'clock!" he muttered. "It seems as if this single battle had been going on for days!"

He made his way slowly back to General Petain.

Chester, his message delivered, also had taken account of the French position on the right. There the fighting had been particularly severe, and the newly won positions presented ghastly spectacles. Chester shuddered:

"And this is war!" he said.

He made his way back to headquarters and rejoined Hal.

"Wonder if we shall try for the second line defenses to-day?" Hal said to his

chum.

"I don't know; but I wouldn't be surprised to hear the order at any minute now. Look at the masses of reinforcements being rushed forward. Surely, they are not being sent there just to hold the trenches. No; I believe that to-day General Petain hopes to carry at least the second and third line of trenches on our whole front."

And, as it transpired, Chester was right.

At four o'clock in the afternoon the French had established themselves firmly in the German second line trenches, although at great cost. Dense masses of reinforcements were immediately rushed forward. To Hal and Chester this signified that there was still to be another effort that day.

And at five o'clock in the evening the effort was made.

Under a sun that beat down with terrific force, despite the lateness of the hour, the French infantry again advanced to the attack. Flushed with two victories earlier in the day, they went forward confidently and with eagerness and enthusiasm. Cheers broke out along the whole line as they advanced. Farther back, a band—many bands—played "The Marseillaise."

The German troops, twice driven back before the victorious French, nevertheless stood firm in their trenches. They had learned a dear lesson at the hands of their enemy this day; and while they realized fully that they were getting the worst of the battle, they still stuck bravely to their task.

Terrible as it was, it was an awe-inspiring sight that Hal and Chester, far back with General Petain and staff, witnessed through their glasses that late afternoon.

In dense masses the French hurled themselves against the German trenches; and in great masses they were hurled back again—those of them who did not lie upon the ground. Time after time the French charged what appeared to be impregnable trenches. Then, on their fifth effort, they reached their goal and surged into the trenches.

Immediately all was confusion there. An unguarded moment meant a man's death. Struggling as they were, it was, at times, almost impossible to tell friend from foe. But the troops distinguished somehow, and for what seemed ages they

battled there, hand-to-hand.

German reinforcements rushed up in a valiant effort to save the day. General Petain threw out supports for his own infantry. All these surged into the trenches and added their quota to the terrible din.

Several times the German cavalry charged, their riders dismounting when they reached the struggling mass of humanity and plunging into the fray with sabres and revolvers. But each time they were beaten off.

Gradually the French cleared the trenches. The Germans gave slowly at first; then more swiftly. The French pursued them with loud cries. The enemy broke and fled.

Again German reinforcements rushed to the attack. The French met them in the open, beyond the third line German trenches. The fighting was something terrible; but flushed with victory as they were, there could be but one ending.

A German bugle sounded a recall; and at almost the same moment the evening sun settled beyond the distant eastern hills.

The French had won the day!

Hal and Chester looked at each other. Then, even as the entire French staff broke into a loud cheer, the two lads grasped hands.

"We've won!" said Hal.

"Verdun is saved!" exclaimed Chester.

So there, upon this historic field, we shall take our leave of these two friends for the time; but we shall renew our acquaintance later, in a succeeding volume, entitled: "The Boy Allies on the Somme; or, Courage and Bravery Rewarded."

THE END

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