

THE
BIG FIVE
MOTORCYCLE
BOYS

BATTLE
LINE

RALPH
MARLOW



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The BIG FIVE MOTORCYCLE BOYS ON THE BATTLE LINE



By

RALPH MARLOW

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The Big Five Motorcycle Boys On the Battle Line

OR

With the Allies in France

By RALPH MARLOW

AUTHOR OF

“The Big Five Motorcycle Boys Under Fire,” “The Big Five
Motorcycle Boys at the Front,” “The Big Five Motorcycle
Boys’ Swift Road Chase,” “The Big Five Motorcycle
Boys in Tennessee Wilds,” “The Big
Five Motorcycle Boys Through by
Wireless,” “The Big Five
Motorcycle Boys on
Florida Trails.”
emblem

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THE BIG FIVE MOTORCYCLE BOYS ON THE BATTLE LINE

THERE WAS A SUDDEN SPITEFUL CRACK FROM THE REAR, AND JOSH DUCKED HIS HEAD INVOLUNTARILY. *The Big Five Motorcycle Boys on the Battle Line. Page 35.*

THE BIG FIVE MOTORCYCLE BOYS ON THE BATTLE LINE.

CHAPTER I. ON THE STREETS OF ANTWERP.

“Good-bye, Elmer, and you, too, Rooster!”

“It’s too bad we have to hurry home, and break up the Big Five Motorcycle Boys’ combination, just when we’ve been having such royal good times over in the country of the Great War!”

“But there was nothing else to do, Elmer, when you got that cable message telling you to take the first steamer home, as your mother was about to undergo an operation, and wanted to see you first.”

“And Rooster here chose to go along with you, because he’s got such a tender chicken heart he just hates to see all the misery and suffering these poor Belgians are enduring.”

“There’s the last call to go ashore. Come along, Josh, and you too, Hanky Panky. Boys, to be honest with you I more than half wish I was going along. Home would look mighty fine to me just now.”

“Oh! shucks! you’ll soon get over that feeling, Rod,” said the lanky boy called Josh, taking the alarm at once, for he seemed perfectly contented to stay where he was; “just wait till we’re spinning along on our bully machines down through Ostend, Dunkirk, and Calais to Boulogne, where we may take a steamer to the U. S. if we can find berths.”

“Be sure to keep a regular daily log of your happenings, Josh, so we can look it over when you get back home,” begged the boy who went by the strange nickname of “Rooster,” doubtless because he crowed so much over his accomplishments.

“Good-bye, and good luck!” called out Elmer, waving his hand again.

“Remember us to everybody in Garland, particularly all the pretty girls!” shouted Hanky Panky, after the last exchange of handshakes, when with his two chums, Rod and Josh, he hurried down the gang-plank to the dock.

The steamer for London was leaving its Antwerp pier, and all seemed excitement. Many people were already fleeing madly from Belgium, now partly overrun by the vast invading army of the German Kaiser. At any day Antwerp was likely to be bombarded by the tremendous forty-two centimetre guns that had reduced the steel-domed forts at Liege and Namur, and allowed the

conquering hosts entrance to Brussels.

While the trio on the dock continued to frantically return the salutes of their two chums as long as they could distinguish their figures on the hurricane deck of the staunch steamer bound down the Scheldt, a few brief explanations might not come in amiss. Possibly some of those who start to read this book may not have had the pleasure of meeting Rod and his four friends in previous volumes of this series.

The boys who wore the khaki lived in the enterprising town of Garland across the water in the States. How they came by the fine motorcycles they owned would be too long a story to narrate here, and those who are curious about the circumstances must be referred to earlier stories for the details.

They called their organization the Big Five because they planned to carry out numerous enterprises that might have daunted less courageous spirits. Rod Bradley was really the leader, though Elmer Overton, the Southern boy, often proved himself a good second.

Then there were Henry Jucklin, known to all his mates as "Hanky Panky" because of his skill as a magician; Josh Whitcomb, with a bit of the Yankee in his composition; and Christopher Boggs, otherwise "Rooster."

They had covered many thousands of miles with those wonderful steel steeds, and met with some surprising adventures up to the time when an opportunity arose allowing them to go abroad. A wealthy old gentleman of their town, who knew their calibre well, had given them an important errand to carry out, and stood responsible for their expenses to the other side of the Atlantic.

Coming leisurely down the Rhine country they had been suddenly caught by the war tide; and as it was in Antwerp that Rod expected to meet the party he sought they had to strike out boldly for that far-distant city.

Strange happenings had marked their course through the war-stricken country of Belgium. Indeed, several times it looked very much as though they would never attain their goal, but might be sent back as prisoners of war to Germany.

Of course, their sympathies were mainly with the Allies, and particularly after they had seen with their own eyes how the poor Belgians, fighting heroically to defend their native land, were being cowed by the seemingly limitless legions of the Kaiser.

But in the end they reached Antwerp, and had about decided to make a run down the coast to Boulogne, where they might take a steamer home, when that fatal cable message upset their plans.

Elmer and Rooster would not hear of the others accompanying them home. Josh, too, was really wild to see more of the great war. So finally Rod, finding that Hanky Panky seemed of the same mind, consented to stay over for a week

or two longer.

Now that their two chums had left them the boys wandered about the city on the Scheldt and tried to amuse themselves as best they could. But they soon found that ordinary sights no longer availed to satisfy them.

"You see, the war fills the air wherever you go," explained Josh, to account for this seeming lack of interest. "What does anybody want to go snooping into things that had to do with battles of centuries ago, when the biggest war the world ever knew is raging right now through Northern France and Belgium?"

"Yes, with Great Britain dragged in, and perhaps Italy and other countries to follow, not even excepting our own land," added Rod, seriously.

"Why," spoke up Hanky Panky, excitedly, "everywhere you look you see signs of the war game right here in Antwerp. Soldiers are marching through the streets to the cheers of the people. Artillery is dashing this way and that. Armored cars can be seen starting out to harry the enemy with their Maxims. And hardly an hour of the day but half a dozen British or Belgian aeroplanes soar above us, doing all kinds of stunts calculated to make your hair stand on end."

"It's the greatest thing that ever happened, barring none," declared the delighted Josh, looking as though he could almost hug himself, such was his joy; "and let me tell you we're the lucky boys to be on the spot when history is being made so fast."

"The party I'm to see for Mr. Amos Tucker," remarked Rod, "will be in the city to-night. I'll get that out of my system; and once I send the documents by registered post I'm free for anything that crops up."

"Hurrah! then we'll have a chance to climb aboard our wheels again, and strike out for France!" said Josh. "Here's hoping we may run across a corner of the big fight that's taking place north of Paris. I'd be a happy fellow if I could actually see those brave Frenchmen, backed up by the British troops, meet the boastful Germans who believe they can clean up the whole world."

Rod shrugged his shoulders, and made a wry face.

"We've already seen something of a battle from a distance, you remember, Josh," he told the other, "and all of us decided that it was simply *terrible*. For my part, while I'd like to see the French in action I'm not going out of my way to take chances. The way they fill the air with deadly missiles from quick-firers and with bursting shrapnel gives you a cold feeling."

"Rod," said Hanky Panky, who somehow had not been taking part in this talk, "do turn and watch that poor little woman over there. She's in a peck of trouble, I reckon, by the way she acts, first looking at a paper she's been reading, and then wiping her eyes with her apron."

“You mean the one with the dog team, and the tall, brass-mounted milk cans, don’t you, Hanky Panky?” asked Josh quickly. “I saw her a while ago, and heard her speak to the little child in wooden sabots that is tagging at her heels. It was pure French she used, and I’d wager a cookey she isn’t a Belgian at all. There are lots of people from northern France in Antwerp, you know.”

“Well, she’s having a hard time of it, some way or other,” added Hanky Panky. “You can see her hug and kiss the little girl, and then read her letter again. Now she looks around as if wondering where she can find a friend. Say, Rod, you can speak French right well; what’s to hinder our finding out what the matter is? Everybody in Antwerp is too excited about the war to bother over a little thing like a poor French woman’s troubles.”

Thus appealed to Rod laughed good-naturedly, and then led the way straight toward the spot where the owner of the dog team stood. Evidently she was on her rounds delivering fresh milk, when overtaken by bad news.

When Rod addressed her in her native tongue she looked up appealingly. Evidently she must have liked the appearance of the three frank-looking American boys, for she quickly commenced to talk volubly, all the while shrugging her shoulders, and emphasizing her words with gestures and face expressions.

The other boys could see that she was comparatively young, and not bad looking. As for the child, they were greatly smitten with her pink cheeks and big black eyes, as well as the coy glances the little thing gave them.

Presently Rod was seen to be reading a letter she handed him, and which she may have taken from the mail while on her milk route. Again Rod conversed with her, greatly to the mystification of his comrades, who thought he would never stop.

Finally Rod turned toward them.

“For goodness’ sake tell us what it all means, Rod!” urged Hanky Panky.

“Yes; has her landlord threatened to turn her out unless she can pay the rent, and ought we put up our spare cash to help settle the bill?” demanded Josh.

“Oh! it’s a thousand times more serious than that,” said Rod, which remark, of course, aroused the curiosity of his chums more than ever.

“Get some speed on then, Rod, and give us the gist of the business,” said Hanky Panky appealingly; “of course there’s a heap of trouble in the old city just now, but when a case pokes right out in front of you it’s hard to pass by. If we could help the little French woman and her pretty child, why, we ought to wake up and do something.”

“Wait till you hear how the thing stands before you get so rash,” warned Rod, who knew only too well the hasty ways of his two chums. “This little woman’s

name is Jeanne D'Aubrey. Her husband is a French reservist named Andre. He was called to the colors as soon as the war broke out, leaving her here in Antwerp with her little daughter, and a living to make from her few cows."

"But what was the paper you read, Rod?" asked impatient Josh.

"I'm coming to that," the other told him; "it is a very important letter she has just received from a law firm in Paris, informing herself and husband that an old uncle, Jasper, has died some time since, leaving his estate to Andre on condition that he sign a certain document within a given time. It now lacks just three weeks of the limit, and unless his signature is properly placed there, and witnessed by three reliable people, the property will go to another nephew, one Jules Baggott by name, who has long hoped to inherit it."

"Great Scott! that is tough, I should say!" ejaculated Josh.

"And her husband away at the French war front, perhaps shot long before now in the bargain," muttered Hanky Panky soberly; "because we've heard that there's been bloody fighting all along the line between the French border and in front of Paris, where General Von Kluck's German army is already pressing."

"You can't wonder then that the poor little woman is overcome with the terrible trouble that has fallen on her," explained Rod. "Once that document is properly signed and she would be fixed for life, no matter what happened to her soldier husband. But she hardly knows what to do. It is utterly out of the question for her to try and find him; and she doesn't know any person reliable enough in Antwerp to trust them with the precious papers. You see, this other cousin, Jules, is here in town, for she has even had him call upon her lately; and she now believes he knows of his uncle's will, so that he might try to keep the messenger from ever meeting Andre!"

Rod paused just there. Perhaps he knew his auditors so well that he really anticipated what the effect would be upon both Josh and Hanky Panky. The pair looked at the French woman, who was observing them with such an eager, hungry expression on her face. She wrung her hands piteously just then, as though she saw the one chance to gain a little fortune for herself and child slipping away for lack of a brave champion who would undertake the task of finding her Andre.

That was the finishing stroke. Josh had been hesitating, wondering whether he ought to make a suggestion that, springing from his generous heart, was already trembling on his lips.

"Rod!" he exclaimed, with boyish animation.

"Yes, what is it, Josh?" asked the other, encouragingly, for just then the child had shot him a roguish, pathetic glance that went straight to his heart.

"Why, I was going to say we've managed to carry out a lot of things before

now that looked as hopeless as searching for a needle in a haystack. Rod, we might stand a chance of finding this same Andre, if you thought it was up to us to deliver the goods!”

Hanky Panky uttered a snort as he expressed his opinion.

“I move we undertake the mission,” he remarked eagerly; “I’d never sleep decent again if we left this poor little woman in the lurch after she’d told us her story. Rod, shut your eyes and make it unanimous! The Motorcycle Boys in the saddle again!”

CHAPTER II.

A CHANGE OF PLANS.

Rod's hesitation was of brief duration. He saw that both his comrades were fairly wild to go. Josh in particular seemed to look upon this chance to see some more of the fighting taking place between the hostile armies as arranged especially to suit his fancy.

"All right, then," said Rod finally, "let's see what's to be done. If she can put certain facts in our possession, so that we'd stand a chance of finding Andre in the army of General Joffre, we might undertake the task. It'd be hard to refuse, with that little darling of a girl in such great need."

"Bully for you, Rod!" exclaimed Josh; "I knew you'd come to time right handsomely. We'll likely see something of the fierce battles that are raging every day in northern France as the Germans drive the Allies back mile after mile, aiming to take Paris, and end the war with a rush!"

Apparently Josh had been dreaming of something along these lines, and the opportunity to gratify his ambition took him by storm.

Rod again turned to the French woman and started to converse with her once more. How her face did light up when she learned that these brave American boys had decided to lend her their aid, and try to find her absent soldier husband among the legions of patriots defending the beloved Paris.

Hanky Panky and Josh could understand very little of what was said, but by watching the expressive face and motions of Jeanne they were able to translate much of her explanations.

"She has told me where her humble home is," explained Rod finally, "and this very night we will visit her to hear further particulars, and receive the document which was enclosed in the letter from the French law firm in Paris."

"And then?" asked Josh breathlessly.

"Perhaps to-morrow we can start away from here and head south, to cross the border line, and enter France," he was told.

"But not to go as far as Boulogne, eh, Rod?" questioned Hanky Panky.

"No, for that would take us out of our way," the other continued. "After we get to Calais we will have to strike direct for Paris; that is unless we learn that one of the numerous German armies has cut across the road, blocking our way."

In that event we will have to shape our plans over again. But there's no use crossing a bridge until you come to it, so don't let's worry."

He once more spoke to the little woman, whose face was now beaming with gratitude. She seized the boy's hand and actually kissed it before Rod had a chance to snatch it away. The act made him flush with confusion, especially since Josh was chuckling in his clumsy way. But one thing was sure, Jeanne considered their crossing her path at the time she needed a friend more than ever before in all her life as a most fortunate thing.

So the boys walked away.

"Just to think what a wonderful change has come about inside of half an hour," remarked the delighted Josh. "We had it all arranged for a little spin down the coast, and then embarking at Boulogne for America. Now we're planning to strike out to that region where a million German soldiers are striking hard blows at the lines of the Allies, and meaning to capture Paris. Why, I'm tickled half to death at the idea of seeing some more thrilling pictures of the Great World War."

Josh and Hanky Panky could talk of little else during the balance of that day. Rod seemed very quiet, and it was evident that he foresaw they would have dangerous work laid out for them, which might try their boldness as few things had ever done before.

"Listen," he told the others at one time, when they were discussing the possibilities of the future; "perhaps neither of you happened to notice a man with a French look who stood by a stoop further along the narrow street, and kept watching us all the time I was talking to the woman. Since then it's struck me that perhaps he may have been the other cousin she spoke of, Jules Baggott, and that he was guessing how the wind lay when he saw me read the paper, and watched her kiss my hand."

"Whoop!" ejaculated the impulsive Josh immediately, "that would mean trouble with a big T, wouldn't it, Rod?"

"If he concluded that we were going to find her husband, providing Andre hadn't already been killed in the fighting," Rod went on to explain, "I should imagine this Jules would go to some trouble to stop us, and get the paper away. You can see what it would mean to him if we failed to make connections."

Many times during the balance of that afternoon Josh and Hanky Panky referred to the business which they were about to undertake. In fact it seemed as though both boys enjoyed the idea of again drawing near the fighting line, and witnessing some of the amazing events taking place there in this modern war. History was being made every day, and the thought of being actual witnesses of these grand undertakings thrilled them as nothing else could have done.

Frequently either one or the other imagined they were being followed; and a

dozen times some innocent citizen was suspected of being the skulking Jules. If the French cousin of Andre actually had them shadowed it was done so skilfully that none of the boys were any the wiser.

After supper that night they sallied forth. Rod took extra precautions to dodge the main exit of the hotel at which they were quartered; if a spy waited there to keep tabs on their movements he meant the fellow should have his trouble for nothing.

They found the home of the French woman. It was, of course, an humble abode, but as neat as a pin. Rod again entered into a fervent conversation, and from time to time stopped to explain to his chums what the burden of the talk might be.

In the end Jeanne entrusted him with the precious paper, which, once signed by her husband, with the names of competent witnesses also inscribed according to law, would mean a competency for herself and child the balance of their lives, whether Andre ever came home from the war or not.

Rod was very cautious in making his way back to the hotel. He avoided all dark streets, and warned his chums to keep a bright lookout for skulking figures. Nothing out of the way happened, however, and they reached their hotel in safety. For once Josh evinced little desire to stop and watch some of the stirring scenes which were to be met with in all the principal thoroughfares of Antwerp during those days and nights when the shadow of the German mailed fist hung over the heads of the dauntless Belgian nation.

Down at the hotel Rod found the gentleman waiting for him with whom Amos Tucker, far away in America, had business connections of vast importance which he had entrusted to Rod to carry through.

This was finally accomplished, and after Rod made sure that everything had been completed in a satisfactory fashion, he entrusted the papers to the mail to be carried duly to Mr. Tucker, guarded by registry and every possible means against loss in transit.

"There; I feel as if I had a big load off my shoulders," said the boy as he once more joined his two chums, who had spent the hour talking over the immediate future, and what amazing things it might have in store for them.

All of them were tired, for they had been up early that August day, and every hour had been crammed with excitement. Accordingly it was decided that they had better retire without further delay, and get what sleep they could.

"There's no telling what sort of a bed we may have to-morrow night," Rod warned the others; "so make the most of it while you have a soft mattress under you. The ground is pretty hard, sometimes, you know, because often we've tried it, and may have to again."

Both the others only laughed, as though they were so well pleased with the opportunity crossing their path so unexpectedly that they could not find any fault, no matter how things turned.

When another day dawned they busied themselves in getting breakfast, settling their account, and then securing their motorcycles, which had been well taken care of during their stay in Antwerp. Such valuable wheels might have been commandeered by the authorities for use in the army, only that Rod chanced to carry a few lines actually signed by King Albert and which had been placed in his hands by the dauntless Belgian monarch himself, which warned all concerned that nothing belonging to the American boys was to be touched, as they had shown their friendship for Belgium in numerous ways.

Rod was careful enough to make sure that all of them carried a plentiful supply of the necessary petrol, for he realized how difficult it would likely be to secure any of this liquid fuel, since every gallon was being seized for the use of the multitude of lorries and cars employed for transportation purposes by the armies in the field.

It was about nine in the morning when they were ready to start. The early September day was a fair one, though promising more or less heat before noon came and went. Rod led the way, and they soon left the big bustling city on the Scheldt behind them. A splendid road invited an increase of speed, and presently they were booming along right merrily.

How delightfully cheery did the rapid clatter of the exhausts sound to their ears, after having been deprived of this familiar company for days at a stretch, since abandoning their machines at the home of a woman market gardener, who had later on brought them to the city, concealed under a load of produce.

They kept as close together as safety allowed, with Rod as usual in the lead. Well did the other two know they could always depend on him to steer them aright. Rod carried a little map of the country with him. Besides, he had studied it so thoroughly that in most cases he could tell the lay of the land without consulting the chart.

"This is the life!" called Hanky Panky, who brought up the rear, squatted in his saddle something after the manner of a huge toad; for Hanky had a peculiar "style" of his own, entirely original, which he claimed to have as many good points as a horse jockey's method of riding on the neck of his mount.

"Pity our two poor chums who had to set out for home so early!" added Josh, who was in a sense fairly hugging himself on account of the wonderful possibilities for excitement looming up above the horizon just then.

"Well, their machines went with them," said Rod over his shoulder, "and they say 'where ignorance is bliss 'tis a folly to be wise.' Right now they may be over

in England, pitying us for being left behind in the land of the Great War.”

“This is a hunky-dory road, all right!” ventured Hanky Panky shortly afterward. “Why, we seem to be gliding along as smoothly as if on a parlor floor. We could go twice as fast, if we wanted to.”

“No need of that,” said Rod, hearing the remark, which was, however, intended only for Josh; “we’ll pass through Ostend and Dunkirk, reaching Calais in short order. Then, like as not, we’ll have to spend the rest of the day there, and to-night in the bargain.”

“Shucks! what’s the use of all that, Rod?” demanded Josh, for he was fairly wild to get near the firing line again, and witness more of those wonderful sights that had thrilled him to the bone a short time back.

“We’ll have to give an account of ourselves, most likely, and get written permission to go into France,” he was told.

“Say, fellows,” called out Hanky Panky just then, “there’s a car whirling along right now in a cloud of dust, with two men aboard. Wouldn’t it be a joke on us if that was the Jules Baggott the woman spoke of, and that he was chasing after us, bent on making us give up the paper she entrusted to Rod here?”

CHAPTER III. THE PURSUIT.

Of course when Hanky Panky made this astonishing statement both his chums commenced to send anxious glances back along the road over which they were spinning so grandly.

“What d’ye think of it, Rod?” demanded Josh quickly.

“They act as if they meant to overtake us, all right,” the boy in the van declared, without hesitation; “but I couldn’t say for certain whether one of them is the scheming Jules or not. You remember I only *thought* I had a glimpse of him at the time we talked with Jeanne on the Antwerp street.”

“Shall we let them come up, and have it out?” questioned Josh belligerently, for Josh was something of a fighter in his way, and always had a “chip on his shoulder.”

“We are looking for no scrap, if it can be helped,” said Rod; “so first of all we can try letting out a little more speed.”

“And if they follow suit, then what?” asked Hanky Panky, with a vein of anxiety in his voice; for being in the rear he imagined he would necessarily be the target for any stray leaden missiles that might come that way.

“In the first place we’ll feel pretty certain they’re meaning to overtake us,” Rod called back, as he increased his pace considerably, an easy thing to do, although he knew the danger of going at headlong speed over an unknown road, where at any minute they might rush upon a hay-wagon blocking the whole thoroughfare, and concealed by some bend.

“Well, they’ve let out another notch, all right!” called Hanky Panky, from his position in the rear.

“And believe me that’s some racer of a car they’re running!” exploded Josh; “why, it can give us a run for our money, try as we may to get away.”

Rod had already discovered this, though saying nothing as yet. He knew that it was not safe to put Hanky Panky to a severe test, for the other was apt to get a little rattled, and while going at a mad pace any sort of accident was likely to be serious.

They continued to speed along at this merry clip for a brief time longer. Then the rear guard reported that the pursuing car seemed to be holding its own.

“Hadn’t we ought to go faster, Rod?” he besought the leader; “I know you’re only holding in on account of me, but forget that, won’t you?”

But Rod knew better than that. He was aware of his chum’s failing, and dared not risk too much. There had been times in the past when he allowed the limit of speed to be taken, but always with serious misgivings.

“Leave it to me, Hanky,” he called out encouragingly; “I’ll fix up a game that will cook their goose for them.”

“Sure you will, Rod,” replied the other at the top of his voice, for the trio of machines made considerable racket as they pushed along in close formation.

Sometimes the dust raised by their passage completely hid the pursuing red car; then a little puff of wind would waft it away, so that the motorcycle boys could easily see the object of their concern.

Past humble homes of the Belgian peasants they rushed. Ducks and chickens and dogs had to get out of the way in great style in order to avoid being run over. This was one of the things Rod had in mind when deciding not to increase their speed any further; a squawking hen has been the cause of a “spill” with many an unlucky motorcyclist; and every one has noticed how persistently “Biddy” will try to cross the road despite the peril, if her home happens to be on the other side.

Rod no longer entertained any doubts concerning the identity of those who occupied the red racing car. One of them he felt positive must be Jules Baggott, the unscrupulous cousin of Andre, who would profit if the soldier should never live to sign the papers which were mentioned in the will of the dead uncle.

By this time Rod had his fighting blood up. Opposition always made him the more determined to accomplish his ends, when his heart was back of the undertaking.

His active mind quickly grasped the situation, and a cleverly arranged plan was formed that gave promise of success.

“Josh, can you hear me?” he called out, not daring to look back now because at the time they were negotiating several sharp turns, and his attention was required at the front.

“Easy thing!” sang out the one just behind him.

“How about you, Hanky?” continued the leader.

“I get you O. K., Rod; let her go!” came the reply in a roar.

“If we can only coax them to leave their car for a short time,” explained Rod, “Josh might disable it in some way, so the pursuit would come to an end!”

“A bully scheme, Rod, and don’t you forget that you said Josh was going to be Johnny on the spot!” the party in question bellowed exultantly.

“There’s a big house ahead of us,” continued Rod, “for I’ve had several

glimpses of the same, and we'll strike it shortly. I don't know why I think we'll find it deserted, but it has that look to me. One end seems to have been burned out. Well, that might be the place we're looking for, to give our pursuers the slip."

"Oh! I see the house right now," barked Josh; "and sure enough it's just as you said, with part of the roof gone."

"It sets near the road, so we can rush around it," called out the leader. "Josh will go on ahead now and hide his machine among the trees near the road. Hanky, you keep with me. Perhaps we'll enter the house, and pass out the back way, to speed on again. Josh, you hurry back so when the men leave their car to see if you're inside the house you can get busy. Understand?"

Both of the others called out that it was perfectly clear to them. The abandoned mansion was now close at hand. Rod believed they must be drawing near the outskirts of Ostend, the Belgian watering place, which could not lie many miles beyond.

It required a clever mind to arrange all the little details of such a plan of campaign in a hurry. The fact that Rod was able to do so stamped him the right kind of a leader. Still, neither of his companions thought it strange, because they had known him to do numerous similar things in times gone by.

Josh managed to get ahead, and would thus have a brief time to hide his machine alongside the road so as to steal back towards the house before the car arrived, for it was still some little distance away.

When the men in it saw only two boys riding off they would naturally suspect that some accident had happened to the machine of the third fellow, who possibly had taken up temporary quarters in the old house. This was just what Rod wanted them to think; it would allow Josh the chance he needed to disable the car in some way or other.

Things moved along swiftly. Rod and Hanky Panky dashed up to the front of the house and stopped. Doubtless the oncoming pursuers would miss the clattering of the exhausts, and understand that they had halted for some purpose or other.

"They've slowed down some themselves, Rod!" cried Hanky Panky, as he stood "at attention," ready to jump on his machine the instant Rod gave the word, so as to continue the mad flight.

The red car had come around the last bend, and was now in plain sight. For a distance of at least two miles the road ran as straight as a yard stick; so that the men could readily see that the third motorcycle lad was not in sight ahead.

"All right; it's time we were off!" cried Rod presently.

The car had covered half the distance between the bend and the deserted

house, and they could plainly see the man sitting alongside the chauffeur leaning forward, as though eagerly scrutinizing them. Rod imagined he was a little taken aback by their halting, and was trying to puzzle it out.

Suddenly the popping of the exhausts announced that the two motorcycles were once more in action. Both boys sprang into the saddle and away they went down the dusty road. As they were in plain sight the men could readily see that one of the trio was missing. And it would be most natural to imagine that something had happened to his machine, so that he must have taken temporary refuge in the abandoned house, while his comrades continued their flight.

What then?

Would the man they believed to be the plotting Jules stop, and with his assistant rush into the house to look for the missing boy? Much depended on his actions, for if the chauffeur remained with the car, Josh, lying in wait near by, might be utterly unable to accomplish the design he had in view.

Rod had high hopes. He could figure that Jules would want to make sure the third American boy did not have the paper on his person, before speeding after the two whom he could see going leisurely down the road, as if inviting pursuit.

As their pace was now less swift Rod was able to turn again and again and look backward. Hanky Panky was doing the same, though his machine did wobble more or less, and he had to be exceedingly careful not to land in the ditch alongside the fine road.

It was a moment of considerable suspense to both boys. They saw the car approach the house, and noted with more or less interest that its pace was lessening. That began to look as though the bait had taken, and Jules meant to make sure of the “bird in the hand,” before trying for those in the bush.

“Rod, they’re stopping, as sure as you live!” yelled Hanky Panky in great excitement just then.

“Yes, and there they both jump out; steady, Hanky, don’t lose your head!” warned the leader, noticing how the other’s machine wavered.

CHAPTER IV.

JOSH DOES HIS LITTLE TRICK.

Meanwhile Josh had carried out the preliminary part of his share in the plot to the best of his ability. Rushing ahead of his chums he had succeeded in concealing his motorcycle amidst the bushes skirting the road, just a little distance beyond the house.

His heart was beating like a triphammer as he turned, once this had been done, to discover whether the men in the pursuing car had come in sight so as to notice what he was doing.

"Everything is lovely, and the goose hangs high!" Josh muttered in apparent glee, when he found that this was not the case.

His two chums had by this time halted at the door of the house, and it even looked as though they might be saying something to some one inside. Of course Josh understood that this was part of the plan intended to deceive the men.

He was already making his way back toward the house, bending low so that no one might see his shoulders above the bushes, which grew in profusion just there, as if on purpose to further his designs.

Then came the rapid pulsations of the engines, as Rod and Hanky Panky got going again. The car must be in sight, coming swinging along, with both men keenly observant of all that was taking place.

Still Josh continued to creep forward. He wished to be as close to the building as possible when the car stopped, as he felt sure would be the case. Probably the men would not linger long, once they had rushed inside and taken a look around. Not finding him there they would be likely to "tumble to the game," as Josh put it, and hasten outside again in order to avoid any backset to their pursuit of the shrewd American motorcycle boys.

When the car did stop Josh was only a dozen paces away. The friendly bushes allowed him to lie there unseen, while at the same time he could catch glimpses of those in whom he had such great interest.

"Shucks! I do believe the chauffeur is meaning to stick by the car," he whispered to himself indignantly, only to hastily add in a gratified way: "No he isn't either, for there he jumps out after Jules, who is already bolting inside. Now's my chance, if ever I expect to get one! Here goes, then!"

With the last words Josh was hurrying through the bushes as fast as he could make time. Of course his pulses were thrilled with the sense of responsibility that rested upon his shoulders. Would one of the men come out unexpectedly, and catch him busy with the car? Josh hoped not; at the same time he had his mind made up just what he meant to do under such conditions.

If either or both of his chums happened to be looking back just then they must have seen him there, for he had by now attained his goal, and was alongside the red racer.

Josh flitted from one side of the car to the other. He seemed to be working with all the vim of which he was capable, and every time he made a movement it was accompanied by a strange sighing sound, as though some restrained captive hailed freedom in a joyous fashion.

After all Josh was not detained there more than a couple of minutes, though it may have seemed much longer to the anxious lad, for his heart beat so tumultuously that it really threatened to smother him.

He could constantly hear the men inside the house moving hastily about, and calling to one another in French. Evidently they were wondering where the missing boy as well as his machine could be hidden. They might at any instant begin to suspect that a clever trick had been played upon them, and come rushing forth to protect their own car, upon which the continuance of the pursuit depended wholly.

At last Josh seemed to have finished his work, whatever it may have been, for he turned away from the car and started to run. He took to the road, meaning to reach the spot where his motorcycle lay hidden in the bushes. Given just enough time to arrive and lay hands on the precious machine Josh felt sure he could laugh at any effort on the part of the men to overtake him.

Just as he came close to the hiding place of the wheel he heard a loud shout from the rear. This announced that his presence had been discovered by one or both of the Frenchmen. Of course their first thought would be to leap into the car and try to speed after him. Josh chuckled with fiendish glee as he contemplated their disgust when they found that no matter how hard they tried they could not coax the red racer to make the first move.

He could hear them roaring as he dragged his machine out on the road. One look back was sufficient to show him how matters stood. Both men were tumbling out of the stalled car, wild to make a hasty examination in order to discover why it would not move an inch, though the engine was throbbing away tumultuously all the while, just as they had left it.

"The crack I gave that self-starter rod bent it, and placed it out of commission, all right," Josh exclaimed, as he drew his machine to the middle of the road, and

deliberately prepared to follow after his chums; “but that was only a beginning; the worst is yet to come when they look around.”

Louder came the angry shouts from the direction of the house. The men must have learned the full nature of their troubles. Josh saw them starting toward him as if under the impression that he would be silly enough to await their coming.

“Not for Joseph; not if he knows it!” he called out, as he turned on the current, and immediately commenced to spin along the roadway.

There was a sudden spiteful crack from the rear, and Josh ducked his head involuntarily as he heard some object whistle past close to his ears.

“Wow! they’re trying to wing me, for a fact!” he whooped, at the same time bending low in his saddle, so as to present as little body surface as possible to the aim of the one who was doing the firing.

Several more shots rang out, sounding like the popping of champagne corks. Doubtless the marksman, no other than Jules himself, was more or less excited, and although he might be a clever shot under ordinary conditions, just then he failed to accomplish anything.

So Josh rolled away, waving his hand derisively when he felt that he was safe beyond pistol shot. The boy was trembling all over, though hilarious concerning the wonderful success of the little plan which Rod had conceived, and left to him to carry out.

“You’ve got to have your eye-teeth cut when you run afoul of the Big Five Motorcycle Boys, and don’t forget that!” he shouted over his shoulder, as he sped along; although of course the outwitted pursuers could hardly have caught the words, and even if they did might not understand their import.

Rod and Hanky Panky had halted half a mile further on, watching to see what happened. It might be they meant to turn back, and come to the assistance of their comrade, should Fate play a scurvy trick on Josh, so that he fell into the hands of the enemy.

When they saw him mounting and caught the familiar music of his engine’s exhaust, the muffler being open, both Rod and Hanky Panky felt like giving shouts of exultation, for they had already discovered that the two men were having some difficulty with their car, after Josh had “fiddled” with the same.

Then came the shots, and of course they felt a new anxiety lest Josh be brought to grief through this means.

“Look at him leaning low over his handlebars, will you?” cried Hanky Panky, lost in admiration over the smart way Josh was accomplishing the trick, which perhaps he had seen riders in the Wild West Show do when pursued by Indians of the plains.

“It’s all right, and Josh has saved the day for us!” exclaimed Rod, beaming

with gratification. "Jules will begin to wonder what sort of boys they raise over in the States, when he finds out what happened."

"But what did Josh do to the car, Rod?"

"You'll have to ask him," replied the other, "though I suspect he put the starting gear out of commission to begin with. Here he is, and grinning at a great rate."

The third rider slowed up as he approached the spot where they awaited him. No danger of the two men starting their car, and swooping down on the allies; if they commenced to run on foot toward Rod and his chums it was only necessary to leap into their saddles and be off like the wind.

"It worked like fresh grease, Rod!" panted Josh, as he threw himself down from his seat, and held one hand to his aching side, for that boisterous laughter was weakening him more or less; "oh! they fell into your little trap like innocents. It was like taking candy from the baby to work them like I did."

"There they are, shaking their fists at us right now!" burst out Hanky Panky, as he pointed along the road toward the deserted house.

"It's about all they can do; when you come to think of it!" grinned Josh.

"We were getting cold feet when we heard them shooting, old fellow; and I hope none of the lead so much as touched you! I saw the dust fly up after nearly every shot, it seemed to me."

"I rather think the fellow meant to hit my wheel and disable it," explained the latest arrival; "but it isn't so easy to do a thing like that, when a motorcycle is speeding along at the rate of a mile a minute. No matter what he aimed to do he missed his guess, and I gave him the slip."

"Rod here says you must have jammed his self-starter so it wouldn't work when he tried it; how about that, Josh?" asked Hanky Panky, who never would be satisfied until he had learned all the particulars.

"You just bet that was what I did the first thing," the other told him exultantly; "but I had another card up my sleeve, too. You see they might hammer that back into shape again, and get a move on; but I fixed it so they'll not chase after us to-day."

"What did you do, then?" demanded Hanky Panky.

"I had my big knife all ready," said Josh grimly, "and I used it with all my might and main."

"On the tires, do you mean, Josh?"

"Every one of them is sliced and slashed the worst way you ever saw," replied the other. "I never was guilty of doing such a mean thing before in all my life; but it was absolutely necessary if we meant to shut off pursuit. You ought to have heard the air sizzling out after I jammed that big blade through, and ripped

it along! Whee! it was mighty exciting, because I half expected to see one of the men come rushing out any old second, and chase after me down the road. But I was lucky, and nothing like that happened.”

Hanky Panky looked his deep admiration. He often wished Nature had made him as smart as Josh, with that underlying streak of Yankee blood in his veins. Hanky was willing to try to accomplish anything that came his way; but being a bit clumsy in his actions there was always a chance that he would bungle his job, and fail to attain the expected results.

He slapped the late actor in the stirring little drama heartily on the back.

“Good boy, Josh!” he went on to say; “you’re all wool, and a yard wide. Why, even Rod here couldn’t have done a whit better. There, see, the men are starting this way as if they meant to make us get a move on.”

“Oh! we’re willing to oblige Jules,” laughed Rod; “especially since we’ve accomplished all we meant to do, and their car is placed out of commission. Good-bye, Jules; if we meet again before we’ve played this game out it will be where the cannon are roaring, and the battle is on! Until that time, then, adieu!”

Immediately the trio started along the road leading to Ostend. Rod had figured some time back that they would soon be across the border, and traversing French soil. The last glimpse they had of the baffled plotter he was standing in the road and still staring hard after the vanishing Motorcycle Boys.

CHAPTER V. ON THE ROAD TO CALAIS.

“What’s this I see ahead there, boys? Looks like there might be some other motorcycle fellows around these regions, though I guess they’ve left their mounts behind.”

It was Hanky Panky who said this. They had halted at a wayside spring to refresh themselves, for the road was proving pretty dusty.

At noon the three boys had swung through Ostend on the Belgian coast. The famous watering place did not look just the same as on other summers, when tens of thousands visited it for the sport to be enjoyed in the sea. True, it was swarming with people, but in the main soldiers walked the sands, and there was a decidedly martial air to the place generally given up to gaiety.

The boys had, of course, been stopped quite frequently. With war in the land this was only to be expected. Still the papers they carried always won the day, and they were allowed to proceed. This could hardly be wondered at when one of those little documents was written wholly by King Albert himself, and contained an express desire that the bearer and his friends should be given every possible courtesy by loyal Belgians, as they had proved their friendship for the little kingdom to the utmost.

Then later on the motorcycle trio knew they were on French soil, for they had been stopped by a patrol in the famous blue tunics of the republican army. Once more had their passports been scanned, and after a little consultation, in which Rod was able to mangle a few sentences, he speaking French, they were saluted respectfully by the patrol, and allowed to proceed.

After that they had arrived at Dunkirk, where later on hundreds of thousands of British soldiers were destined to be landed.

Once through this city the boys headed on south, aiming to reach Calais before evening came. So far nothing serious had hindered their forward progress, and all of them felt light-hearted indeed.

Then had come the halt at the cool wayside spring; and it was after drinking their fill of the delightful water, thanks to a gourd some kind person had supplied, that Hanky Panky announced his discovery.

Josh took a look, and then burst out into a loud laugh.

“Why, if you’re going to believe because a fellow wears khaki he must own a motorcycle,” he told the other, “you’ll have the whole country full of spinning machines. Those are British soldiers, Hanky; Tommy Atkins, you know, come over to France to give a helping hand to keep the Germans out of Paris.”

“Sure they are,” grinned the other; “as if we didn’t spy a lot of the same up at Dunkirk when we slipped through. I was only guying you, Josh. But we must be near Calais, don’t you think, Rod?”

“Only a few miles more and we’ll get there,” the leader advised him. “Like as not there’s a regiment of Britishers camped near by, ready to start off in the direction of Paris when trains can be supplied.”

“Huh! they’ll need all the hands they can muster to hold back that army we saw passing through Brussels, I wager,” said Josh.^[1]

“Hundreds of thousands of Germans, if there was one,” added Hanky Panky; “why, they passed on the dog-trot for hours all that afternoon; and in the morning the drab-colored line was still moving steadily through the city, headed south.”

“There, those two men are going down the road now, in the same direction we are,” Josh went on to say; “I’d like to come up with them, and hear a few words in my own mother tongue. Let me tell you I’m tired of listening to only German, Flemish and French.”

The two soldiers, hearing the splutter of the motorcycles behind them, drew to one side of the road so as to allow the trio of boys to pass. Instead of doing this the chums dismounted and saluted.

“We’re three Americans boys who got caught in the whirl of the war on the border of the Rhine country,” Rod hastened to explain. “We’ve had a pretty warm experience getting through Belgium with our machines, but by great good luck managed to do so. Now we want to get to the front where the fighting is going on. We’ve a good reason for wishing to do that, you see. Where is your camp, may I ask, fellows?”

The two young Britishers exchanged surprised looks. Evidently they hardly knew whether to believe Rod or not, his story seemed so remarkable. Still they must have been favorably impressed with his looks, as nearly every person was, for presently they smiled broadly, and insisted on shaking hands with each of the motorcycle boys.

“Our camp is about a mile ahead, and alongside the road,” one of them hastened to explain; “you will be held up there, unless you sheer off on a little side road that lies just beyond that batch of squatty trees.”

Evidently this was intended as a gentle hint. Rod, however, only laughed.

“Thanks for the tip, my friend,” he said gaily; “but we mean to spend the night in Calais, and will be only too glad to meet your commanding officer. We have papers he will be pleased to see; and there isn’t a general on French soil but who would gladly let us pass on the recommendations we carry.”

“When do you expect to start for the front?” asked Josh just then, as with his companions he prepared to move on.

“We have received notice that a train will be ready for us an hour after sundown; and let me tell you we are highly pleased to know it,” came the reply, accompanied with a good-natured smile.

“What is the news from the front?” continued Josh eagerly.

“A tremendous battle is on before Paris,” replied the Britisher. “Von Kluck has swung around from the northwest, and is trying to envelope the city with his forces, while two other armies are bearing down from the north and northeast. It will be all the French can do to hold them back. Most of us expect that Paris will fall inside of a few days. But we’re fair wild to get in the ruck, and strike a blow at the Kaiser’s soldiers. He’s called the British a contemptible little army, you must know.”

“Here’s hoping that you do have that pleasure!” called Josh as he turned and looked back over his shoulder, for the three boys had started along the road; “and my dearest wish is that I get on the ground before all the scrapping is over.”

A short time afterwards and they arrived at the place where the regiment of khaki-clad Britisher regulars was in a temporary camp. They were awaiting the summons to take their train when it was made up, and be whirled off to the scene of carnage, where tens of thousands of men on both sides were fated to be killed and wounded before three more suns had set.

Rod expected to be held up, and therefore was not in the least surprised when a patrol stepped into the road, motioning to the three lads to halt. They were soon taken to the place where several officers sat looking over a map of Paris and its environs, where they fully expected to be in action before another twenty-four hours had passed.

The British officers eyed them with more or less wonder, and not a little suspicion in the bargain, for they soon realized that the boys were not English, as they had at first supposed; and ugly rumors concerning clever German spies had already begun to pass current in the ranks of the Allies.

When Rod gave a brief account of all their adventures, from the time they heard the first news of how war had been declared against Russia and France by Germany, all of them were deeply interested. And they scanned the wonderful paper bearing the signature of King Albert with eager eyes, for already had the monarch of the dauntless little Belgian nation become an heroic figure over

across the Channel, on account of his defiance to the Kaiser's demand that he allow the German army to march through neutral territory in order to swoop down on Paris.

After a very pleasant ten minutes with the British officers the boys passed on toward Calais, followed by the best of wishes.

"No use talking," Josh was heard to say, "blood is thicker than water, after all. I've got some English and Scotch and Irish blood in me, and that's why my heart is with the cause of the Allies. I suppose if I'd had German ancestors I'd be just as much for their cause; but all the same I am not."

Shortly afterwards they arrived in Calais, and put up at an inn recommended by one of the officers as being decent and reasonable. Calais was already in the throes of the war, for the streets were crowded with marching soldiers; and artillery trains could be seen moving this way and that, as they were being loaded on flat cars to be taken to the front.

The boys expected to pass the night there, getting such sleep as was possible, considering the confusion that prevailed. In the morning, if all were well, they could make an early start in the direction of Paris, expecting to find splendid roads all of the way, and with nothing to delay them, unless it were the fact that moving armies clogged the thoroughfares so that a passage was impossible.

After they had had their supper they wandered forth to look around a little, because on account of meaning to get away so early they knew there would be no opportunity to do this in the morning.

All of them felt rather tired, however, and it was not long before Hanky Panky voiced the general sentiment when he suggested that sleep would fill the bill better than anything else he knew of.

They had a room with two beds, and as Josh was a restless sleeper he was given the single cot. It may have been about one or two in the morning when Rod awoke, oppressed with the conviction that there was something moving in the room, which suggestion sent a thrill through his whole being, and aroused him thoroughly.

[\[1\]](#)

See “The Big Five Motorcycle Boys Under Fire.”

CHAPTER VI.

THE FRETFUL ROAR OF BATTLE.

Rod held his breath and listened. Though his nerves were quivering with excitement he could hold himself in check wonderfully well. Josh was breathing heavily, while Hanky Panky lay quite still; somehow Rod half suspected that the other might also have been aroused, and was, like himself, listening with bated breath to find out what had caused that slight noise close by.

A thrill passed through Rod when something touched him. Then he suddenly realised that it was his bed-fellow, Hanky Panky, wishing to be reassured; and accordingly Rod gave him a slight nudge with his elbow.

Something moved again, and, on straining his vision, for the room was fairly dark, Rod managed to discover what seemed to be the bent-over figure of a man. He guessed instinctively that it was no common thief who had managed to enter their chamber in this Calais inn at the dead of night, meaning to steal money, or any other valuable he could get his hands on.

Jules must have managed to follow after them, and was also in the French city by the sea, which later on the Kaiser became so wild to possess in order to harass the coast of England twenty miles away that he ordered mad charges on the part of his men, and thousands on thousands were slaughtered without accomplishing any favorable result.

Rod did not mean to lie quietly there and allow this sneak-thief time to rummage around. Of course the precious paper wanted by Jules was securely hidden; but for all that it went against his grain to allow such liberties.

Managing to get his mouth close to the ear of Hanky Panky he whispered:
"Shout when I do, and jump out of bed!"

The other gave a sign to the effect that he heard and understood; although this consisted only of a nudge with his knee it was sufficient to tell Rod the game was ready for touching off.

When both of them started to yell the effect was weird, and must have given poor, unsuspecting Josh the scare of his life; for he rolled out of bed and commenced to thresh wildly about him, perhaps under the impression that dreams were realities and his clothes actually on fire.

Rod had eyes only for the dusky figure of the unwelcome intruder. The man

made a headlong dive for the open window through which he evidently must have entered the room of the inn. It was all of ten feet, perhaps twelve, to the ground, and he went plunging through space like a huge frog.

They heard him strike heavily, though he managed to gain his feet, and go limping away, groaning as he vanished in the darkness.

Of course there was more or less excitement about the inn. People could be heard calling out as they thrust their heads from the windows. Some men who had been lying asleep in the wagon-yard near by came hurrying up, asking if it was a fire.

Rod explained to the landlord, who appeared, candle in hand; and as no damage had been done the excitement soon quieted down. The boys, however, decided to set a trap by means of a cord, that would warn them if any one again attempted to enter their room by that exposed window.

Apparently the failure of his plan discouraged the schemer, for they were not annoyed any further during the remainder of the night. With the coming of morning they ate an early breakfast, settled their reckoning with the French landlord, who insisted on apologizing profusely for their being so rudely disturbed, just as if he was to blame, and then once more mounted on their reliable motorcycles the trio of boys started forth.

It was a fine morning in early September. All Nature seemed smiling, and it required quite a stretch of the imagination to realize that not so very far away from this fair spot two million determined soldiers were facing one another, bent on slaughter unparalleled. The Battle of the Marne was even then opening, with the fate of fair Paris trembling in the balance.

One thing they soon noticed, which was that the road they were following now seemed to keep even with a railway line, over which trains were passing at a dizzy speed, all heading in the same direction, toward Paris.

Every time one of these was sighted the boys could see that the passengers were wholly soldiers. Sometimes they wore the blue coats of the French, with the beloved red trousers, which have been so dear to the hearts of the fighting men of the republic from away back to the time of Napoleon; then again the dull khaki of the British regulars predominated. They occupied first-class carriages, freight vans, cattle cars—anything sufficed so long as it allowed them to get closer to where a chance for glory awaited them.

All these things kept the boys in a constant condition of expectancy. As the morning wore away and they continued to make good headway Josh even found himself indulging in the hope that they would reach the scene of activity before many hours had elapsed.

Once, when they had halted at a wayside farmhouse to see if anything in the

shape of a lunch could be secured for love or money, he even called the attention of his two mates to a faint rumbling far away in the distance.

"As sure as you live, fellows," Josh went on to say eagerly, "that must be made by some of those monster guns the Germans are rolling along with them, meaning to batter down the forts defending Paris, just like they did the steel-domed ones up at Liege and Namur in Belgium, as we know happened."

Rod was not quite so positive about it. They had covered many miles, because of good roads, and the few obstacles encountered, but he hardly believed they could be so close to Paris as that.

"I can see something low down ahead of us that may be clouds," Hanky Panky now asserted.

"More'n likely that's the smoke of the battle that's raging over yonder," declared the positive Josh, who always had to be wrestled with before he could be convinced that he was wrong.

"No matter which is the correct solution of the puzzle," laughed Rod, not wishing to take sides against either of his chums, "we're meaning to go ahead after we see if we can get some grub at this little farmhouse."

Fortune played them a kind stroke, for the farmer's wife, a voluble little French woman, who had a husband and three sons in the army, on learning that they were actually American boys, insisted on their settling down while she cooked them a fine dinner.

It turned out that Madame had herself spent several years in America, and even then had relatives living in the French Quarter in New York City. She asked them a multitude of questions, and was especially anxious to learn if the great republic across the sea would align itself with the Entente Allies, who were now, she insisted, engaged in fighting the battles of the whole world for freedom from military domination.

Taken altogether, the boys quite enjoyed that hour at noon. They learned considerable about things that interested them, especially the lay of the land ahead, and where they might expect to come upon trouble in meeting some of the troops engaged in the fighting.

Josh was especially tickled when she assured them that the dull throbbing sound they heard almost constantly was indeed the fretful murmur of big guns. Being a French woman, and very sanguine with regard to the valor of her countrymen, the farmer's wife could already in imagination see the beaten Germans fleeing in mad haste before the invincible soldiers of the republic.

In this humor then they once more started forth, feeling considerably refreshed after that fine meal. Indeed, Rod had been unable to make the little patriotic woman accept the three francs he offered her; and watching his chance he had

laid the money on the table where she must later on find it.

An hour later and the throbbing had grown much more perceptible, showing that they must be rapidly drawing closer to where the vast armies were marching and countermarching, with the field batteries in almost constant action.

They understood that several German armies were approaching Paris at the same time, one coming from the north, another veering more to the east, but the most dangerous of all, that commanded by the clever Von Kluck, swinging around so as to come down on the devoted French capital from the northwest.

More than forty years had passed since another hostile army had laid siege to Paris and taken the gay city after many months of desperate fighting. Rod wondered whether history was going to be repeated now. He felt sure that if once those Germans managed to get their terrible forty-two centimetre guns busy, no fort was capable of standing up under their frightful pounding.

So the afternoon began to wear away, and all this while the motors hummed cheerily, as they worked unceasingly, carrying the three bold riders closer and closer to where the greatest battle of the age was being fought to a finish.

There was a sudden whoop from the rear, where Hanky Panky held his place. When the others managed to glance around, almost afraid that they would find him in the ditch alongside the road, with his machine a wreck, they discovered Hanky pointing wildly overhead, while at the same time he shouted:

“Looks like old times, fellows, to see that aeroplane spinning along up there half a mile high; and say, it’s sure a German Taube in the bargain. How about that same, Rob; you ought to know what they look like?”

CHAPTER VII.

CLOSE TO THE FIRING LINE.

“You’re right about it, Hanky Panky!” announced Rod, after he had taken a good look aloft, and recognized some of the familiar features distinguishing the Taube aeroplanes used almost exclusively at that early stage of the war by the German military forces.

“It’s snooping around getting information so’s to help Von Kluck strike the Allies where they don’t expect him, most likely!” the boy in the rear called out.

“Mebbe not,” said Josh stoutly; “for all we know old Von may have put his fingers in the trap laid by wily General Joffre, and what he wants to do now is to find a way to draw out again.”

Whether Josh really believed all he said or not was an open question, but at any rate it was in his heart to stand up staunchly for the French and English, whatever came to pass. He had seen that vast German horde overrun poor Belgium, and he was praying they might meet an obstacle when they finally ran up against the whole Allied army, standing before Paris, and determined to do or die there.

They cast many a glance upward as they continued to move along. The aeroplane did not seem to be disturbed, as far as they could make out. If there were French birdmen in the vicinity they had other work cut out for them besides chasing a hostile flier. Possibly they were over the fighting armies, finding out valuable statistics for the use of the French commanders, and which might affect the ultimate outcome of the battle.

All doubt concerning their being in the vicinity of the field of gigantic operations was by this time removed. The roar of guns had kept on growing more and more intense. Besides, it was easy for them to make sure that what Hanky Panky had suggested as a threatening summer storm cloud was in reality smoke from artillery and burning cottages along the line of Von Kluck’s advance.

Once they had to stop and get on one side of the road in order to permit the passage of a convoy of motor lorries loaded with wounded men. The boys noticed that some of these wore the khaki of British soldiers, which seemed to prove that a portion of General French’s little army from across the Channel

must be valiantly holding a part of the thin line against the furious rushes of the disciplined German troops.

The three boys took off their hats and waved them heartily as the procession of trucks passed by. Some of the wounded answered them lustily, showing that their spirit had not been in the least quenched by their hard luck in getting in the way of hostile missiles.

Josh was burning with a feverish desire to be moving again.

“Why, judging from that,” he told the others excitedly, as the last of the sad procession passed them by, heading possibly for some French town where a hospital had beds ready against their coming, “we must be almost in the riot by now. Listen to how the guns keep up that whoop, will you? I’ll bet you they’re not more’n five miles away from here! Rod, can’t we push right along?”

Rod, however, realized that they must now begin to exercise a great deal of caution. No matter which side they happened to come upon, there was a fair chance of the three boys being held up, and not permitted to go any further.

“Keep on the lookout for some hill or other elevation, where we can get a good view of the neighborhood!” he told them, remembering former occasions when they had adopted a similar method for seeing operations.

It was late in the day by now. They had come at a tremendous pace over scores and scores of miles, since that start at six o’clock in the morning. Along about two in the afternoon Josh had declared that his cyclometer was marking the hundred-and-fifty mark since beginning the day’s run, which was a pretty good spin, all things considered.

Thanks to the excellent French highways, and the fact that they had met with no accident to detain them, this record could be hung up as one of which any fellow might be proud.

It would be utterly impossible to describe all they saw while on that wonderful day’s run. Each of the boys had secured a little French tri-color, and this flag they took pride in attaching to their machines. It aroused the greatest enthusiasm all along the road. In every town they passed through they were taken for some new type of native soldiers mounted on motorcycles. That they did not carry any guns may have occasioned more or less surprise; but then doubtless they had other methods for destroying the rash invaders when the time came; small but powerful bombs would take up little space in a knapsack, every one knew.

In the country sections where the neat French market gardens predominated they had found the women working amidst the crops, and few men in evidence. Of course those of a military age were already called to the colors, and at that moment might be laying their lives down cheerfully in defence of their beloved land; for their old hatred of everything German had once more leaped to the

surface as soon as war was declared.

Rod was trying to figure out what his course should be under the circumstances. He knew how difficult it must prove for them to reach a place where they could observe any of the desperate fighting. The best they might expect would be to see some detached action, and possibly learn where the French regiment might be found to which Andre belonged.

As they proceeded slowly along the road, after watching the procession of motor lorries loaded with wounded wind past, all of them were using their eyes to the best advantage.

The country was hilly to the north of Paris, Rod knew, with many roads crossing in every direction. At any time they might expect to discover some movement of troops belonging to one of the armies engaged.

This came to pass shortly afterwards, and when they found that it was a British regiment that was crossing a field on the double-quick, with guns ready for business, the boys sent up a real American cheer.

“There, they’ve come to a halt, somehow or other!” said Josh, “and listen to the fellows send back an answering cheer, will you? Guess they must take us for some of their boys from over the Channel. Here comes an officer on horseback to interview us, Rod.”

Great was the surprise of the British colonel to find that they were not English boys at all, but cousins from the great republic across the ocean. He asked many questions while his men rested before continuing their movement, which was undoubtedly meant to carry out some purpose or other.

One startling piece of information he gave the three motorcycle boys.

“The Germans have shot their bolt, and are retreating!” was what he declared in his hearty British way. “Von Kluck meant to take Paris by surprise from the northwest, but he made a terrible mistake and left his flank uncovered. It was threatened by our British troops, as well as by a new army that came out of Paris, sent by General Gallieni, the commander of the city. There was nothing to be done but swing in a half circle past Paris without coming within cannon shot of the forts. We are now about to strike with all our force, and beat him back on the Marne. Paris is saved for the time being!”

This was the amazing news that thrilled the three boys through and through. In their minds it meant that the German tide had already reached its flood stage; and that from the hour Von Kluck changed his plans with regard to attacking the forts defending Paris the campaign of invasion was fated to meet with its Waterloo.

Josh actually shouted aloud to show his glee, nor did the grim British officer consider this any discourtesy. He himself was feeling in much the same humor,

for victory was already in the air for the Allies, and he knew what that would mean for the future of the whole of Europe.

After a very pleasant and interesting chat the three boys again mounted their machines, and set out. They had been warned by the accommodating officer that they might run into a nest of the enemy at almost any time now, for detachments of the Germans were raiding the country, trying to inspire a reign of terror among the inhabitants.

“If they can catch us,” the confident Josh had remarked in his customary boastful fashion, “they’ll be welcome to our mounts. All the same we don’t mean to let ourselves be taken off our guard. To be made prisoners just now would upset all our lovely plans, you see, Colonel. But it’s awful kind of you to give us the tip, and make sure we appreciate it.”

Shortly afterwards Rod announced that there was something of a hill ahead, and once they had managed to reach the crown they might find a chance to take an observation that would prove profitable to them.

“Drive ahead, then,” chirped Josh, always willing to do anything that came along, especially when it promised fresh excitement; possibly he was hoping that from the top of the low elevation they would be able to see many stirring dramas connected with the great battle that was now opening, and which must seal the fate of the French capital, one way or the other.

“I’m going to slow up first,” observed the cautious leader; “because we don’t know what we may run on at the top of that hill. It’d be rough on us to suddenly come face to face with a whole battalion of Germans, advancing up the other side, and reaching the crown just at the same time we did.”

“Rod, you’re right there!” Josh was heard to call out almost instantly; “look up where we’re heading, and you’ll see the Germans have got there even before we did!”

All of them came to a sudden halt, and dropped off their motorcycles in a desperate hurry.

CHAPTER VIII.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF THE TRAP.

The summit of the low hill was not more than a quarter of a mile away from the spot where Rod and his two chums had dismounted, to stare aghast at what was transpiring before their eyes.

The hill was almost devoid of trees near its top, and a minute before they had taken note of the fact that the bushes stood out against the sky-line with nothing to interfere with the vision of an observer perched aloft. But now it seemed as though the whole hilltop were alive with moving figures. The declining sun glinted from hundreds of polished guns and bayonets. And clearly could the boys see that these men were garbed in the dun-colored uniforms distinguishing the Kaiser's troops.

"That settles our hash so far as getting a peek at the fighting goes," muttered Josh discontentedly, for he always gave a cherished object up very lothfully.

"Oh! I wouldn't say that!" declared Hanky Panky; "there are other ways of doing it, you can wager. That hill yonder isn't the only pebble on the beach. What'll we do now, Rod?"

"Get out of this, and in a hurry, too," snapped the other instantly.

"We certainly can't keep on going forward, for a fact," admitted Josh, still filled with gloom and disappointment; "those chaps'd gobble us up like fun, and it'd be good-bye to our bully wheels."

"Course they'd take us for Britishers, from our khaki uniforms," admitted Hanky Panky; "and say, if they once got their hands on us they'd snatch all our papers away in a hurry. I'm counting on keeping that one our friend Albert gave us, to show the boys over in old Garland when we get back home; because they'll never believe half we expect to tell 'em if we don't have *some* evidence to prove it."

"Huh! That isn't the worst by a long shot," continued Josh. "Don't you see our having those papers on our precious persons would make it look like we might be spies, working in the interest of Belgium and France? You just better believe we don't want to be nabbed by the Kaiser's men, not if we know what's good for us, and I reckon we do."

"The worst is yet to come!" exclaimed Rod just then; "look off there to the left

and tell me what you see moving across those fields toward the road back of us.”

Hardly had he said this than loud outcries arose from his two companions.

“Why, Rod, they’re whole regiments of the Germans, and they’re deploying so as to cut off our retreat, you see!” cried Hanky Panky, in a near panic.

“I don’t expect they’ve even noticed us as yet,” Rod went on to say; “but all the same if ever they do reach the road we’ll be caught like rats in a trap.”

“Looks like we might be between two fires,” said Josh, frowning savagely; “what can we do about it, Rod?”

It was second nature for the other fellows to depend on their leader whenever a knotty problem arose that needed solving. And seldom did Rod disappoint their expectations. He came up smiling on the present occasion.

“Get turned around in a hurry!” he called out; “we’ve one chance in three to slip past before they get near the road. Are you both game to try for it?”

“Sure!” bellowed Josh; “try anything once, is my motto!”

“I’ll go where you lead, Rod,” was the simple but eloquent tribute which Hanky Panky paid the other; and Rod must have felt deeply gratified to know he was able to inspire the hearts of his chums with so much confidence.

“Then let’s get busy!” was all he told them.

The rattle of the machines’ exhausts instantly announced the start. Rod led the way, with the others close behind him. He did not dread the soldiers who were upon the hilltop, even though every movement made by the fleeing motorcycle boys must be plainly seen by their observing eyes; for the distance was too great for them to expect to damage the mounts of the escaping enemy by any gunfire.

It was the forces coming up on the double-quick to reach the road over which the three boys had so lately passed that aroused Rod’s greatest fears. He knew that with the speed of which the machines were capable they could manage to sweep past before the troops reached the road; but should the Germans open fire on them the result might be disastrous indeed.

Hoping for the best, and ready to accept the desperate chances, they dashed along, every fellow bending low in his saddle from some instinct of self-preservation. It was a serious time for them, and with set teeth they hastened into the danger zone. Now they approached the place where there would be the most peril from a volley fired by the oncoming soldiers, who of course ere now had seen them, and perhaps judged that they must be British scouts caught in a trap.

Rod had changed his mind. He suddenly remembered that there was a branch road leading off from the one they had come along. Of course it was a blind move, because none of them could even give a guess where it went to; but if they took it they might manage to slip out of the dilemma into which the fortunes of war had thrown them.

“Be ready to follow me when I turn into a side road!” he called to the others.

Undoubtedly they heard him, though they gave no answering shout. It would have availed little, however, because just at that moment there was a savage burst of firing back in the direction of the hill, and many spent bullets dropped all around them, some even kicking up little clouds of dust as they fell on the road.

Rod turned in the saddle to see if there was any sign of his chums having been struck. So far all seemed well, for they were coming right along after him, and without any indication of having received even the slightest damage.

The forks of the road were now close at hand. Rod was never more delighted in his life than to realize this, for once they turned into this lesser thoroughfare he believed they would be protected by friendly trees from the gaze of those on the hilltop.

A dreadful crash gave him another chilly feeling. He understood that it must be the explosion of a shrapnel shell, not more than fifty feet behind them. The gunner may have been on the hill with the gathering troops; but in calculating the distance he had failed to take into consideration the speed which the escaping boys were making.

Perhaps if given an opportunity to try a second shot he might be able to correct this error of judgment, and the next shell would burst directly over their heads.

Rod almost held his breath. He felt as though so much depended on the next twenty seconds of time, perhaps even the lives of his two brave comrades, as well as his own.

Then he arrived at the forks, and, making a detour, left the main road to plunge into the smaller thoroughfare. Again Rod looked back to assure himself that both of the other boys were as successful in turning as he had been.

Yes, there was Josh, safe and sound, and Hanky Panky, wabbling a bit to be sure, but keeping a firm grip on his speeding machine had now managed to accomplish the deal.

Rod saw something suddenly explode on the road exactly where the forks came. He knew full well it must be that second shrapnel shell, and only for their sudden change of base, which the gunner had not calculated on, it must have burst so near Hanky Panky that he might have suffered seriously.

The outlook was better, though it seemed as yet too early to count on security. Rod kept a keen watch on what lay before him. He would not have been greatly surprised to discover more of the invading hosts appear in view at any second; for they were undoubtedly in the midst of a turning movement that had to do with the great battle opening up. When an army of between two and three

hundred thousand men, like that of Von Kluck, the German commander, attempts a gigantic movement, it covers many miles of territory, Rod understood.

After proceeding in this manner for several miles his hopes grew stronger, and he actually felt as though there was a good chance for them to elude the enemy. Josh was growling to himself, keenly disappointed because they seemed to be running away from where momentous things were taking place.

The night was not far distant, and Rod had to bear this fact in mind. Where were they to secure anything to eat in the midst of all this turmoil and confusion? So far as a bed went they could do without, nor would it be the first time such a thing had happened in their eventful career.

"Looks as if we might have outrun the Boches, Rod," called Josh, using a term he had heard some of the Frenchmen apply toward the Germans, though no one seemed able to explain where it had originated, or just what it meant, save that it was intended as a term of derision, the same as "Yanks" and "Johnny Rebs" passed current during the Civil War between the States.

"Yes, that's all very well," replied Rod, "but it doesn't cut any figure when we try to run across a house where we're going to get our suppers, and find a place to sleep."

"Oh! we're sure to come to some sort of French farmer's place sooner or later!" declared the confident Josh; "and if they're anything like the little woman who took care of us this noon it'll be a picnic."

Ten minutes later, as they were negotiating a bad section of the road, Rod made an announcement that sent a wave of thanksgiving through the hearts of his chums.

"Farmhouse ahead half a mile or so," was the burden of his call; "I glimpsed it against that bright place in the sky. As the sun's already gone down we'll have to take our chances, and apply for lodging there."

"I'm with you, Rod!" called out Josh immediately, while Hanky Panky added:

"I only hope none of the enemy slip up in the night and gather us in, that's all."

CHAPTER IX.

THE NIGHT ALARM.

Their arrival at the dooryard of the roadside farm was signalized by a frantic clatter. Dogs barked, chickens squawked on their way to their roosts, ducks quacked, and even a calf tethered to a stake in the rear of the house set up a pitiful bleating, as if under the conviction that the dreaded butcher's cart had arrived, and the last hope of life now hung by a slender thread.

"One thing I'm glad to see," announced Josh, as they came to a halt amidst all this bustle and clamor.

"What's that?" asked Hanky Panky, in duty bound.

"The terrible Germans have not come this way so far, that's sure," remarked the observing one.

"I'd like you to tell us just how you know that?" demanded the other.

"Shucks! open your eyes, and look around you, my friend. Would it stand to reason that a bunch of hungry soldiers, raiding through an enemy's country, could pass by, and allow all this fat of the land to exist? Ducks, and chickens, and pigs, and calves would have gone to make up a German feast this night. And like as not the dogs would have been shot in cold blood because being French they had dared to bark at the uniforms of the Kaiser's men."

"Guess you're right there, Josh," admitted Hanky Panky, easily convinced when the evidence was there before his very eyes.

"Here are the good people of the house come to see what's broken loose to give their live stock such a scare," observed Rod just then.

A woman with a tottering, silver-haired old man just behind her, appeared around the corner of the low building. Possibly they had been alarmed by hearing the splutter of the coming motorcycle brigade's machines, and hesitated about showing themselves. But when Rod advanced toward them, making a courteous salute, and they saw what a frank boyish face he had, somehow they lost all fear.

Arrangements were soon made that assured the lads some sort of entertainment. That they were not the terrible Germans was enough for the good woman of the farm house. In her mind the whole world was divided into two classes just then: enemies and friends; and all who did not have German blood in

their veins she looked upon as naturally favoring the Allies.

The old man became quite solicitous concerning the safety of the splendid motorcycles. He even led the boys to where they might store them for the night. This receptacle turned out to be a sort of dry cave dug into the side of a mound. It was evidently a frost-proof receptacle for the potatoes and other vegetables raised for winter use, and had a good stout door, secured with a hasp.

"There doesn't seem to be any sign of a lock here, boys," announced Josh, after they had carefully deposited their machines inside and closed the door.

"Well," replied Rod, "these people around here are so honest themselves that they never dream of anybody ever stealing a single thing. Chances are you'll not find a lock or even a chain or a bar in all the house."

"Sounds all very nice," grumbled the suspicious Josh, "but I'd sleep better, I'm thinking, if I knew the machines were under lock and key."

"We could manage to make you a shake-down here in the potato bin if so be you felt disposed that way," suggested Hanky Panky blandly; but somehow the idea did not appear to appeal strongly to the other, for he snickered.

"If the rest can stand it I oughtn't to worry," he grunted, and thus dismissed the subject apparently from his mind.

Later on they sat down to a pretty fine supper, which the good woman prepared for them. The hungry boys were ready to declare that while they had sampled all sorts of cookery since landing on European soil, from English and German to Flemish, they really believed that the French excelled all others when it came to getting up tasteful dishes out of next to nothing.

"No wonder they save so much money, and could pay off that billion dollars the Germans exacted after the war of Seventy-one," said Josh confidentially.

"They always say that a French family can live comfortably on what an American family would waste," added Hanky Panky; "and for one I believe it."

Rod, of course, started in to do the talking, but it was soon discovered that the woman could speak pretty fair English. Great was the surprise of Josh and Hanky Panky when she told them she had lived in the French Quarter of New York as long as three years, some time back, before she was married.

She proudly confessed that her two boys, as well as her husband, were in the ranks of the republic's patriotic army; and that even though she might never again see them, it would be a sacrifice for the land she loved with all her heart and soul; so that if the hated Germans were only beaten, and France saved to posterity, she could reconcile herself even to the loss of all she possessed in the wide world.

They sat up chatting until a reasonably late hour. Then, as the boys were more or less tired after an exhausting day's ride they asked to be shown the apartment

where they were to pass the night.

It proved to be a room in a wing that had been recently added to the old farmhouse, with evidences of not yet being suitably furnished. Still, all they wanted was a place to throw themselves down and rest. The night was warm, it being still summer, and little if any covers would be needed.

Here then they prepared to sleep. Each of them removed their outer garments, as they had already done with regard to their leggings and shoes.

Josh poked his head out of a convenient open window to take an observation. He grunted as if pleased to know that from that point it was possible to see the mound of earth in which the potato cellar had been located.

A wide double bed occupied one corner of the room. The good woman of the house had also fetched in a cot, which would serve admirably for the odd traveler.

"It looks good to me," remarked Hanky Panky, after testing the big bed, and finding that it felt reasonably soft. "I reckon, Rod, we'll let Josh take the cot, because you know he's such a kicker when he dreams that nobody likes to stand for it."

"Only too glad of the chance to sleep alone," chuckled Josh, apparently in no wise feeling hurt by the insinuation.

So it was easily arranged, and in less than ten minutes afterward Rod, being the last one up, blew out the candle that had been given to them, and sought his place in the big bed.

If Josh chose to lie awake for any length of time turning over matters in his active mind at least he did not make any sound calculated to disturb his companions.

Time passed on.

Rob was in the midst of a delightful dream of the far-away home across the sea when he felt some one gently shake him. As he instantly opened his eyes it all came back to him again in a flash, and he knew where he was; also that it must be Josh who was again trying to draw his attention.

"Hello! what's up, Josh?" asked Rod quietly and without a trace of excitement, whereas a good many boys, upon being so suddenly aroused from a sound sleep would have sat up, trembling with alarm, and demanding to know in quivering tones what had happened.

"Something's going on outside here that we ought to look into," whispered Josh.

By this time Hanky Panky had been awakened, and heard the last words.

"Gee whiz! then the Germans have come after all!" he was heard to mutter, as he started to feel around for his shoes.

They hurried to the windows and looked out. Just how Josh had happened to awaken he did not take the trouble to inform the others; but they could see that something out of the common was occurring outside. A couple of lights that might be lanterns seemed to be moving this way and that, as though those who held the same were looking around the outhouses belonging to the farm.

“Get dressed, and in a hurry, too,” said Rob, after he had watched these moving lights for a minute or so.

“Then you think they must be the Germans come after us, do you, Rob?” asked Hanky Panky tremulously, as he started to dress as fast as he could in the semidarkness.

“I don’t know, but I mean to find out,” he was told in low but incisive tones.

They made all the haste possible. Rob was ready some little time ahead of his comrades. This might be because he mastered his feelings better than either of the others, or else on account of having his possessions so carefully arranged before climbing into bed that he knew exactly where to lay a hand on each and every article in the dark.

Finally Josh, and then Hanky Panky announced that he was all ready to issue forth. Josh doubtless was figuring in his mind just how they might get the precious motorcycles out of the potato cellar unobserved, and ride wildly away before the searching Germans suspected their presence. Hanky Panky on his part would have been almost willing to abandon the wheels rather than risk chances of falling into the hands of the invaders; for he had an idea they might be treated as spies, and dealt with in a summary fashion. The thought of being stood up against a barn and riddled with cruel bullets was uppermost in the boy’s mind.

There was a door leading from the new wing of the farmhouse to the outer air. Rod softly opened this now, and led the way forth, the others trailing after him, confident that Rod would know what line of action was best under the exciting conditions by which they were confronted.

The first natural thing for them to do was to peer carefully around, in expectation of again locating the wandering lights. Then Josh uttered a low gasp, as his fingers plucked at Rod’s sleeve.

“Looky there, will you, Rod?” he whispered, intensely excited; “they’ve run across the potato bin, and are going to take a peep inside!”

“Oh! my stars! it’s all up with our poor wheels then!” Hanky Panky was heard to tell the others, though no one seemed to pay the slightest attention to him.

There was no doubt about the situation being grave. The lights had by this time vanished within the vegetable cellar that had been built underground for frost protection in the cold winters.

“Come; let’s creep forward and see what’s happening,” suggested Rod boldly,

as though after all he began to have slight hopes that it might not be quite as bad as they had been thinking.

As they advanced hurriedly they soon began to catch the sound of several voices. Evidently the searchers had been amazed to discover three such splendid motorcycles hidden away in a potato cellar on this farm; this was hardly what they had been looking for when using their lanterns so industriously.

“Too bad, too bad it had to happen!” whimpered the disconsolate Hanky Panky, for he had become so accustomed to spinning along on his reliable machine that the prospect of using “Shank’s mare” as a means of progressing did not appeal to him at all.

“Don’t worry!” Rod told him, “but listen again.”

“What’s the use?” complained the other, “when I can’t understand a single word of what’s said, because it’s French they’re using.”

“French!” echoed Josh, a little louder than prudence might have dictated, though in his new excitement he evidently did not consider that; “why, then after all it isn’t the Germans who’ve come snooping around looking for us.”

“What are they saying, Rod?” asked Hanky Panky.

“Asking each other who can be the owners of these wonderful machines,” replied Rod, at the same time taking a step forward, as though meaning to enter the potato cave.

“Messieurs,” he said, “pardon me, but those machines belong to us; and we are friends of France, we beg you to believe.”

CHAPTER X.

MORE NEWS FROM THE FRONT.

Three men who wore the uniforms of French soldiers, one of whom was evidently a lieutenant, looked hastily up when Rod entered the vegetable cellar, and addressed them in the words we have given. The ordinary soldiers carried guns, and these weapons they half raised, as though wishing to be ready for any emergency.

Of course, it was immediately manifest to the officer that these three wideawake lads were not of the enemy. Like most other people he at first suspected them to be English boys. That would mean they were allies of the French; but nevertheless those splendid wheels were a great temptation; and the Grand Army was in sore need of all such means of rapid locomotion it could commandeer.

“You are English, then?” he asked, politely, returning Rod’s salute.

“No, American, monsieur,” replied the boy, promptly; “we were making a trip down the Rhine on our motorcycles when the war broke out. We had just managed to get across the line into poor Belgium when the Germans came. You can well understand that we have seen much of what happened in that unfortunate country, for we were compelled to go to Antwerp on business.”

“But—this is France,” interrupted the lieutenant, as though puzzled; “and here close to the firing line it is peculiar that we find three American boys mounted on such wonderfully fine motorcycles.”

Rod smiled blandly.

“You wonder how we managed to retain possession of them through it all,” he went on to say; “but the secret lay in a certain magical paper which we carry, and which you shall yourself be permitted to examine.”

With that he once more carefully extracted the document given to them by the brave king of the Belgians, and which had proved to be worth a thousand times its weight in gold.

So the French lieutenant, by the light of the flickering lanterns, also read the brief but forceful sentences penned by King Albert. He was of course greatly impressed, as who would not have been, remembering what a prominent figure the royal writer of the “pass” had already become in the world war?

“It is plain to be seen, young monsieur,” the officer hastened to say as he very carefully folded the precious paper, and with a bow returned it to the owner, “that you and your brave companions have found occasion to lend a helping hand to the grand cause for which all loyal Frenchmen are ready to shed their last drop of blood. But I notice that here the writer speaks of *five* young Americans, and I see but three.”

“That is easily explained,” replied Rod; “two of our chums were compelled to return hastily to America, having received a cable message. They sailed from Antwerp for London, and by now are far on the way across the Atlantic.”

“But what possessed you three adventurous boys to wish to come once more to the scene of battle and carnage? It is hardly a fit place for lads of your age, I should think?”

“But American boys are full of the spirit of adventure, monsieur,” urged Rod; “and the opportunity would surely never come to us again. Still, it was not merely curiosity that caused us to decide to make this trip. We have come on an errand of mercy; to assist one of your countrywomen who was in great trouble.”

He thereupon hastily sketched the situation in which Jeanne D’Aubrey was placed, with a chance of securing a competence could her husband be communicated with, and allowed to sign the important paper within the specified time limit.

A Frenchman is always filled with a love for anything that borders on the dramatic. He also has the greatest respect for such heroism as these three boys were now exhibiting in undertaking the dangerous mission for the sake of the poor woman at whose humble home they had been temporary guests.

Impulsively he stretched out his hand to Rod, and then to each of the other two boys.

“I am proud to meet you, young messieurs,” he announced; “and while these magnificent mounts would be put to a glorious use in the grand army that needs many such so badly, I could not have the heart to deprive you of your property. On account of what you have already done for the cause, and stand ready to aid any further attempt if the occasion arises, here then we hand you back your beloved motorcycles.”

While Josh and Hanky Panky could not understand much that was spoken, still it was possible for them to read the signs aright. Josh grinned as though greatly tickled over their good luck; and Hanky on his part doubtless felt like offering thanks because the searching party had turned out to be friends instead of foes.

When further conversation took place between Rod and the lieutenant the boy was given to understand that the French had learned of the presence of a German

spy in that neighborhood, and several patrols were searching every farmhouse and cottage within a radius of three miles, as well as the patches of woods that lay between.

After considerable more talking the lieutenant explained that as there was more country which he and his detail had been directed to search, he must linger no longer.

When the Frenchmen had departed the boys once more sought their room in the new wing of the farmhouse. They had hardly reached their quarters than a timid knock on the door was heard, and the good woman of the house appeared, to ask with more or less trepidation if they had suffered any loss from the visit of her countrymen, whose uniforms she must have recognized.

Rod assured her that all was well with them, at which she seemed particularly pleased, and vanished from the scene.

"Well, after all it turned out to be a false alarm," ventured Hanky Panky, giving an exhibition of one of his fancy yawns; and really no boy could excel him when it came to stretching his mouth wide open, so Josh always declared.

"But it might have been serious, all right," asserted the latter. "Our luck only caused them to be French instead of German. It was what you might call a narrow squeak, Hanky Panky; and only for my waking up when I did we'd have lost our property anyway."

"We owe you our best thanks for your wakefulness, Josh," Rod told him.

"Oh! that's all right," laughed the other; "thanks to a bad dream I chanced to arouse myself, and caught the flicker of some sort of moving light out there. So of course I just tumbled out and made for the window. When I saw lanterns moving this way and that I began to think we were going to be in the soup; so, knowing you ought to be put in touch with the situation, I wakened you, Rod."

"By the way," Hanky Panky continued, "what was the lieutenant telling you all the time he kept on talking, Rod?"

"That's so," echoed Josh immediately; "whatever it could have been it seemed to give him a whole lot of pleasure to be able to inform you, for he was smiling like everything, and I could see the pride sticking out of his face."

"Oh! I was asking him for the latest news from the battle front," replied Rod, "and what he told me was great stuff, to be sure. It seems that what we heard before was part of the truth."

"You mean how the German General Von Kluck, swinging down to attack Paris from the northwest, didn't get within gunshot of the outer forts before he found he had exposed his flank, and it was in danger of being turned—was that it, Rod?" and Josh, who was intensely interested in all military matters, eagerly waited to hear the answer to his leading question.

“Just what happened,” Rod explained. “You see, a new army was hastily gotten together by General Gallieni, the Governor of Paris, consisting for the most part of the regiments meant to defend the city. This, assisted by the British forces, was threatening the exposed flank of Von Kluck. If it struck hard it would throw his whole army into confusion, and start a rout. So instead of attacking the forts as he had intended, Von Kluck made a swift swing, and passed Paris on the north.”

“And what did Joffre do then?” asked Josh.

“The whole French army had been held for just such an opening. It was sent forward with impetuous speed to strike like an avalanche. The lieutenant said that already the blow had started to fall, and that there could be no doubt about the Germans being in retreat, heading north again to positions they must have arranged for along the Aisne River.”

“Hurrah! that makes me sing for joy!” cried Josh, exultantly; “then Paris isn’t going to fall like a ripe plum into the hands of the *invincible* German army. They counted without their host that time, I guess.”

“Much of the praise for what has happened goes to Joffre because he kept his army intact and refused to risk a general engagement until he believed the time was ripe. When Von Kluck exposed his flank, and that new army came out of Paris to threaten it, Joffre knew the fatal hour was at hand. Then he struck home, and already they are pushing the Germans back along the Marne with frightful slaughter.”

Josh was so pleased with hearing this wonderful news that he went around and insisted on shaking hands with each of his chums.

“Why, I’m nearly as tickled over it as if it was Washington that had been spared from the hand of the despoiler,” he went on to say, hilariously; “those Germans are learning something, it seems to me. They believed their army couldn’t be beaten, but by now their commanders know there are others just as brave as Germans—French, British, Belgians, Russians, yes, and Americans too among the lot. I’ll sure be able to sleep better after hearing that glorious news, Rod.”

Somehow they seemed to feel that their machines would not be disturbed again during the balance of that particular night, so fraught with big events for the people of imperiled France. All of them managed to get to sleep again without much trouble, and really knew nothing more until the sun shining in Rod’s face awoke him.

They were soon dressed, and on entering the other part of the farmhouse found that breakfast was already under way. Rod had to explain a lot of things to the old Frenchman, who it seemed had not been awakened by what had occurred

in the night, but had heard something of the event from his daughter.

It was worth while to see how both of them smiled when they heard about the sudden change of plans of the German general, and that even then, when the big guns were once more commencing to speak in the distance, it marked the retreat of the rash invaders who had expected to take Paris as easily as they had battered down the defences of Liege and Namur in Belgium, with their wonderful forty-two centimetre cannon.

The incident of the night, while at the time it had been quite thrilling, was already relegated to the past. Rod and his chums had really been through so much that was exciting during the time they owned those motorcycles, that events of this type were only so many reminiscences, once they had passed.

They had a bountiful breakfast, and then prepared to mount for another ride over the good roads lying north of the French capital.

As usual Hanky Panky began to speculate on what they were fated to see or experience during that day. Situated as they were, with warring armies near by, anything seemed possible. Indeed, Hanky could not venture to even give a guess as to what might come their way before the setting of another sun.

“I only hope we manage to get on the track of the regiment that Andre belongs to,” he ventured to say as they made ready to depart; “and that we find him still in the land of the living. Once we get that paper signed and witnessed, Jeanne D’Aubrey’s future is made secure, no matter what happens to her husband afterwards; though we do hope he’ll live to go back home, whole or crippled, as the fortunes of war decide. All ready here, Rod, so give the word to get started!”

CHAPTER XI.

HELP FOR THE STRANDED ONE.

“I’m as thirsty as a fish out of water, Rod!” called out Josh some time after they had started moving along the road; “must have been that ham we had for breakfast which was some salty, if fine. And unless I miss my guess there’s a roadside spring ahead of us there. You can see that foot traveler taking a drink right now.”

Rod had of course already noticed this for himself. Possibly he would have given the stop signal, even had Josh not pleaded with him to do so.

They pulled up close by and dismounted. The man at the spring watched them with what seemed to be uncommon interest; but then that was not so strange, considering what splendid machines they were riding. A trio of such wheels must make almost any one take notice.

Josh surveyed the other curiously as they approached him. It seemed to the boy that he hardly looked like a native of the soil; for he wore clothes far better than the average French farmer could afford; and there was also something about his appearance that suggested his being a foreigner.

To the astonishment of the boys he immediately addressed them in English.

“Your motorcycles I see are American made,” he remarked; “and from that fact I guess you must be like myself from the other side of the ocean. It is strange that we should meet here in this war-stricken country.”

“Then you are an American, too?” asked Josh, before Rod could say a word.

“I am a naturalized citizen of your great and glorious republic,” explained the man. “I was born in Switzerland, but my people emigrated while I was a child. My name it is Oscar William Tell.”

“Oh! you don’t mean to tell me that you spring from the original William Tell, the famous archer who defied the tyrant Gessler, and shot the apple from the head of his own son?” cried Hanky Panky, in delight.

“So I have been told,” replied the other, modestly. “But just now I am more concerned how I may get out of this country of the fighting armies than what my dead and gone ancestors may have been. I have been caught napping, as they say, and for days now have been trying to reach Paris, where I hope to secure some funds, and start back across the ocean to my far-away home.”

The boys exchanged glances. Somehow, although the man had not as yet mentioned such a thing plainly, they could read between the lines, and understand that he was hinting about assistance.

“We could supply you with the little money you may need to pay for your food until you get into Paris,” said Rod, promptly.

“That is indeed very kind of you,” continued the other, eagerly, while his eyes fairly sparkled with satisfaction; “but my greatest need is to be helped on my way a few miles. My feet are so sore I can hardly walk; and I have been told that a short distance ahead there is a railway line over which I might get transportation to the French capital, which cannot be more than fifteen miles away at the most.”

Josh lost no time in offering to take him along. He had often carried a passenger, and never had an accident thus far. Had it been Hanky Panky now, or the still more clumsy Rooster, the undertaking might have assumed a more serious aspect.

“Sure, you are welcome to a seat with me,” he told the other, promptly, right from the depths of his generous heart; “that is, if you think you could hold on, and do the grand balance act.”

The man who claimed to be an American took him at his word so eagerly that there was no chance for Josh to change his mind, even had he wanted to do so.

“I’ll accept that offer, my young friend, and with thanks,” he announced. “Yes, I have been on a motorcycle before now, so I trust you will not think I am endangering your safety. And it will be a great help to me if I can stay with you for a short time.”

The boys each took turns in securing the needed drink, while Oscar curiously examined their machines. Josh, once more a little suspicious, kept an eye on the other while this was going on. It may have suddenly occurred to him that since the man admitted a knowledge of riding on one of the machines possibly he might be seized with a sudden mad impulse to jump into the saddle and try to get away with a mount.

Nothing of the kind happened, however, and Josh was doubtless a little ashamed of his suspicions. At any rate he went to some pains to let the other get seated behind him, as though to make amends for his secret thoughts.

Rod led the way again. So far as he could see there was nothing strange about the plight of the said Oscar. Hundreds of American tourists must have been caught stranded in strange lands when the war broke so suddenly; and when they finally reached home they would have all sorts of remarkable stories to tell concerning their experiences and sufferings. Not all of them could have the great luck, like the motorcycle boys, to carry magical documents signed by the king of

the heroic Belgians, and calling on all the Allies to favor the bearers as far as was possible.

They covered several miles of the road. The thunder of the guns grew louder all the while, and Rod fully expected to come upon marching regiments at any time, although the thoroughfare they were following seemed to be singularly free from troops heading toward the scene of the battle.

There was no railway line in sight as yet, though they had covered much more than the distance mentioned by Oscar Tell. But then he may have been misinformed as to distances, which was always possible.

In this fashion they came to a little rise which Rod chose, as customary, to ride up slowly and carefully, not knowing what sort of a surprise might await them at the top.

It was while they were proceeding toward the crown of the hill that Josh suddenly found his machine toppling over. He did not know of any obstacle which he could have run across, for the road seemed absolutely free from stones and such things; and even as he struggled desperately to keep the heavy machine from smashing to the ground he felt a suspicion flash through his brain that in some manner his passenger might have been responsible for the unexpected catastrophe.

Both of them fell off, but beyond the shock, and perhaps a few minor scratches, Josh was not hurt. Indeed, boylike he immediately showed much more concern over a possible injury to his motorcycle than he gave any thought to himself.

Rod heard the crash, as well as the exclamation of dismay springing from Hanky Panky, who was put to some quick work in order to pull up in time to avoid running the unfortunates down.

Rod immediately reached the ground, and laying his machine down hurried back.

"Nothing serious, I hope, Josh?" he inquired, Hanky Panky bustling around, while Oscar was hopping up and down, as though he might have received a bruise on his leg that was painful to a degree.

Josh was frowning dreadfully. Truth to tell his suspicions were growing stronger and stronger all the while; and he even believed the man to whom he had extended the courtesies of the road had purposely brought about the accident at such a particular moment when the fall would be apt to prove less serious than when they were whizzing along at twenty miles an hour.

"I don't know yet whether the machine is knocked out of commission or not," muttered Josh, disconsolately, as he proceeded to hastily examine into matters; "but it would be exasperating for us if that happened, just when we're close to

the battle line, and want to get around so lively. Hang the luck, I say!"

He glared in the direction of the apparent cause of all the trouble; but as Oscar was now raising his trouser leg, as if meaning to examine into the state of his own injuries, of course the look was wasted so far as he was concerned.

Rod frowned also. Up to then he had not allowed himself to suspect that the so-called Switzer-American could be other than he so frankly claimed; but somehow it began to dawn upon Rod that there may have been a method in his madness. What if it were all a part of a deep-laid scheme calculated to delay them, for some dark purpose or other?

The thought made him angry. Now that it was too late he felt that they should have seen through the scheme of the other, when he asked to be given a lift on his way. He had claimed boldly to have such sore feet that he could hardly bear to stand his weight upon them; yet here he was now dancing around as lightly as any one could.

"But what object could he have in view?" Rod was asking himself, even while continuing to keep a cautious eye on Oscar, though he pretended to be tending over Josh, still examining his wheel.

Like a flash it shot through Rod's mind that this same Oscar might be in league with the man who was devoting all his talents and energies to the task of getting a certain paper out of their possession—Jules Baggott. He had already shown himself to be possessed of considerable skill at planning, and the story told by Oscar may have all been made up out of whole cloth, just to cause them delay, and give the plotter another opportunity to rob them.

It was well that these thoughts should have raced through Rod's mind just then; for they caused him to take exact note of what the stranger was doing. Josh chanced to be too busily engaged at the time to observe anything; as for Hanky Panky, really he was not to be depended on. And that his sudden suspicions were well founded Rod presently had positive evidence.

CHAPTER XII.

TURNING THE TABLES.

This was what happened!

Oscar had for the time being ceased to remember his bruised leg, and even his grunts had temporarily stopped, which would apparently indicate that after all his injuries were not so serious as he had made out.

He was now industriously engaged in ridding his garments of some of the dust which they had accumulated at the time he and Josh rolled over in the road. To the surprise of Rod he even took out his handkerchief, and used this to wipe the sleeves of his coat.

Just then Rod, out of the tail of his eye, noticed the fellow give a quick glance toward Josh and Hanky Panky, both of whom were bending over the former's machine, anxiously examining to ascertain if it had really been much damaged.

Instinctively Rod made out to be industriously looking at something of interest in the near distance. He even shaded his eyes with one hand, though at the same time he could manage to see Oscar.

It paid him well in the bargain, for he noticed that while dusting his coat as a dandy detesting all manner of dirt might, the said Oscar also flirted that white handkerchief in a strange manner.

Then it suddenly dawned upon Rod that the fellow was actually making some sort of signal to an unknown party further off. He used his eyes to advantage, for he immediately caught what seemed to be an answering wave from a patch of trees possibly three hundred yards away, and along the side of the rise!

This complicated matters exceedingly. Oscar, then, was a fraud of the first water. His story must be a tissue of lies from beginning to end. Perhaps even his name had been assumed for a purpose, which was to entrap the three American boys.

Rod had to think very fast just then. A plan of campaign must be arranged on the spur of the moment, fitted to cover the case. Of course he could not more than give a guess as to what it all meant, except that there was danger in the air for himself and chums.

Could the pretended Swiss-American be in truth a German spy, bent on taking them prisoner for some mysterious reason or other? Rod felt sure this could not

be, for he had failed to detect a sign of the Teutonic guttural in the voice of the other. In fact, Rod was inclined to suspect him of being of French origin, for when speaking he had all the shrugs and grimaces which so often mark the natives of France, especially when excited, and making explanations.

The three comrades were almost unarmed. Knowing the constant peril of capture that menaced them, should they chance to run upon a squad of German soldiers, Rod had decided that it would be the height of folly for them to carry firearms; for if found to be armed they were likely to be considered in the light of guerrillas, since they belonged to neither army as enlisted men.

Of course the three of them would easily be able to overcome Oscar, who did not appear to be very brawny in build. But if he had accomplices near at hand even his capture might not prove sufficient to stave off the danger.

Rod conceived a better scheme than to simply overpower the suspect. Why not make him a hostage for the good behavior of his associates? The idea seized hold of the boy, and in that instant he determined to put it into immediate practice.

Oscar would be surprised to find that his cunning plot had been seen through. In fact there would be others in the same fix, for Rod could imagine the astonishment of Josh and Hanky Panky, possibly utterly unsuspecting regarding the true course of events.

It happened that Rod had in his pocket a little tool shaped not unlike one of those modern automatic pistols that can be fired as fast as the finger presses the trigger. He believed this would answer his purpose admirably, and acting on the spur of the moment he immediately drew it forth.

Oscar was still very diligent with that handkerchief of his, switching it to and fro, as though determined that not a speck of dust should remain to mar the appearance of his garments. It would seem as though Oscar must be an exquisite of the first water when on his native heath; though Rod was more firmly convinced than ever that this was Gay Paree rather than Cincinnati, Ohio, which he had so boldly claimed as his home city.

So Rod, sauntering toward the other in an apparently idle fashion, suddenly came up behind him, and clapped the cold metal tool against the nape of Oscar's neck, causing a shudder to pass through the other's whole system.

"Don't try to make a move or you are a dead man!" said Rod, sternly; "I'll pull the trigger if you so much as turn your head this way!"

"Gee! whilikins!" exclaimed Josh, whirling about; while Hanky Panky, taken completely by surprise, could only stand there and stare as though he imagined Rod had suddenly taken leave of his senses, for up to that moment Hanky had not entertained the slightest suspicion toward the man they were helping on his

way.

Oscar apparently understood; at any rate he remained as motionless as though carved out of stone. His face went white, and his eyes rolled wildly in their sockets, but he knew better than to risk having his poor brains blown out by an incautious movement.

“Your game is up, my friend!” said Rod sternly. “I’ve been watching you send a message to some one with that handkerchief of yours. Don’t waste your breath to deny it. You have been trying to lead us into a trap, perhaps for the sake of helping your friend, Jules. Well, we are on to your game, and mean to block it. Josh!”

“On deck, Rod!” exclaimed the one addressed, cheerily, with a wide grin decorating his face; for it amused him to see how after all Rod had taken matters into his own hands, and turned the tables on the scoundrel.

“You’re getting to be a clever hand at playing the frisking act, Josh,” continued the leader of the trio; “suppose you look this chap over, and remove any deadly weapons you may find. I’ll keep him still, dead or alive, while you do it.”

“I beg of you to be careful, young M’sieu!” gasped Oscar, betraying his French origin in that unguarded moment; “I assure you I am not thinking of offering resistance; and it might be your finger it would slip, to my everlasting regret.”

Josh lost no time in commencing work. As Rod had said, of late the other had been having considerable experience at this sort of business, and boasted of being quite an expert.

“Whee! here’s a nasty looking gun, Rod!” he speedily announced.

“Hand it here, then, and I’ll take possession of it,” the other told him; “then keep on feeling in every pocket, Josh.”

“Some papers, Rod—letters they look like,” came another announcement presently.

“Give them to me; when I have time I’d like to look them over, and see if the hand of our friend Jules is back of this game. Hello! what’s this. These letters are addressed to M. Armand Marchant, Rue de Rivoli, Paris. Quite a difference between that name and Oscar William Tell, eh? But I’m not surprised a whit. Keep on looking, Josh, especially for more ugly guns.”

Apparently, however, that one weapon was all the man “toted,” for no more could be discovered.

“All right, then,” said Rod when his chum proclaimed the finish of his search; “I’ll change to his own revolver, which I see is nicely loaded. It is more to be depended on than my own tool,” with which remark he held the article in

question before the eyes of the prisoner, who turned fiery red with confusion and anger, while Josh and Hanky Panky burst into peals of laughter at the joke.

“Now listen to me,” continued Rod, sternly again, “you are to go with us over the rise here. Remember you are a hostage for our safe conduct. If your friends attempt to attack us your life will be forfeited the first thing. So I’d advise you not to try and signal again, if you know what’s good for you.”

“One thing I’m glad to tell you, Rod,” remarked Josh; “which is that after all the damage to my machine isn’t worth mentioning. I reckon he meant it to be put out of commission, and even took chances of getting hurt himself so as to accomplish it; but the Whitcomb luck stuck by me, all right, all right. Do you think you can move your machine along and attend to him at the same time, Rod?”

“Oh! that’s easily fixed,” replied the other, cheerily, “because Oscar is going to attend to the trundling act for me. It’s the least he can do to make up for the bother he’s given us. And his feet have gotten well in the bargain, just as if a miracle had been wrought. Get busy, Oscar, and start pushing uphill!”

The man did not dare venture any protest. What was the use of his trying to plead weariness or a bruised leg when they knew that he was a fraud of the first water, and had, as Josh would say, “tumbled to his game?”

So he took hold of Rod’s heavy machine, and toiled manfully up the ascent. As he went he cast numerous anxious glances to the right and to the left; but Rod understood now that these were not in hopes of seeing his confederates suddenly dash into view, since that would be the signal for his own troubles to begin; rather was the man mentally praying they would remain in hiding, having grasped the new state of affairs, which could not be to their liking.

They reached the crown of the low hill, but did not linger there, for the position was too exposed. Once down to the level again Rod began to consider dropping the pilot, as they had no further need of his protecting services, with the road level and straight stretching away for miles ahead.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FIELD HOSPITAL.

“Do we get into our saddles again now, Rod?” asked Josh, as a halt was called.

The other glanced around. So far as he could see there did not seem to be any reason for delaying their departure further. Certainly any persons who may have been in ambush on the hillside could not have managed to get further along the road so as to waylay them.

“Yes, you start the ball rolling, Josh; and Hanky will follow. I’ll keep our new friend engaged until you get going, when I’ll start after you both.”

“Then you expect to leave Oscar here, do you, Rod?” questioned Josh.

“Oh! he’ll find assistance, if his sore feet get to hurting him dreadfully again,” replied the leader, whimsically. “But I’d advise him to sit down by the roadside, and not attempt to bother me any. He knows how well his gun is loaded; and I think I could hit that top button of his coat, even when on the move, the first clip!”

Oscar, as they would still have to call him for want of a better name, shrugged his shoulders at hearing this declaration.

“Believe me, young M’sieu, I do not mean to give you the chance. I know when I have enough. Things have not gone to my liking at all. And this is a very comfortable seat, I assure you.”

He sat down and folded his hands while Josh started off, Hanky Panky speedily following him, and calling back:

“Don’t trust him too far, Rod, please; really, I hardly like the look of his eye.”

“That’s all right,” laughed Rod, unconcerned, “Oscar can’t help his looks; but he knows enough to sit tight sometimes, and this is one of them.”

Rod moved his machine far enough away from the seated man to prevent any possibility of the other playing him any treacherous trick. Then he got himself ready to mount.

Even as he started off, holding the weapon still in his right hand so as to be in a position to use it on Oscar, he had a glimpse of the fellow tumbling backward; and at the same instant his voice rang out in loud shouts. Perhaps he was calling to his comrades, hoping to hasten their arrival so that they might yet cut off the flight of the last boy, who evidently had on his person the paper they were after.

So Rod passed down the road, with the late prisoner still whooping it up in the rear. Taking a fleeting look behind him, Rod could see that Oscar had now managed to scramble to his feet, doubtless deeming the danger point passed. He was wildly accentuating his extravagant gestures by renewed shouting; and Rod even imagined he could catch some movement further back, as though those who were being summoned might be hurrying to the spot.

Well, let them come. He and his two comrades could afford to laugh, because the game had turned so nicely in their favor after all. And then they were ahead one bulky revolver in the bargain.

Rod was at first tempted to toss this weapon away, but on second thoughts concluded to retain it for the present. That wily schemer Jules Baggott might have yet another ambushade prepared for them a little further on, and such a tool was apt to come in handy in case of a surprise.

Although no mention has been made of the fact, because other stirring events continued to face the boys, they knew that they must be steadily drawing nearer the scene of warfare, because the roaring of big guns became more and more insistent with every mile they covered.

It would not surprise Rod in the least should they come in sight of some spirited action at almost any time now. Realizing that it was his duty to be in the van at such a critical juncture, so as to occupy a position to decide on their course of action, he gave the signal so well known to the others, and which meant that they were to hold up.

They were several miles away from the spot where Oscar had been left in the lurch, so no danger hung over their heads from that source. Rod soon explained just why he had called the temporary halt; and then once more the journey was resumed, this time in their regular order, with Hanky Panky bringing up the rear.

Rod knew they must be drawing near the bank of the Marne, which river flowing from the east empties into the Seine. He had been given to understand that it was along the banks of this river that the vast German host had retreated after their bold plan for taking Paris had been frustrated, and their flanks were threatened by the Allied forces.

Looking ahead when there came a more than usually fierce outburst of cannonading, he believed he could see where the battle was progressing, though the distance was still too great to make out which side manned the guns that were being fired. It was just then that in turning a bend of the road he suddenly came upon a most interesting sight, though at the same time it struck his soul with a feeling akin to awe, and sent a shiver through his frame.

Evidently a field hospital had been established in a spot where it was out of range of the German guns beyond. He saw numerous shelters of canvas, with

busy surgeons and attendants, both men and women nurses. Along the roads, and across the level fields were hurrying ambulances and vans of every description, each bearing its load of wounded picked up along the front.

Rod threw up his hand. It was the signal that he was about to stop, and wanted to let his chums know so that they might be prepared to follow suit.

A few seconds later and they were at his side, gaping at the strange picture now spread before them. Josh was going to have his dearest wish realized, for they had undoubtedly now reached the battle line, and could see some of the desperate charges and counter-charges attempted on both sides.

The Germans had evidently turned at bay in their great retreat, and were seeking to hold back the pursuit of the furious French, whose ardor was apt to carry them to desperate attempts to break that solid line of green-gray.

Hanky Panky was almost holding his breath. He did not possess the same disposition that Josh had, and all this dreadful suffering was apt to fill him with horror. Still, he had a boy's ordinary share of curiosity, and might even be morbid enough to run so as to see an injured man in a railway accident, even if he came near fainting immediately afterwards.

"It's a French field hospital, isn't it, Rod?" asked Josh.

"There's no mistaking the tri-color flag that waves near the one with the Red Cross," replied the other, without the least hesitation.

"Oh! what a pity we lost our field glasses," continued Josh, disconsolately. "We could never have such a splendid chance again to watch the play of a real battle like that going on over there; and it's a bit too far for the naked eye to get the full benefit of it all. I'd give everything I own for binoculars right now. Rod, don't you think we might push on a little nearer the firing line?"

Rod shook his head in the negative.

"The chances are we'd be rounded up in a hurry, and forced to turn back," he told the eager comrade. "As it is I'm surprised we've been able to get as close as we have right now. It's a part of our luck, I guess. But I was thinking that if we chose to go over to the field hospital perhaps after we'd made friends with some of the doctors and attendants, helped a little it might be, we'd find a chance to borrow a pair of binoculars from some one."

"Bully for you, Rod; that sounds good to me!" exclaimed Josh; while Hanky Panky gave a little gasp, and was heard to say almost helplessly:

"Oh! my stars, do we have to run smack into that hospital business, when often the sight of blood gives me the creeps, and makes my knees wobble?"

"You can squat down right here, and stay if you want to, Hanky Panky," volunteered Josh; whereat the other seemed to make a swift mental calculation, after which he shut his teeth firmly together, and went on to say resolutely:

“I’m game if you both are; besides, something might happen to me here, if that miserable Jules and his crowd came along the road back of us. Yes, I’ll go,” but it could easily be seen that Hanky Panky was not taking any great pleasure in the outlook.

They could use their machines for a short distance along the road; then it became necessary for them to dismount, break down a fence, and trundle the motorcycles across a field to where the temporary hospital had been established, in touch with the battle lines.

Motor vehicles were coming and going at speedy intervals. Rod noticed that they all used another road, which evidently must be the direct course to Paris, where the wounded heroes were being hurried after their injuries had received first care; because that is usually all a field hospital is intended to accomplish, staunching the flow of blood, and in other ways holding the spark of life until operations can be attempted further removed from the scene of action.

Every one inside the limits of the place seemed to be desperately busy. Men were rushing this way and that with stretchers, carrying wounded soldiers back and forth. Vehicles were coming and going, and these seemed of all descriptions, from the customary ambulance to big lorries run with a motor; and all of them bore the sign of the Red Cross on their sides, in order to protect them as much as possible from the fire of the enemy.

It was in this manner therefore that the three Motorcycle Boys found themselves entering a new phase of their extraordinary adventures, and one that would doubtless never be forgotten, even when they found themselves once again safe in their distant homes.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHERE THE BATTLE OF THE MARNE RAGED.

“Look, an aeroplane coming this way!” exclaimed Hanky Panky, pointing upwards.

“If you glance off yonder,” added Josh, “you’ll see more than one of the same. They’re hanging over the battle lines, and I guess sending signals back to tell what the observer notes from his perch away up aloft.”

“Just what they’re doing, Josh,” Rod went on to say, as he stopped for a brief time to take a look in the direction indicated.

In fact, they could make out as many as half a dozen of the fliers, some darting about as swift as swallows on the wing, others more stationary, and evidently with the operators busily engaged transmitting signals.

“There, see that one dropping something white!” cried Hanky Panky; “chances are he’s giving the gunners on his side a tip, so they can get the range of the German battery, and put it out of action with a volley.”

“And there’s going to be something doing pretty soon, or I miss my guess,” added Josh, excitedly; “because there comes a pair of those Taube machines bent on giving the French ones battle. Rod, we’re going to watch a fight in the sky, don’t you see? Whee! but this *is* the life, take it from me. I never dreamed I’d be so lucky as to be right on the lines when a big battle was taking place.”

The pair of Taube machines came swiftly along to engage the rival aeroplanes that had been making so free with the secrets of the German defences. Evidently the aviators had been ordered to put a stop to the operations of the French pilots, no matter at what cost to themselves.

“They’re shooting at each other now!” cried Josh; “you can see the puffs of smoke break out every second; and it’s different from the bursting of shrapnel shells all around them.”

“Gee! whiz! but this is awfully exciting!” gasped Hanky Panky, stretching his neck still more in order to follow the swift evolutions of the rival air machines; “what if one of them has the hard luck to get his motor smashed by a ball; or his gasoline tank exploded?”

“That’d be a bad thing for the men in the aeroplane, I should say!” Josh informed him. “They must be all of half a mile high, and a fall would flatten a

poor chump out like a pancake.”

“There’s one of the Germans turning tail right now and running away!” called out Hanky Panky; “and the other—why, see how queer that machine is acting, will you? It keeps turning around like a corkscrew, and seems to be dropping all the while.”

“A good reason, too,” snapped Josh. “French guns proved superior to the Kaiser’s, for they did some damage. That Taube is falling! Only for the skill of the two men aboard it’d be coming down right now like the stick of a spent rocket, or a meteor aiming to strike the earth.”

All of them watched the erratic course of the disabled aeroplane with the keenest interest. Indeed, the valiant pilot certainly deserved a great deal of praise for the way in which he manipulated his charge. At the same time the Taube was going to strike the earth with a severe blow.

“I wouldn’t like to be aboard that poor craft, let me tell you,” said Hanky Panky, as it neared the earth, not far back of the French front; “the people in it are going to get broken arms or legs, and the machine will be smashed in pieces.”

“Huh! they’ll call themselves lucky if it ends at that,” snorted Josh; “some men would have their necks or backs broken; but these German aviators are a tough lot, I’ve heard, and can stand a heap of pounding.”

Even as they looked the wrecked Taube struck the ground. Some soldiers had hastened in that direction, and were on the spot almost as soon as the disabled German machine landed. They could be seen moving about amidst the wreckage of the aeroplane. Then they appeared carrying something in their midst.

“They’ve picked up the occupants of the fallen Taube,” said Rod, “and from the way they carry them the poor chaps must be badly hurt. Yes, there they’ve stopped that ambulance coming from the front, and are getting the wounded birdmen aboard. The French admire bravery, even in a mortal foe, and you can be sure that those gallant fellows will receive just as good care as if they were their own men.”

He again started to move forward. The field hospital was now close at hand, and they could expect to be within its borders in a few minutes more.

Hanky Panky nerved himself for the terrible ordeal he knew was before him. Both the other lads also shut their lips firmly, so that they might endure the gruesome sights without feeling faint; for they were not accustomed to such things, and but boys after all.

Some of those they met eyed them in wonder, doubtless at a loss to know who the three youngsters were, and what brought them to the battle lines. No one seemed to think of stopping them and asking questions; it might be from lack of

time.

Whenever Rod noticed some officer near by he gave the regulation salute, which may have induced the others to believe the boys actually belonged to some branch of the service; though their khaki uniforms would rather indicate a connection with the British army just then co-operating with General Joffre.

The boys had just succeeded in stacking their machines when an opportunity came that allowed them to render assistance in carrying several poor fellows into one of the tent shelters. A lorry had arrived, and there did not seem to be any attendant on hand to help the driver, who looked around in despair.

“Come along, Josh, and lend a hand here!” exclaimed Rod, equal to any emergency, as he sprang forward.

Hanky Panky started, but soon held back, unable to bear the sight of the wounded men who were in the motor truck.

The two boys succeeded in carrying three of them inside the shelter, where they were placed as comfortably as possible, awaiting the time when the bustling surgeon, engaged with other cases, could attend to their hurts. One of them was in a very bad way, having been terribly injured by a bursting shell. It pierced Rod’s sympathetic heart just to look at his white, blood-specked face. But the black eyes were still full of fire and animation; and when Rod held a dipper of cold water to the lips of the soldier of the republic the other drank greedily, and then thanked him in French.

“It may be the last drink I shall ever want,” he told Rod complacently, “but I rejoice to know I have lived to see the day when a French army has made the German beast turn tail and run. My father died before Paris many years ago, and I have prayed for this glorious day to come. I am satisfied. I have done my duty to France.”

It made a powerful impression on both the boys. Such bravery and devotion to country could hardly fail to do otherwise. Secretly they hoped the valiant soldier might survive his terrible injuries, and live to see the day when victory crowned the tri-color of France, which he adored.

The busy surgeon now found a chance to pay attention to the later victims of German bullets and bursting shells and bombs. At the same time he started a conversation with Rod, the latter being the only one of the boys who could speak French.

Presently Rod turned again to Josh to say:

“Here’s a streak of luck for us, Josh. Just as soon as he’s through with the case he’s now working on, the gentleman, Dr. Gervaise, is going to loan us his binoculars. He also says there is a slight elevation twenty yards back of this shelter, from the top of which we can get a pretty fair view of the battle lines.

From what he tells me I figure we'll be just in good time to witness something that is going to take place before long."

Of course this pleased Josh exceedingly, because it was a field-glass he had been yearning for ever since they found themselves within touch of the field of battle. He even tried to assist the wearied army surgeon as best he might, for Josh had an abundance of nerve, and could accustom himself to almost any sight if he had a motive controlling his actions.

Presently, armed with the Lemaire binoculars, Rod led the way out of the temporary shelter under which the victims of the fierce fighting could be shielded from the hot September sun while the principle of "first aid to the injured" was being applied.

Hanky Panky was lingering near by, watching some of the interesting sights, and evidently finding it a difficult thing to retain a firm grip on himself. He greeted the reappearance of his chums with eagerness. Perhaps he even hoped that they meant to quit the confines of the field hospital, and depart to other regions. At sight of the field-glasses which Rod waved at him Hanky understood, however, just why they were hurrying toward that elevation close by; and he trotted at their heels as an obedient little spaniel might have done.

Once they reached the summit of the rise it was found that the French surgeon had not overstated the fact when saying that a very good view of the battle lines could be obtained from this point. Rod took a look and then handed the glasses over to Josh, knowing how eager the other was to see at close range what was going on over where the big guns were thundering so fiercely—where also the French lay in hiding, ready to again charge desperately upon the German trenches when the word to advance was given. The ground between the hostile armies was covered with the fallen. Josh shivered as he contemplated the terrible spectacle. It would doubtless haunt him for many a day and night to come. He looked everywhere, not even omitting to glance upward so as to see what the flying birdmen might be doing; then he handed the binoculars over to Hanky Panky, who received them eagerly, despite his sensation of horror.

When Hanky Panky leveled the glasses at the distant line of hastily thrown up German trenches the first thing he saw was what seemed to be an innumerable army of men in drab working feverishly to strengthen their defences.

Already they had tasted of the new-born French enthusiasm, and could anticipate that much more of the same sort was bound to break loose. Long years had those fiery Gauls been hugging to their hearts the thought of revenge for the humiliation suffered away back in '71, when their beloved Paris echoed to the tramp of the victorious Teutonic hosts.

They began to believe the day had dawned at last when the shame of their

fathers could be wiped out, and the tables turned on the hated foe.

How Hanky Panky did turn from one point to another and “soak” it all in, as Josh remarked aside to Rod, impatiently waiting for a second chance to observe what was going on over there beyond the windrows of the dead.

It seemed as though Hanky Panky could not tear his eyes away from the amazing sight which fairly fascinated him. As though held in the grip of a nightmare the boy was staring and muttering to himself. Sometimes his words signified wonder and awe; then again there was an underlying vein of compassion in what Hanky Panky said; for his heart was greatly touched by the sight of all this terrible misery. He could see some of the forms on the late battlefield moving. He realized that men in anguish must be calling out for a drink of cooling water so as to quench their burning thirst. Others were doubtless suffering all sorts of tortures from the wounds they had received.

To be sure the hospital attendants were doing everything they could to gather up the wounded. Men bearing the sacred Red Cross, from both the French and the German sides, were moving about, searching for those in whom life still remained. Vehicles could also be seen in places, receiving some of these victims, while the men with stretchers stumbled about carrying their groaning burdens to the rear.

Yes, Hanky Panky would never forget what he saw that day, though he lived to a ripe old age, for it was burned upon his memory indelibly.

Josh, getting impatient, was just about to demand the binoculars when the other uttered a sudden cry that gave them a new thrill:

“Oh! see what’s going to happen now, will you, fellows?” was the burden of his announcement; “there’s a new French army hurrying up to attack them on the flank; and they’ve given the signal for a general advance. Great snakes! but it’s going to be an awful sight when they come to close grips!”

CHAPTER XV.

THE TAKING OF THE GERMAN TRENCHES.

That was too much for Josh to stand. He had been at the point of rebellion before, and this was the "last straw that broke the camel's back." He snatched the glasses from the trembling hand of his comrade almost rudely, though perhaps Josh did not mean it that way, only he was fearfully excited.

Of course Rod could see something of what was transpiring, even without the aid of the binoculars, though they were bound to be a great help. He had immediately turned his gaze upon the spot indicated, and discovered that what Hanky Panky called out was true.

A great mass of men clad in the regulation French uniform came rushing forward from the left quarter. Guns were fast starting up here, there, everywhere, to rain a perfect hail of shells on the German line, so as to prevent the defenders from springing forward to meet the new attack.

At the same time those Frenchmen lying concealed in front also sprang to do their part of the work. The air was rent with shouts from thousands of throats, though the tattoo of the guns became so insistent that even this sounded faintly, as rain might on the roof between thunder-claps.

Riveted to the spot with the wonder of the spectacle, which they had never dreamed would fall to their vision, the three boys stood there, unable to speak a single word. Indeed, with all that frightful noise going on speech was next door to folly, and they wisely held their breath.

The Germans had anticipated just such an assault, no doubt, for it was along their flank that they had been so industriously throwing up new entrenchments at the time Rod and his chums first sighted them.

They had not been given sufficient time, however, to get more than half prepared when the mighty blow fell. Those enthusiastic Frenchmen, realizing that they had Von Kluck's army finally on the run, did not mean to lose any of their advantage by unnecessary delay. They could not be held in, even had their officers wished to attempt such a thing. Rod indeed was reminded of the impetuous charge of hounds, once they were released from the leash.

It was all very plain to Rod, who was a boy with a long head. He knew that when the vast German host had advanced so steadily toward Paris, sweeping

everything out of their path with such apparent ease, they had certainly brought along with them many great siege guns, with which to batter down the forts defending the city.

Some of these were the famous forty-two centimetre guns which had proved at Liege and Namur that no modern fort could hold out against the enormous weight of metal they were capable of dropping, almost vertically, on the works, from a distance of many miles.

Then when the sudden alteration came about in the plans of Von Kluck, and his army turned aside from Paris so as to save its exposed flank, the one thought in the mind of the general was to save those wonderful guns, without which all his work would be for naught.

It was for this purpose that these desperate rearguard actions were being undertaken by the retreating Germans. Some of the big guns were drawn by traction engines, and their progress even over good roads must necessarily be very slow. To enable them to be transported to the positions already prepared along the Aisne River, looking to a possible retreat, the victorious French had to be kept at bay.

So tens of thousands of Teutons must fall during those bitter days in order that the Krupp guns might be saved to the cause. Manfully they stood up to their task. There was not a sign of wavering as they met the furious charge of the French, who seemed determined on thrusting the enemy out of their newly made trenches at the point of the bayonet.

Josh, remembering how he had felt a brief time before, presently gave a sigh and reluctantly handed the glasses over to Rod. The latter gladly received them, and without a second's delay proceeded to glue his eyes to the smaller end.

It was like a living picture of other battles that Rod remembered seeing, done in colors; but the realization that this was the *real* thing he now gazed on so entranced thrilled him again and again.

Backed by every gun that could be brought to bear upon the German front, the living stream of blue and red-clad French soldiers, men of the line, zouaves, chasseurs and all, plunged madly along. Little they recked that many fell by the way under the storm of missiles that belched from the hostile trenches; the lines closed over the gaps almost mechanically, and only the figures that dotted the field after their passage told of the terrible price with which the action was accompanied.

Now they were close up to the trenches, and some even leaping over the redoubt, to grapple hand to hand with those who so desperately defended it.

Brave though they were, the French had been so decimated in their mad rush that it seemed as though there could not be enough of them left to overcome the

resistance of the defenders of the works.

It was while Rod was filled with this sense of anxiety that he noticed something calculated to arouse new hope; for somehow he found himself in sympathy with the French soldiers, perhaps because they had been the under dog in the other war, when their fair country was overrun by Bismarck's armies.

The wise French commander-in-chief, possibly General Joffre himself, had seen to it that reserves were on hand to take up the fight after the first line had hewn a way into the hostile trenches. Yes, there they came along like a serried mass, or the waters bursting from a vast reservoir after the dam has been broken.

He saw the living wave strike the first embankment and pass over. He knew what terrible work must be going on beyond that thrown-up earth, for in bayonet work the French have ever been without a rival. He pitied the Germans who were trying to hold the first line of trenches so valiantly, for they would mostly be either killed, wounded, or taken prisoner.

The French guns still roared unceasingly, though that part of the great Marne battle was already as good as won. Now their exploding missiles were being hurled further on, so as to add to the perplexities of the hurriedly retreating Germans, making for the next line of trenches, which in turn would doubtless be just as stubbornly defended.

Josh it was now who used the glasses. As a rule Josh had always been reckoned a generous fellow, sharing alike with his friends; but to-day a spirit of greed possessed him. There was Hanky Panky, who really shrank from such scenes as a battle—why bother paying any attention to him when there was only a single pair of binoculars to go around?

Indeed, Hanky Panky made no further claim on the precious glasses; evidently he had seen enough and more than enough as it was, to satisfy his ambition. He was staring toward those figures dotting the new field, and his lips kept moving as though he might be uttering words of commiseration, though of course what he said could not be heard above the universal clamor that continued with unabated vigor.

Gradually, though, the racket began to slacken, as though word had gone forth that the pursuit of the retiring foe must be temporarily abandoned. Victory had perched on the banner of the defenders of the soil; the lilies of France had swept proudly over the trenches of the foe; still further back from the imperiled capital had the host of Von Kluck been pushed, but all gained at a terrible cost.

So the guns began to cease firing. New positions must now be taken up so as to continue the good work. Everywhere the Germans would be pressed back and back until possibly the ardent French believed they would be forced to retreat to the Rhine.

And now new features began to appear upon the field that had so lately been the scene of a fearful engagement. Batches of dejected looking prisoners were being convoyed to the rear, stout-looking young fellows as a rule; for in the early months of the great war the German army consisted of the pick of the whole empire, every soldier being an almost perfect specimen of physical manhood. Later on, when havoc had been made in their ranks by continuous engagements, younger and older reserves would begin to make their appearance to fill the gaps.

Then again did the French Red Cross attendants with their handy stretchers begin to reap the harvest of the battle. Of Germans there were none, for since their side had been compelled to retreat so hastily most of their hospital corps had accompanied them, leaving to the victors the double task of caring for the wounded of both armies.

When Rod, again with the glasses, saw how the French attendants did not discriminate in favor of their own men, but took them just as they came, a German even before a Frenchman, he realized the spirit of brotherly love that really exists between the common people of all countries, even though by force of circumstances they may be compelled to face each other in deadly carnage for the faults of politicians or kings.

Well, it was all over now, but the binding up of wounds and the sad burial of the many who had fallen. The invaders had been pushed still further back, and their hopes of taking Paris received an apparently fatal blow.

“Josh, you can never again say that you haven’t seen a real battle,” remarked Rod, as they made their way back toward the shelter where the almost exhausted surgeon, aided by his assistants, would now have to start afresh with the incoming of another batch of cases needing immediate attention.

“I’m satisfied,” replied Josh in a suppressed manner; “and between us both, Rod, I want to own up that I hope I’ll never have another chance to look on such a terrible sight; though remember, I wouldn’t have missed it for a whole lot.”

CHAPTER XVI.

A SUDDEN SURPRISE.

Although the three lads had already performed an amount of labor that would have considerably astonished their home folks, could they have witnessed it, and filled them all with pride in the bargain, they were not yet through, it seemed.

“Here’s plenty more for us to do, fellows,” suggested Rod, as they reached the canvas shelter tent, where the procession of stretchers was beginning to arrive, each with its sad burden.

“I’m willing to help all I can,” said Hanky Panky, trying to look as though he could stand anything after what he had passed through.

Indeed there was need of assistance. Two other field hospitals had already been established not far away, since the subjects were many times more numerous now that Germans as well as French were beginning to be brought in for treatment. And a steady string of ambulances and motor lorries would soon start to taking the wounded in the direction of Paris, where they could be better attended to.

So for at least two hours the three brave-hearted American boys stood up to the work to which none of them were accustomed. They certainly, in that space of time, earned the everlasting gratitude of the nation whose sons they assisted in their time of need.

Rod was interested in several Germans who had been taken prisoners, slightly wounded. He entered into conversation with one of them, and managed to learn more of the other side of the contention than he had known before.

Finally even the willing Josh was heard to declare that he had about reached the limit of his endurance, while Hanky Panky looked ready to drop.

“We’ve got to get away from here, Rod,” Josh was saying; “after all we’re only boys, and this is a terrible experience for us. Our chum is nearly done up; and as for myself I admit that I’m getting shaky.”

Rod himself had to confess that they ought to be making a move. The worst of the bringing in of the wounded was over by now, and besides, more attendants were on hand to look after things.

“That’s all right, boys,” he assured his chums, “we’ve done our level best to be of some help to our friends, the French; and now it’s only fair we should start

in looking after our own affairs again.”

“I’ve noticed you talking with a number of men besides our surgeon friend, Rod; have you picked up any sort of information that’d be of use to us?” demanded the other shrewdly, guessing what their leader must have had in mind.

“Something that may turn out to be worth while,” came the reply.

“Meaning you’ve struck a clue about the regiment to which Andre belongs—is that what it is?” continued Josh.

“Yes, and of course it’ll be our object to run across the same as soon as we can,” he was told; “because it’s beginning to strike me that we ought to get away from this war-stricken country. We’ve seen things that few boys ever could run across—things that’ll haunt us for a long time, I’m afraid.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that, Rod,” remarked Hanky Panky, white of face after his recent experiences; indeed, it was mostly on account of this comrade that Rod had made up his mind not to linger in that region an hour after their mission had been accomplished.

“There’s another thing I want to tell you, fellows, which is a bit more cheerful, I’m glad to say,” continued Rod. “Our supply of petrol is nearly exhausted, you must know, and getting another lot at a time like this might prove a pretty tough proposition.”

“I was just thinking about that!” declared Josh, “and had it on the tip of my tongue to ask you what we ought to do about it.”

“Well, fortunately it’s been made easy,” Rod informed him; “our good friend, the army surgeon, has given me a paper that will allow us to replenish our tanks at the general supply station which I’ve already located. He said it was little enough in recognition of the work we’ve been doing.”

Both the other boys declared that it was a splendid thing, and congratulated Rod on his forethought in looking out for the necessary supplies. Without liquid fuel with which to drive their speedy motorcycles they would find themselves in a “serious pickle,” as Josh said; for every gallon in the whole country had undoubtedly been seized by the military authorities—that is, what little the Germans had not discovered and confiscated while passing through.

Accordingly their first labor was to proceed to the tank, present the order given by the surgeon, who actually ruled the field hospital, and the man in charge readily allowed them to refill their reservoirs with the precious liquid.

It was with a thankful heart that Hanky Panky finally turned his back on the field hospital. He had passed through so many painful experiences since striking that place he felt as though his nerves had been badly rattled.

After the late battle a strange calm seemed to have settled down again. Doubtless both sides were replenishing their stock of ammunition and getting in

readiness for the next upheaval; for the French would never cease to attack as long as they knew they had the enemy “on the run,” and that it was French soil those detestable German boots were still pressing.

Rod had figured things out as best he could. The wearied army surgeons had also been able to give him a few pointers that might prove of value.

As they progressed they could no longer say that they had the road to themselves. A score of different sights were before their eyes much of the time, consisting for the most part of vehicles bearing the wounded heroes far to the rear; other empty ones hurrying forward to secure their loads; detachments of sullen prisoners being taken under guard to a detention camp; squads of French soldiers bent upon some duty; here a belated regiment hastening forward, eager to be in at the next furious engagement; peasants standing in the doorways of their cottages watching all that went on, and laughing with the passersby, because victory was in the air for France, and it mattered little that they had lost all their live stock when the German hosts trooped by, if only the “day” they had long prayed for had indeed arrived.

So the Motorcycle Boys had to pick their way along now; it could no longer be said of them that they fairly “flew” over the road. Besides the numerous obstructions in the shape of vehicles coming and going, there were many ragged holes to be encountered, where mighty shells had fallen and exploded, forming craters that had to be carefully negotiated lest the riders meet with a serious catastrophe.

Besides this, all along the way they discovered such cast-off material as the retreating German army had discarded in order to hasten their march—broken caissons and guns that had been rendered temporarily useless by reason of some accident; stocks of provisions that could not be carried; cooking outfits that were the most complete affairs the boys had ever seen; and many other things which could not be safely carried off by an army that was being hourly harassed by a fierce and unrelenting foe.

The day had worn on while they were in the field hospital so that it was now getting well along in the afternoon. Rod knew they would soon have to be thinking of seeking some sort of shelter for the night. He was more particular about this because clouds had come up, and there seemed a chance that rain would follow, as often happens immediately after a great battle has been fought in which there is much cannon firing and consequent concussion of the atmosphere.

At noon they had shared the meagre lunch of the noble French army surgeon, who had conceived such an ardent admiration for the trio of young Americans. Josh was already heard saying that he felt as hungry as a tramp who had been

walking the railroad ties from early morning; and hoping that they would be lucky enough to soon strike a house where a meal might be secured.

This was what Rod had in mind when ahead of him he discovered signs of a pretty little French village. His hopes mounted higher because from the evidence before them it seemed plain that the retreating Germans had somehow managed to pass around this small place, so that there was a pretty good chance they would find a hospitable woman there, who, after learning that they had been assisting in the field, would be only too proud to cook them a meal, and it might be allow them to sleep in her house.

“I’d be willing to occupy a shed, or even a dog-kennel so long as it didn’t have a French poodle occupant,” Hanky Panky had solemnly said, when they talked this over at the last crossroads, as they stopped a short time to confer upon their plan of campaign.

Their coming created quite a little furore in the village, for being off the main road to Paris the good people here had as yet not learned what wonderful success General Joffre was meeting with in his attempt to force the stubborn enemy back toward the Rhine country.

The boys were soon surrounded by a throng of women and children, with a smattering of very old men. Apparently there was not a single able-bodied man left in the place, every one having gone to join the colors and defend the capital.

Rod was kept busy telling some of the grand things that had happened miles away, where the roll of the great guns had been sounding so long, bringing terror to the faithful hearts of the good people. How they shouted and even embraced each other as they learned what measure of success was coming to their army. One and all they were now positive that their wonderful commander would never give up the pursuit until he actually dictated terms of peace before the walls of Berlin itself.

When Rod modestly mentioned the fact that he and his two chums were hungry they immediately received a dozen offers of accommodation and supper. Every house in the village belonged to them, and they were at liberty to ask for anything they wanted.

Rod, however, used a little discretion. He did not in the first place want to be separated from his chums, and this meant they must choose some house capable of entertaining them all.

In the end he selected for their hostess a middle-aged woman who looked prosperous and capable of attending to their wants without robbing herself. The three motorcycles were stacked in the yard close by, where they continued to attract the attention of every boy, big or small, in the village.

Rod was not in the least afraid to leave them. He knew full well that there was

not any chance of the machines being tampered with; for those French boys seemed well behaved. He wondered what would happen over at his home town of Garland, where such fellows as Oscar Griffin, Gid Collins and their like loved to play all manner of tricks and practical jokes, regardless of other people's feelings.

Comfortably seated inside the house Rod and his chums awaited the call to supper. They could get tantalizing whiffs of the food that was being prepared for their consumption as the odors crept in from the kitchen; and Josh several times privately declared he did not see how he was going to stand that sort of thing much longer, for it was making him fairly frantic, he was so ravenous.

Rod was figuring on where the three motorcycles should be placed for the night, and had already made up his mind to ask if they could be brought into the house; because while the good people of the village might all be as honest as the day, stragglers from the army were apt to come along who might feel like helping themselves to a "good thing" when they found it so convenient.

It was just at this moment, when they were expecting to be called into the dining-room to sit down at the bountiful feast provided, that, without the least warning, a bombshell seemed to drop among them. Shouts were heard without, and as the three boys sprang to their feet they looked at each other in sudden anxiety.

"What are they yelling about, Rod?" begged Hanky Panky.

"They say the Uhlans are coming down on us, and are already close to the place!" was the startling declaration of the one who understood French.

CHAPTER XVII.

BEHIND THE BARRICADE.

“Such tough luck, and just when supper was going to be called, too!” groaned Josh, though possibly he did not mean to be at all humorous, but was only expressing the first natural feeling of bitter disappointment that beset him.

Rod realized that it was a time for quick thinking, and rapid action as well. No matter if the raiding Uhlans proved to be only a small detachment bent on striking terror to the hearts of the French, while their main army was still retreating toward the Aisne, they would be in numbers sufficient to awe the village, where only women and boys and aged men were to be found.

He also knew that the three fine motorcycles owned by himself and chums would be either confiscated or destroyed by the German cavalrymen. Uhlans have always been accredited with bold and reckless deeds whenever engaged in warfare in the enemy’s country. They would find incriminating papers, too, upon the boys, and might even take it in their hands to treat them as spies.

“Get busy, fellows; we must fetch our machines indoors and close shop to keep the enemy out, if we can!” was what Rod called, as he hastened to run from the room.

Just then a bell tinkled somewhere near by, apparently to summon them to the supper table; but much to the deep regret of Josh they were hardly in a condition to respond to the alluring call.

Each of them came staggering in, trundling a heavy machine. These they stacked in a room, after which the outer door was shut and secured in the best way possible, though not before a number of people had crowded in with them.

Out on the village street the greatest excitement prevailed. Children cried, women called to one another as they hurried their innocent charges homeward; even the stray dogs started barking again, just as they had done when Rod and his friends hit the place with their buzzing motorcycles.

Above other sounds they could hear loud and heavy voices, as of men bent on terrorizing the peaceful little community. Of course the words they heard were German ones, showing that the speakers must indeed be the dreaded Uhlans.

They were undoubtedly galloping hither and thither, ransacking houses in search of food or anything else worth carrying off. It might be that presently

some of them would even be found putting the torch to any building that failed to meet with their approval, after a hasty search.

Rod suddenly remembered something just then. It struck him forcibly, and the more he considered it the stronger did it seem to appeal to him.

He recollected that they had come upon a regiment of French zouaves making a temporary bivouac alongside the road about two miles back. If only they could be communicated with and informed of the presence of the hated Uhlans in the little French village, he felt positive they would not let the grass grow under their feet in hastening to the rescue of the small terrorized community.

But how could it be done? Rod would have given considerable for a chance to use his speedy motorcycle in this work, but there was no use thinking of such a thing, because it could never be carried out.

Perhaps from the roof of the house he might manage to attract the attention of some sentry at the camp, and by means of the Signal Corps code, which he knew very well, communicate their sad condition to the commander of the troops, and thus procure help for the frightened villagers.

“Stay here, and try to keep them out if they make an effort to break in,” he told Josh. “I’m going up to the roof and see if I can send a signal for help to that zouave regiment we noticed camping by the roadside. Here, take this, Josh, and remember that you’re defending women and children when you use it.”

“Bully for you!” cried Josh, as his hand closed upon the revolver which had been taken from the fraudulent Oscar William Tell.

Rod hurried away, and ran upon the woman of the house close by. She was looking greatly alarmed at the sudden coming of the enemy, but for all that Rod believed she would prove true grit.

“I want to get up on the roof if it’s possible,” was what he said to her; “there is a regiment of French troops camped not two miles away on the side of the hill, and if I could get in touch with them they’d come to our help. Show me the way to the trapdoor, if there is one.”

She must have grasped his idea without trouble, for she immediately started up the stairs. The confusion outside was growing worse than ever, and served to spur the boy on to renewed exertions.

The good woman of the house was soon pointing at the trap, and Rod quickly had it open. As he clambered out on the roof he saw to his satisfaction that it was situated on the side away from the village street. In this fashion he believed he might be able to accomplish what he had determined to attempt, at least without being interrupted by any passing Uhlan lancers.

One look in the direction of the hillside gave him cause for further delight, since he found that he could easily see the camp of the tired zouaves, who had

marched many miles since sun-up in hopes of participating in the day's battle, only to arrive when the action was all over.

Rod immediately began to wave his handkerchief wildly, though carrying out a certain program, and hoping to thus attract the attention of some sentry who may have been posted on that side of the camp.

Almost immediately he realized that this was just what had been accomplished, for he saw men running, and then a signal flag was waved in reply to his frantic appeals.

"What do you want to communicate?" was what he made out to be fashioned through the regular wigwag work of the flag.

"Village at mercy of Uhlans—come and help us at once!"

That was the message which Rod sent waving back. How glad he was at that minute he had picked up his knowledge of Signal Corps work, and could both send and receive so accurately.

That the man in the zouave camp had grasped the meaning of his dispatch Rod quickly understood, for almost immediately there was waved back an answer calculated to reassure him:

"Hold on! Relief coming! O. K."

All this of course took a little time in transmission. Seconds had passed into minutes, and about the time he was through Rod realized that things were getting pretty warm close by. In fact some of the raiders had discovered that the most pretentious house in the entire little village was barred against them. They had leaned from their saddles and pounded heavily on the door. When no one opened up they had given vent to their anger and even threatened to smash their way in, doubtless promising all sorts of terrible things for the inmates if forced to go to this trouble.

Still there had been no response. Josh, who was in charge below, did not mean to risk the loss of the precious motorcycles, as well as take chances of being shot as a spy, just because those lordly Uhlan cavalrymen demanded that he unbar the heavy door and let them enter.

The threatening voices, accompanied by louder blows, continued to sound as Rod hastened downstairs again. He realized that they must do everything possible to keep those rough raiders out until the French zouaves had a chance to arrive on the field.

There were several old men among those who, in the first excitement, had sought refuge in the house that temporarily sheltered the young Americans whom the simple French peasants and villagers considered real heroes. Although far from sturdy in build, and with trembling, half-palsied hands, these old chaps had proceeded to arm themselves as best they could.

One had found a big carving knife which he brandished as though it were a sword, and he a captain leading a charge; a second was swinging a cudgel, as though filled with a hope that it might yet be laid up against a German head; while the last of the trio had taken down a gun of the vintage of '71, which, together with its glistening sabre bayonet, had hung on the wall in memory of the good man of the house, who doubtless made the right kind of use of it in other days.

Altogether they presented quite a curious collection as they gathered there by the door, and waited to see if the enemy would carry out those loud threats to break in. Rod was reminded of accounts he had read about the patchwork army gathered together by one Falstaff in early English days, which consisted of the lame, the halt and the blind. All the same, those old fellows had the right sort of spirit, and acted as though quite willing to yield up their own lives in defense of the village.

Things were going from bad to worse outside. Smoke could easily be detected now, as if to prove that those awful threats made by the Uhlans were not idle ones; and that some cottage was already in flames.

Rod was almost counting the seconds. He found himself wondering whether the oncoming zouaves could possibly reach there before the door was broken from its hinges and the wolves without rush in to use their heavy sabres against the defenders. How long could they hold the aggressors in check? Those weak old men would be swept aside as though they were pigmies; and what could he and his two chums do against half a dozen big cavalymen, bent on pillage?

The very first thing Rod did do was to possess himself once more of that revolver. He believed he could make better and more judicious use of such a dangerous weapon than Josh might—Josh was so rash and headstrong, once he found himself up against a dangerous situation.

The door, being very heavy, was resisting the attack of the soldiers successfully, though Rod did not plume himself on this account. He feared there were many other ways by means of which the Uhlans could accomplish their purpose and enter the house did they care to bother about looking.

Just then there arose a new cause for alarm. The good woman came crying from the other part of the building. Rod heard what she said and was able to understand, although the other two were left in the dark.

“What’s happened next, Rod?” demanded Josh, with the air of a veteran; for Josh often affected to liken himself to those old worthies who, when sorely beset, never asked about the number of their foes, but where they could be found, so that they might attack them hip and thigh.

“She says they’ve set fire to the house, and that the whole rear of the same is

already blazing fiercely,” Rod explained.

Hanky Panky’s face was a study. Of course it was not really *fear* that gripped him so fiercely; but nevertheless the boy had a peaked look about the eyes, and watched Rod eagerly, as though hoping the other would eventually find some way of extricating them from this new predicament.

“Now here’s a pretty kettle of fish,” growled Josh; “house afire, and we can’t even rush out to throw water on the flames, just because there’s a lot of cowardly skunks waiting to spit us like we were fowls. Whee! what’re we going to do about it, Rod, tell me? I’ll sally out and try to create a diversion, if you say the word.”

Perhaps Josh honestly meant it, but Rod only laughed at him.

“Don’t be silly, Josh,” was what the other said; “you’d have about as much chance against those half-dozen Uhlans as a baby might. All we can do is to hold tight, and hope the zouaves will get along before it’s too late. But if they do try to smash their way in we’re going to fight; hear that?”

“You just bet we are; every time,” said Josh, who had found a heavy poker and was swinging it around in a way that made poor Hanky Panky duck every time it barely missed his devoted head.

He had hardly finished saying those few expressive words than there was an awful crash, and the front door, struck by some sort of battering ram, seemed to be partly knocked from its hinges. The Uhlans were apparently determined to enter; and the more opposition they met the greater their desire seemed to become.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE COMING OF THE ZOUAVES.

“Why don’t you give them a shot, Rod?” Hanky Panky was heard calling just then, for apparently things had reached a crisis, and he expected seeing one of the raiders come pushing through the opening the next thing.

Rod was only holding back so as to keep his fire to the last extremity. The boy was pale, and his teeth were set, but there was a blaze in his eyes that boded no good for the first Uhlan who ventured to try to enter.

Although the Motorcycle Boys in the start decided not to take sides if such a thing could be avoided, they had found it impossible to control their feelings in the matter. The cause of the Allies seemed to be closer to American ideals than the militarist methods of the Kaiser’s men; and by degrees Rod and his chums had come to sympathize with the French and Belgians until finally ready to openly declare that they were for them heart and soul.

Rod hated the thought of shedding blood, even though his own life, as well as those of his chums, seemed in deadly danger. Only as a very last resort was Rod willing to use that weapon which had come into his possession so strangely; and in his mind he had already determined to only wound, if such a choice seemed possible.

The Uhlans without were exultant over the success they had already attained. To continue their work and presently smash the door completely in, they drew back the ladder which they were using as a battering ram.

Rod saw his chance to look out through the vent. What he saw was not of a reassuring nature. There were five stout men in the uniform of the reckless rough riders belonging to the German army; and they were swinging that heavy ladder in a way that showed what delight they experienced in just such work of destruction.

Rod did not class them as different from the soldiers of any army raiding through the enemy’s country. In fact he was not bothering his head just then making comparisons, for he had enough to do in figuring how he might further delay the crisis so as to give the coming zouaves a little more time in which to arrive.

“I guess it’s got to be done!” the boy was muttering to himself as he peeped

through that narrow slit of an opening and saw that the pack had about reached the end of their swing, so that the forward rush was about to begin.

It was easy enough to pick out the man who seemed to be the head and brains of the bunch. He was of course in the van, and by his actions as well as by his loudly shouted exclamations exerted a most important influence on the others. In fact he served as the pilot of the little group; when he gave the word they surged forward with whoops, meaning this time to finish smashing that objectionable door.

Why the Uhlans did not attempt to force an entrance through the rear of the house, which was absolutely undefended, Rod never could tell. Perhaps they were of the “one-idea” class of men, who, having made up their minds to do a thing in a certain way, could not deviate from the plan they had laid out.

Rod saw his chance to break up that next assault if only his aim were true. He thrust his weapon forward, finding plenty of room for his purpose. While he did not claim to be much of a shot with such a clumsy weapon as he now held, at the same time the boy knew considerable about firearms in general, and that counted for a whole lot.

Besides, the distance was ridiculously scant, and really Rod would have been deeply mortified had he missed his aim under the circumstances.

He meant to wound the leader by shooting him in the leg, and with that intention in view aimed low when pulling the trigger. The five Uhlans had actually started on the run at the time, so that they might strike the tottering door a tremendous blow, and complete matters with one fell swoop, which would give them entrance to the house.

Josh, who was peeping over Rod’s shoulder, gave a howl of delight when through the little puff of smoke that followed the feeble crack of the revolver he saw the big leader suddenly crumple up, and, falling in a heap, bring every one of his companions down in a struggling mass.

“A great shot, Rod, a magnificent hit!” was the burden of his shout; “pinked the whole five at a clip! Splendid work, let me tell you, Rod! However did you manage to do it?”

Apparently, Josh had allowed his enthusiasm to run away with his better judgment, for he imagined that in some mysterious manner the missile from Rod’s weapon had split in sections, and scattered like a load of bird shot, bringing down victims by the wholesale.

However that might be, Josh speedily realized his error, for a number of the soldiers were already struggling to their feet. Only one remained on the ground, and he was hugging his left leg as though in sudden anguish, a fact that sent a qualm of regret through Rod’s heart.

He hoped they would draw off now, and give up the attempt for a little time at least. True, there were five more charges in his gun, and only four of the Uhlands, so that it seemed as though he might be equal to the task of holding them in check, but one victim was enough to satisfy him.

“They’re going to try it again, Rod!” cried Josh, shrilly.

He was trembling violently with the excitement, and his face had taken on the look of one wrought up to the fighting pitch. To tell the truth, Josh had but a single regret just then, which was that he did not possess the mate of the weapon his chum gripped in his hand.

“And I’d never have bothered just peppering ’em in their legs, either,” he afterwards affirmed, when talking matters over with Hanky Panky; “they were meaning to get us, and if the shoe happened to be on the other foot who would be to blame?”

When Rod saw that the four men once more picked up the heavy ladder and started to swing it forward he realized that it was up to him to try again. By gradually reducing the number of their foes he must in the end check their drive.

So he coolly picked out the next victim. As before, it had to be one of those in front, so as to bring confusion to the charge, as the rest were bound to trip over him should he fall.

All this while there arose from different quarters loud outcries and shouts of laughter from the spoilers, filled with the mad desire to inflict a reign of terror and frightfulness upon the natives. Shots were also heard at intervals, women screamed, children shrieked, dogs barked, and taken in all it was a combination of sounds never to be forgotten by those who happened to be in the little French village.

Well, Rod was just as successful with that second shot of his as he had been on the former occasion. With the report of his weapon he could see the man start, and give every evidence of being hard hit. He managed to keep from falling, however, being sustained by his grip on the ladder, as well as the impetus of his companions’ advance.

It might have altered things somewhat had Rod been given an opportunity to discharge a third shot, this time selecting the other fellow in the van; but before he could really grasp the immensity of this idea it was too late.

The heavy ladder struck the already weakened door, and such was the force with which it was hurled forward that it tore the latter from its hinges and sent it to the floor, the end of the ladder projecting several feet into the room.

Rod, seeing what was about to happen, had swept his two comrades back so that none of them chanced to be struck by the falling door. There was now a wide gap, and the three uninjured Uhlands might easily rush through this. They

would find, however, that the resistance of the inmates did not end with the breaking in of the door; for there was Rod holding himself in readiness to shoot again, Josh with his upraised poker, Hanky Panky also in line with a club, and the old man who had secured the revered gun that had hung on the wall since '71, waiting for this day, had its sword bayonet adjusted so as to pin the first German who dared venture across that threshold.

Fortunately there was no necessity for further action on the part of the valiant defenders of the village home, for just at that moment there arose a series of the wildest shouts Rod had ever heard. They were shouting in unison, those zouaves, as they spread through the village looking for Uhlans to spit upon their hungry bayonets. Hanky Panky in times past had more than once ventured to make fun of certain phrases which he had heard spoken in French; but he was now ready to confess that there was no language on the face of the earth to be compared with the French as falling from the bearded lips of men who wore those baggy red trousers of the famous zouaves.

"They've come, Rod, they've really got here!" he cried, in a paroxysm of delight.

Josh too was equally satisfied, though he should always deeply regret that it had not fallen to his lot to strike *one* blow for the cause, and that all the honors had gone to Rod.

Rod, seeing that none of the Uhlans seemed disposed to renew the attack, managed to look out; and the others were speedily at his side.

The danger, in so far as it related to the inmates of the village houses, was past; but evidently it had only begun for the Uhlans. They had mounted their already tired horses in hot haste, that is, all those capable of doing so, and were trying to get out of the village, turning and firing back at the French with reckless abandon as they went galloping away.

Rod saw one man trying to help another mount a prancing horse. He had his arm about the wounded man and seemed to ignore his own danger in the desire to fetch his comrade safely away.

"That's the fellow you pinked the first time!" cried Josh, understandingly.

Rod had already guessed as much. He hoped deep down in his heart that the Uhlan would manage to regain his saddle and ride to safety, for the boy did not want to feel that through any act of his the raider might be finally brought down.

Half a minute later and the two were galloping off. Once the injured man sat in his saddle he seemed capable of taking care of himself, though unless his wound were attended to shortly he must become too weak from loss of blood to continue on his way, and would find it necessary to allow himself to be taken prisoner by the French in order to save his life.

All around the active zouaves were running madly, and shouting in their wild excitement. The Uhlans had not attempted to make any sort of a stand, for they realized they were vastly outnumbered, and that it was “safety first” with them.

From the crackling of guns that continued for some time Rod felt assured that all of the raiders who had so boldly entered the French village could not have gone out of it again. Some there must be caught in a trap, for it seemed that the first of the zouaves arriving had started to encircle the place, with the idea of cutting off the retreat of the pillagers when they took the alarm.

Josh first of all insisted in shaking hands with each of his chums, and then with the three valiant old men who had shown such grit. Rod, more practical, knew that there was other work to be done.

“Here, we must find buckets, and put out that fire before it gets too big a headway!” he told both of his companions, upon which they bestirred themselves; and some of the zouaves coming to their assistance, they presently had the flames completely smothered.

Things began to assume a settled appearance in the village as the sun sank low in the west, seen through the breaks in the clouds. There was wailing in a few of the houses over the destruction that had been wrought during the temporary occupation of the place by the enemy. Luckily, however, no one of the inhabitants had been killed, or even seriously injured. Two buildings were burned, several dogs shot because they had dared bark at the invaders, a few slight wounds received; but on the whole every one felt that they had good reason for congratulating themselves on the fact that things were no worse. Other French villages did not fare so well when overrun by the invaders.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE ROAD OF VON KLUCK'S RETREAT.

After all the boys were not sorry for the experience. They had witnessed some sights that they would never forget. Rod too could plume himself on having done the right thing when he used his weapon twice with telling effect.

After the fire in the rear of the house had been effectually extinguished the good woman appeared before them to announce that supper was served; and she added her apologies because they might find some of the dishes not quite so warm as they liked, "For," as she naïvely put it, "we had too much heat in another quarter; and one never knows just how to manage when those terrible Uhlans are around."

Certainly none of the three boys found anything to complain of. They never remembered sitting down to a finer meal, when their appetites were on edge, as just then happened to be the case.

Hanky Panky ate until Josh solemnly warned him that he would surely founder unless he curbed that awful appetite of his. It might have been noticed, however, that Josh was sitting there for some little time after his comrades had left the table, and still "sampling" the good things that tempted him.

It was settled that since the three motorcycles were already in the house they might as well remain there. Rod managed to fix the smashed door so that it would close again, though a carpenter's skill would be required to place it in its former excellent condition.

When they got through eating it was beginning to grow dusk. Josh remarked that he guessed he would saunter out to stretch his legs, and at the same time see the extent of damage inflicted by the brief occupation of the village by the raiders.

"They say those Uhlans can make a howling wilderness of a Paradise quicker than any men on the face of the earth, once they set out to do things," Josh explained as he picked up his hat, "and I'd like to find out if there's any truth in the yarn."

Rod told him to "mind his eye," and not wander away, since with the night coming on there could be no telling what danger might not hover over his head.

"For all we know some of those Germans may still be hanging about," added

Hanky Panky, "and I'd really feel better if Rod loaned you his gun."

"Oh, come! there's no necessity of Josh going out at all if he has to load himself down with deadly weapons like that," laughed Rod.

Josh had his little outing, and returned in good time. He acted as though he did not regret his determination, and Hanky Panky, knowing from the signs that the other must have seen something worth while, immediately set to work "pumping" him, being filled with curiosity.

"You ran across something while you were out, Josh, and I'd thank you to open up and tell us about it," he went on to say. "Did the French chaps with the baggy red trousers and the big yell manage to bring down any of the German raiders when they used up so much powder and ball?"

"I believe they did, for one woman who could talk some English managed to tell me the zouaves took three prisoners back with them, and in addition one fellow who would have to be buried, she said, because he was dead."

Hanky Panky would have shivered at one time on hearing such gruesome news, but after witnessing the terrible sights accompanying the battle along the bank of the Marne he somehow seemed to think little of it.

"Was that *all* you saw or heard, Josh?" he continued, bent on making the other confess to the limit.

Josh grinned, showing that he had purposely acted so as to excite the suspicion of this curious comrade. Having attained his end, he consented to explain further.

"Well, no, not quite all, Hanky," he remarked calmly; "I'm most sure I saw a man skulking around who showed a whole lot of concern when I approached, and even hurried away. He wasn't an old man either, and let me tell you, Rod, he hid his face from me in the bargain. Now, what do you think of that?"

"Was it Jules, do you reckon?" asked Hanky Panky, as quick as a flash; for somehow he could not imagine any other person wishing to avoid meeting one of them.

"I got the notion in my head," admitted Josh, "that it must be either him or else some party hitched up with Jules. He acted in a way that made me sure of that."

"Huh!" Hanky Panky went on to say, with one of his odd chuckles, "I'm only surprised, Josh, you didn't step right up to the fellow and ask him if he answered to the name of Jules Baggott; also if he happened to know a woman called Jeanne D'Aubrey. That'd be just like your way, Josh."

The other grinned affably as though he considered this one of the highest compliments his chum could pay him.

"Oh, well, to tell you the truth, though I'm almost ashamed to admit it," he

remarked, "I did want to chase after him and say that very same thing; but, hang the luck, he was too slippery for me. Besides, you see, it was getting dark; anyhow he managed to leave me in the lurch. But it was one of that bunch, believe me."

"Still after that paper, it seems, Rod," said Hanky Panky with a frown; "mebbe we'll have a visitor again to-night, just like happened in that inn over at Calais."

"If we do you can make up your mind he'll have all his trouble for his pains," the other told him; "besides, we'll take precautions this time, and no sneak-thief can get into the room when I'm on my guard without our knowing it."

The boys sat around for some little time afterwards. Rod entered into a conversation with the woman of the house, for while he could tell her many things concerning the state of affairs at the front, at the same time there was always a possibility of his picking up a little information that might come in handy later on.

In good time they were shown to a room, where they proceeded to make themselves comfortable. Rod, with some cord which he produced, set a clever little trap. By this simple method of protection he fixed matters so that should any one try to enter by way of the open windows they would arouse the sleepers by pulling down three chairs which had been piled up, and made fast to the cord.

Whatever the plan of the plotter may have been, evidently entering the room of the three American boys did not form a part of it, because the night passed without any further alarm.

"Guess he knew we had that gun we took from his man who played the part of Oscar William Tell," observed Hanky Panky in the morning, when awakened by the rising sun they lay there and talked matters over.

"Well," remarked Josh with a yawn, "by this time Jules is beginning to understand that we don't mean to handle him with gloves if he runs afoul of us. While he may keep on trying as hard as ever to get that paper in his hands, it'll be through some sneaky way, and not in a stand-up fight. Schemers like him seldom do feel like facing the men they aim to beat. I'm keeping an eye out for Jules; and say, if ever I do get a chance to give him my compliments you listen to what he says about it; that's all."

The morning opened peacefully, though in the distance they could already begin to hear the guns take up the same steady rhythm that would grow louder and more insistent as the day grew older, until the fierce rush of battle again held sway, and a million of Frenchmen hurled themselves against an equal number of Germans in the endeavor to push them back still further in their retreat from before Paris.

The boys started out soon afterwards. Rod believed he knew about where the

regiment could be found to which Jeanne's husband, Andre, belonged. If fortune favored them, and they discovered the French reservist still in the land of the living, doubtless it could soon be arranged as they planned.

As on the previous afternoon, they soon found themselves on the road along which the retreating German army had passed. Everywhere they could see marks of this flight, for such it really was, despite the order with which the retrograde movement had been conducted. In places the roadside was glutted with cast-off articles, such as had better be disposed of if haste and mobility were to be considered.

As a rule these had been rendered useless before being abandoned, in order to prevent them from becoming valuable to the enemy. It was a sight worth seeing; and no wonder such of the country people whom the boys came upon, examining this "made in Germany" material, had broad smiles on their faces, since it spoke eloquently of the near panic that must have existed in the army of Von Kluck, before they would thus abandon so much of their resources.

A score of interesting things engaged their attention as they slowly made their way along. Obstacles were frequently met with, but cleverly avoided by these expert riders. Many times Rod called a temporary halt in order to speak with some peasant who chanced to look more than ordinarily intelligent, and, he imagined, able to give him information.

They also came upon various detachments of the French army. Some were engaged in caring for wounded comrades who could not be taken to the rear as yet on account of the glut of injured and the lack of vehicles of transportation; though many such were to be seen on their way to Paris with loads of groaning humanity.

Then fresh artillery was to be found going to the front, the horses snorting as though they already scented the battle smoke, the men sitting there on gun carriage and caisson, grim and eager, though none could say if he might be so fortunate as to see the sun set when that dreadful day reached its close.

Other big vans there were carrying fresh ammunition to the guns that were so noisily punctuating the morning atmosphere with their clamor. French powder and shot had never been sent forth on a mission more in keeping with the hearts of the people. A million hands would willingly toil day by day making fresh supplies, if only it could win for them another such fight as this glorious victory over the German invaders on the banks of the Marne.

There came a time, however, when Rod was brought to a sudden stop through other means than his own will. From either side of the road arose men wearing the French uniform. Guns were brought to bear upon the three riders, and a gruff voice ordered them to come to a halt and surrender.

Laughing at what they deemed something akin to a joke, they hastened to comply.

“We might as well go to their headquarters, as they are ordering us to,” suggested Rod pleasantly; “it will serve to break the monotony of our ride, and who knows what information we may be able to pick up there.”

He touched his breast pocket as he said this, and the other boys knew that Rod did not in the least doubt the ability of those papers to carry them through any little difficulty that might arise.

Accordingly he turned to the grizzled French sergeant who seemed to be in charge of the detail by which they had been taken prisoners, and told him to lead the way to his commanding officer.

Passing up the road they turned into what seemed to be a little-used path. Each of the boys trundled his machine along, preferring to do this rather than risk handing them over to the soldiers.

Even Hanky Panky exhibited no sign of alarm. If in the beginning he felt any such weakness it had been immediately set at rest by those cheery words which Rod spoke. Of course they could quickly satisfy the French commander of their standing; those magical documents would do the trick and gain them new friends as well.

Shortly afterwards they found themselves in what seemed to be a temporary camp. A regiment of troops had been stationed here for some strategical purpose, which was never explained to the boys. Under a shelter tent several officers were conferring while they sipped their coffee. The older man with the white imperial Rod knew to be a colonel from his uniform. All of them eyed the trio with frowns, and somehow Hanky Panky began to feel a little chill.

Rod immediately courteously saluted the colonel and started to speak.

“Pardon me, Colonel, but may I ask why we have been waylaid and taken in charge?”

“It is very simple,” came the astounding answer in plain English; “in times like this spies may be arrested, tried, and executed all inside of an hour. And you three boys are accused of having been known to send information to the enemy!”

CHAPTER XX. THE ACCUSATION.

That startling accusation sobered even Josh, for the smile faded from his face as he turned an anxious look upon Rod. To be taken for a spy was a serious thing in these war times, when a short shrift often followed such a charge.

Rod did not lose his self-possession. At the same time a little frown appeared on his usually placid face.

"That is a serious thing you charge us with, my Colonel," he remarked. "We are three American boys who were caught in the whirl of war. We finally found our way out of Belgium with much difficulty. Two of our number started back home, having been recalled by a message of importance."

"But Belgium is far away from Paris, and the banks of the Marne, young M'sieu!" said the officer, with a touch of satire in his cold voice, and a look toward a man dressed as a civilian, who, Rod noticed, was intently watching them.

"That is true, Monsieur le Colonel," immediately replied the boy, "and we can explain that easily. We met with a poor French woman in Antwerp whose story enlisted our sympathies. She had just come by a paper from a lawyer in Paris whereby her husband would inherit quite a snug little fortune if he signed the same document within a stated time. But as he had hastened to join his regiment when war was declared she feared the opportunity would be forever lost. And, my Colonel, we three boys, hoping also to see something of what was going on along the French front, gave Jeanne D'Aubrey our promise that we would try to find her Andre, so that the paper might be signed."

The colonel appeared to be interested, also the other officers, for they were all French, and as such could appreciate anything bordering on chivalry. Nevertheless the commander shook his head a little sadly.

"That sounds very fine, young M'sieu," he went on to say, "but, alas! what are we to believe when this gentleman, who is a fully accredited member of the French Secret Service, informs us that he certainly saw you communicating with the enemy only last night, and that there can be no doubt of your guilt?"

At hearing this Hanky Panky uttered a low cry of alarm, while Josh glared defiantly at the man in question, who was nodding his head as if confirming all

the colonel said.

“Aha! I smell a rat,” Josh muttered, “and its name is Jules, too! I can see his fine hand back of all this raw deal.”

Rod had to think fast. He, too, believed that the Secret Agent must be in the employ of the schemer; but it might not be advisable to say so as bluntly as Josh seemed capable of doing.

“Keep still, Josh,” he said aside, “and let me do all the talking necessary.” And then, addressing the commandant again, he continued: “There surely must be some mistake about this, Monsieur le Colonel. We spent the whole of last night sleeping in a house in a small village where a regiment of brave zouaves routed a force of Uhlans who had taken possession. The building in which we found shelter was attacked, and we had the honor of assisting in its defense. I myself shot two Uhlans in the leg with this same weapon, as they were smashing in the front door, after firing the back of the building. But the zouaves came up just in time, and cleared the field of the enemy.”

The colonel listened and looked hard at Rod. Evidently he had been already favorably impressed with the frank face of the lad, and was puzzled to know what to believe. He turned to the Secret Service agent and exchanged several low sentences with him. The man seemed positive, and apparently did his best to convince the officer that at least the boys should be held, pending an examination.

Once more Rod faced the colonel. He meant to play his trump cards now, and convince the other that the charge made against them was ridiculous, to say the least.

Rapidly he started to recount some of the strange happenings that had been their portion since crossing from German territory to that of Belgium and taking up the race to reach Antwerp by dodging the invading armies.

The officers listened, and apparently all of them could understand English, for they showed the greatest interest. Now and then two might be seen exchanging meaning looks, as though coming to a mutual understanding to the effect that this boy must be a modern Baron Munchausen, judging from the remarkable stories he had at the tip of his tongue.

This was especially the case when Rod mentioned that they had actually been invited into the presence of King Albert, who had thanked them personally.

“It is all very interesting, young M’sieu,” said the commandant, when Rod paused for breath; “but naturally we would be better pleased if you could show us some proof that these wonderful things have come your way. So grave an accusation may not be brushed aside, you understand, with a wave of the hand. And I am sure you will only too gladly oblige us in this case.”

He smiled when saying this; so too did the younger officers, for they could not believe that the boy was carrying anything with him calculated to substantiate his remarkable story.

Judge then of their amazement when Rod coolly produced certain documents which he kept wrapped in oilskin, located in a deep pocket of his coat.

“Be kind enough, my Colonel,” Rod said composedly, “to observe that not only is this paper signed by the gallant king of the Belgians, but that indeed he himself wrote every word it contains. And I have still other proofs to show you in turn, if you would still be convinced that our story is every word of it true.”

There was a tense silence; several pairs of eyes were glued on that document which Rod meant to have framed if ever he were lucky enough to get it safely home with him. It would be a badge of honor to which he and his chums might proudly point when speaking of their remarkable adventures in the Land of the Great War.

The manner of the colonel had changed when finally he looked up. Admiration spoke in the glance of his sparkling eyes. Here, then, were brave American boys who had indeed done something worthy of commendation by one whose name was already on the lips of every loyal Frenchman; because the stubborn defense of his native soil by King Albert and his little army had caused the delay in the plans of the German host that really saved Paris from capture.

“It is only right that I should beg your pardon, young M’sieu,” he hastened to say, with deep feeling his voice; “there is no mistaking the meaning of this recommendation, which rings true. You are the friends of Belgium, and also of France. There is little that you could ask within my power to grant that I would refuse you. And if you will do me the honor to shake hands with me I shall be proud to press the palm that King Albert has held.”

Well, the thing had not been so hard to accomplish after all. Still Rod realized that the Secret Agent of the French Government must have sold himself to Jules for a price, knowing at the time he was going to put the lives of innocent boys in peril; and Rod did not feel positively safe yet.

The man, however, saw that, so far as he was concerned, he had put his foot in a hole and had better beat a hasty retreat while there was yet time.

Undoubtedly he himself had been impressed by the display of a document of such great value, and realized that those who had the sincere friendship of the ruler of the Belgians were not to be treated harshly with impunity.

As Josh afterwards remarked, the man immediately commenced to “hedge”; that is, he hastened to “square himself” with the French colonel, who was now glancing curiously, perhaps a bit suspiciously, toward him.

“Apparently I have been mistaken in supposing that it was these brave young

messieurs who were sending secret messages to the enemy,” he went on to say glibly, “and I hasten to offer them my most sincere apologies and regrets that through me they have been put to such needless trouble. I hereby withdraw my charge and trust that you will forget it has ever been made, Monsieur le Colonel.”

This was said in French, which Rod alone of the three boys could fully understand, but Josh guessed the tenor of the remarks from the shrugs accompanying them.

“He’s eating his words, Hanky, don’t you see?” he observed behind his hand to his other chum. “Some people know enough to get in out of the rain when the deluge comes. Jules has wasted some more hard cash, seems like.”

Now Rod understood that he could make it pretty hard for the Secret Service man of the French Government if he chose to tell what he knew about Jules, and the profit that would accrue to the schemer could he prevent Andre from signing that paper on time. He did not think it good policy, however, to mention the matter. It would only serve to anger the man, and could not bring them any particular benefit.

Accordingly Rod only shot him a suggestive look that doubtless the other could easily analyze. It meant that the boys were not disposed to be vindictive—that in fact they were ready to take it for granted he did not know the true condition of affairs when he entered into his agreement with the crafty Jules; and hence they were going to let the matter drop.

Perhaps the man might feel a spark of gratitude and appreciation for this kindly and generous spirit; the future would show that, Rod thought.

As the colonel had been so much interested in their story, Rod considered it only fair that he relate a few more circumstances connected with their past. He also gladly showed him the paper given him by the surgeon at the field hospital, telling how the American boys had worked like beavers in assisting him take care of the numerous cases he had been compelled to handle with such inadequate facilities at his command. Yes, there were still other documents which Rod allowed them to glance over, after which he smilingly remarked:

“I suppose now, M. le Colonel, there will be no necessity for taking us out before a file of your soldiers and blindfolding our eyes while they perform their melancholy duty?”

The officer for answer threw his arms around Rod and gave him a demonstration of excitable French admiration by kissing him on both cheeks.

“If I had a son,” he said fervently, “which, alas! Heaven has not allowed me to retain in this world, I should be proud indeed were he built in your image, my brave young American. And when you go back to your splendid country tell

them, will you not, wherever you go, that France sees her duty by the world, and will not flinch, no matter what the cost. When this war is over there will never be a despotic military power again. The victory on the Marne has settled all that, though it may take years for Germany to recognize the fiat."

The three boys parted from the worthy colonel with mutual expressions of esteem. They would often recall his fine martial appearance, with his strong face and its white imperial, trimmed after the style of the later Napoleon.

Even Hanky Panky could laugh now, once they were on the road again.

"That agent of the Government saw he had put his foot in it, after you flashed the King Albert message before them," he remarked as they rode slowly along as near to forming a bunch as was safe for motorcyclists.

"Yes, and I reckon he felt pretty cheap when he had to own up about making a mistake," added Josh. "You don't believe for a single minute, do you, Rod, that he really saw anybody trying to send signals to the enemy? It was all a set-up game, wasn't it?"

"No question about it," he was told by the other, Rod being in the van, as usual, "but it was another experience for us, you know. And besides, I managed to pick up a little information that helps out."

"Do you mean with regard to the regiment we're on the track of?" questioned Hanky Panky eagerly, for to tell the honest truth he was hoping that the end of the trail was near at hand, when they could follow their other chums across the sea to their far-distant homes.

"Yes," said Rod over his shoulder, "it's ahead of us, and we ought to reach it some time to-day; but the chances are we'll find it neck deep in action, because it forms a part of that army thrown forward to do the worrying of the German rearguard to-day. Let us hope if one man in that regiment survives the battle it may be Andre."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE HAUNTED WELL.

The boys did not attempt to do much of this sort of talking as they moved along the road. Many reasons united to make conversation a weariness to the flesh when carried on under the prevailing conditions.

In the first place they had to keep a certain distance apart, which would in itself necessitate shouting. Then the rumble of cannon was growing steadily heavier the further they advanced, deadening most other sounds pretty much all the time. Last of all there were those gaps in the road, springing up most unexpectedly, where enemy shells had struck in the endeavor to destroy as many of the pursuing French troops as possible.

Both armies had traversed the region through which Rod and his friends were making their tedious way. It can well be understood that the marks of their late progress abounded on all sides.

Even where no particular action had occurred a thousand reminders of the human flood of men that had so lately passed through were to be discovered on every side. Often Hanky Panky's heart seemed to feel a chill hand rest upon it as he marked the inevitable evidences of "man's inhumanity to man." Cottages were burned or ruined in some way or other; once beautiful gardens trampled out of all recognition; outbuildings torn down to make campfires for the marching hosts—in fact the land looked as though a hurricane might have recently swept across it, leaving scars that it would take a long time indeed to heal.

Here, there, and everywhere they could see groups of the forlorn inhabitants wandering about. Some stood and stared at the ruins of their recent homes; others guarded the little they had saved; while still more were on the roadside looking toward the region of the north, from whence came all those portentous rumblings and angry roarings.

Hanky Panky, however, was astonished to discover very few solemn faces among the peasants of the Marne country. At first this amazed him, but presently he figured out what it meant.

They had in many cases lost the accumulated savings of years, even their humble homes; but in spite of this they could take off their caps and shout in almost savage glee as the three Motorcycle Boys rode past.

Why, to be sure, the Great Day had come, of which they had some of them dreamed full forty years and more; when the German legions, like a plague of locusts, had once more descended upon devoted Paris, only to be brought to a standstill by the glorious army of the republic. And even now those furious guns told how Von Kluck, who had made such wonderful boasts of what he meant to do, was in full retreat bordering on a panic.

That was why temporary sufferings were all forgotten. For France these honest sons and daughters would make much greater sacrifices, and think little of it. So Hanky Panky felt ready to take off his hat to every one of them who gave the three riders a cheer or a salute in passing by.

Few animals save dogs and cats could be seen. Evidently the Germans had tried to make a clean sweep of the forty miles and more they covered like a vast fan, in falling back to the prepared positions along the Aisne. Those horses or cows that had been saved from the general slaughter or seizure must have been artfully secreted somewhere, so that they escaped the keen search. As for chickens, not a solitary rooster's crow had the boys heard since early dawn; for fowls of every description are first looked after by the soldier marching through a hostile country.

Long caravans of supplies were crawling over other roads, all heading for the front and coming from the direction of Paris. No wonder that every thoroughfare must be crowded with vehicles of transportation, when a million Frenchmen in arms had to be fed daily, not to mention the enormous quantities of ammunition that must be expended between the rising and the setting of every sun.

The more Rod saw of this the greater grew his admiration for the genius of the men whose brains had to command all these thousands of details looking to the provisioning of such a vast host. It was an experience the educational value of which could never be fully estimated; and often would the boy ponder over the problems that must have confronted those who were responsible for the solution of them.

They had numerous little adventures by the way, though as a rule these were in the line of narrow escapes from nasty spills, on account of ruts in the road. Rod frequently gave warning when he reached an especially bad stretch of ground, for he was well aware of the failings of his two chums—Josh with his impetuous ways, and Hanky Panky rather apt to be careless as well as clumsy.

One thing in particular Rod noticed, and this was that as they proceeded the sounds ahead of them kept on growing louder. Evidently then they were coming up on that part of the Marne country where the last rearguard action was being fiercely contested.

Von Kluck and his proud army must be continually finding themselves pushed

further and further away from the beautiful city in which they had fully expected to be encamped ere this; though they grimly contested every mile they gave up, bound to sacrifice as few of their heavy guns as possible.

Another thing staggered the boys when they came to think of it. During the Civil War in their own country some of the greatest battles then known to history were fought, and the numbers on both sides did not really amount to more than two hundred thousand men. Here there were more than as many million grappling in deadly earnest, supplied with the most wonderful of modern death-dealing weapons, with engineers highly educated along the lines of utilizing these engines of wholesale destruction.

No wonder then the dead and wounded were as the leaves of the forest when the wind of late October tears them from their hold upon the branches and scatters them in windrows behind the logs and stumps and in fence corners.

Rod had some reason to believe that if they were allowed to proceed forward on this particular day they would presently reach the regiment in which Andre, sought so earnestly in the interest of his family, had an humble part. He was determined that should fortune favor them and the object of their search be accomplished he would listen no longer to the pleadings of Josh, but strike for Paris, so as to get away from this war-blasted country as quickly as possible.

It was beginning to pall upon Rod. After all he was only a boy, and had never been accustomed to such terrible sights as of late were being continually thrust before him. Nature has its limits, and Rod believed he was now very close to the end of his endurance.

“As it is, what we’ve run across will haunt us the rest of our lives,” he was telling himself as he led the way along the difficult road; “and for one I’m longing to wake up again, and find myself wandering by the peaceful waters of the river bordering Garland in the far-distant States. And here’s hoping that this may turn out to be our very last day in the track of the battling armies.”

The dust was thick in places, partly on account of the season of the year, and then again because of the unwonted use to which that particular thoroughfare had been put of late. When several hundred thousand feet have tramped along in almost endless procession, and then innumerable vehicles of every known description, not to mention heavy artillery, some of it drawn by traction engines, some by horses, passing back and forth, it can easily be understood that the best of roads must be well nigh wrecked.

Hanky Panky had coughed a number of times, as though his throat was beginning to clog up with all this dust, and he found himself in danger of choking. When no attention was paid at first to these plain symptoms he coughed louder than ever, and with such evident distress that Rod guessed what he

wanted.

“All right, Hanky,” he shouted back, “wait till we come to a well, or a spring of some sort, and we’ll drop off to wash it down.”

After that Hanky Panky quieted considerably, his main object having been accomplished. As he rode along the boy kept watching ahead, hoping that it would not be long before they sighted some oasis in the desert where a sparkling rill ran, or the thrice welcome sweep of an old-fashioned well told of water to be had for the trouble of raising the same.

“I see one, Rod!” he presently called at the top of his voice, which was quite husky from the accumulation of dust; “there’s a well in that place we’re coming to, and I hope you keep your word, because I’m nearly perishing for a drink.”

“Same here,” said Josh, thinking to relieve the other’s mind, because that would make two in favor of a stop, and majority always ruled with the Motorcycle Boys.

It happened just then that the road was next to deserted, though again just the reverse might be the case. The well sweep could no longer be seen, but Hanky Panky had marked the spot in his mind, and was not to be cheated because a knoll hid the well from the road, so it was only visible in that one quarter.

Rod drew up. A gate stood before him that was now in ruins, showing that the invaders had been there. They pushed their heavy machines past, and followed the lane leading over the knoll, to find a cottage in ruins, having been burned to the very ground.

It was a sad sight, and filled the boys with distress; but by this time they were naturally becoming a little hardened to such spectacles of warfare, and could view them without the same sensation of anger and disgust toward the aggressors that had filled their hearts at an earlier date.

For some reason or other the Germans had chosen to apply the torch to this isolated cottage. Perhaps some party had been keenly disappointed at finding it totally deserted, with not even a stray chicken left to satisfy their longing for a supper.

Rod gave one hasty glance around. Then he heaved a satisfied sigh, for he had been a little afraid lest he discover some evidence of foul work there. Such did not happen to be the case; the owner of the cottage instead of staying and arousing the passions of the invaders by firing at them in secret, had wisely departed to unknown regions before their coming, taking warning in time.

So the trio of boys hastened to the well as soon as they could dispose of their wheels. It would do them no harm to idle away ten minutes here, and drink their fill of the sparkling liquid which doubtless lay in those shadowy depths.

Hanky Panky reached it first of all, Josh not appearing to be in a humor to

force himself to the van. In fact Josh seemed to be amused at something, for he had one of those smirks on his face which marked it whenever he watched Hanky Panky's evidence of greed.

"I don't seem to be able to quite see down *all* the way, Rod," the other was saying when his comrades joined him; "but I dropped a pebble in, and could plainly hear a good splash; so there's plenty of the stuff down there."

"I only hope it's all right," remarked Josh, shortly afterwards, when they had managed to draw up a dripping bucket of cold water.

That caused Hanky Panky to hesitate, for he had a gourd in his hand, and was about to dip in.

"Now what in the wide world do you mean by saying that, I'd like to know, Josh; you're always trying to drop a fly in the ointment, seems to me. What could there be wrong with this water?" he demanded, filling the gourd as he spoke.

"Oh! I don't know," drawled the other, wickedly, "but if it happened that some of those ugly-tempered Germans chose to drop a little poison in the well it'd be a tough thing for the French who drank later, and mebbe make 'em sick in the bargain."

Hanky Panky turned pale, and allowed the gourd to spill; whereupon Josh coolly took it out of his hand, dipped into the bucket, and commenced drinking.

"If it doesn't kill *me*, why then it's safe, you see. I'm always willing to be the tester for the crowd, you know. Tastes all right, though, and as cold as anything. Whew! Rod, you have a dip, since Hanky feels nervous about it, won't you?"

Rod thereupon laughed, accepted the rude drinking cup from the joker, filled it from the dripping bucket, and offered it to the third member of the group.

"Don't mind what he says, Hanky; you know Josh loves to have his little joke; and I believe he still feels that he owes you one on account of the trick you played on him this morning."

"Then you really don't believe they did poison it, Rod?" asked the other.

"That isn't the German way of doing things, as far as I know," Rod told him; at which assurance Hanky Panky swallowed his fears, and drained the gourd.

"Might as well be hung for a whole sheep as a lamb!" he declared, once more dipping into the bucket; "but no matter if it's my last drink or not, I'm going to say this is as fine water as any I ever drank over in our own dear country. So here goes."

Rod in turn took a drink, and was ready to pronounce it excellent. Indeed, after their dusty ride of the morning nothing could have been one-half so refreshing as that draught of ice-cold water from the well with the old-fashioned sweep.

“If we’re meaning to rest up a little bit,” remarked Hanky Panky, shrewdly, “we might as well stay right here. Then just before we start off again it’ll be another swig all around. I’d like to carry a canteen of that same water along with me, so I could wet my whistle as I rode.”

“That would be your undoing, I’m afraid,” laughed Rod, picturing the other uptilting the said canteen every few minutes, in spite of the wretched condition of the road and the necessity for cautious riding.

“I wonder whatever became of the people who lived here?” remarked Josh, presently, as he shifted his position for some reason or other, and sat with his face close to the curb of the well.

“Oh! they must have lit out long before the Germans arrived,” Hanky said, confidently; “I hope now you don’t believe they were actually killed, and buried somewhere around here, do you, Josh? You are the worst hand to imagine terrible things I ever knew.”

“I didn’t say anything like that, did I?” demanded Josh; “but it must have been on your mind. Listen! what was that?”

“I didn’t hear anything,” said Hanky Panky, looking worried all the same; “what did it sound like, Josh?”

Instead of answering, Josh held his hand up to indicate that if the other stopped talking he too might catch the sound. And as they listened what seemed to be a long-drawn groan came up from the depths of the well from which they had just been drinking!

CHAPTER XXII.

AT THE FORD OF THE RIVER MARNE.

“Oh! did you hear that?” exclaimed Hanky Panky, all excitement; “it was a sure-enough moan. Rod, Josh, there’s been some poor fellow down there all this while; and we never dreamed of it when we pulled that bucket of water up!”

Saying this Hanky Panky leaned far over the edge of the well curb, and attempted to see into the murky depths. Rod cast a quick look in the direction of Josh, who gave him a sly wink, but kept a straight face.

“I can’t see anything, for a fact,” complained Hanky Panky in great distress; “but it was a groan, I’m sure—there it goes again, and worse than before. Oh! Rod, do you believe some poor chap tried to hide in the well when he saw all those awful Germans coming, and hasn’t been strong enough to climb up again since?”

“Why, that might be possible, of course,” replied Rod, “though just how he could stay down there this long is more than I can understand.”

“What do you say, Josh?” demanded the sympathetic one.

“Oh! me?” remarked Josh, with a shrug of his shoulders, and not even offering to change his position; “if you asked me straight off the handle now I’d say that it might be only the wind sighing through the trees, or something like that. Don’t stand to reason that anybody could be down there in that well.”

When Hanky Panky met with opposition he always became more positive; possibly the sly Josh knew this full well, and allowed the fact to govern his actions.

“But we all heard the groans, didn’t we?” demanded Hanky Panky; “and I guess I know one when it hits my ears. There certainly is some one down there. Listen to that, will you; isn’t it just fierce the way he keeps going on, though?”

Indeed, the sounds had once more commenced to well up from the dark depths, and in a most agonizing fashion too. Even Rod felt a thrill, although he could give a pretty good guess concerning the nature of the poor unfortunate who was the contributing cause for those dismal groans.

“No use talking, fellows!” declared Hanky Panky presently, after they had listened again to the suggestive sounds that seemed to spell human misery; “I just can’t stand this any longer. Something’s got to be done, that’s what. I’ve a

good notion to slip down the rope myself, and find out what it means.”

“But that’d be going a whole lot, just to satisfy your curiosity, wouldn’t it?” asked Josh, cunningly, for he knew that he was taking just the course to further aggravate the other’s intention to act.

“Well, you don’t seem to care much what happens to a poor chap who’s made a fool of himself, and got caught down in a well; but I do,” asserted Hanky Panky, proudly. “I don’t think I could ever sleep decent again if I had the nerve to ride away from here, and never even try to get him out.”

He deliberately started to remove his coat, showing that his mind was made up. Rod looked at Josh, but received in turn a pleading glance, as though the other begged to be let alone, and turn his trick. The chance to “get one” on Hanky Panky was too good to be lost, Josh evidently believed.

So those amazing groans continued to well up out of the depths, increasing in pathos if anything as they proceeded.

“Take care not to slip, Hanky,” advised Rod, “or we’ll have the job of drying a chum out before we can go on our way.”

“And say, that well water’s awful cold in the bargain,” remarked Josh, carelessly; “keep a tight hold on the rope. We’ll look after this end, and when you say the word pull you out.”

Accordingly the determined one started to lower himself into the haunted well, showing a most commendable spirit, Rod thought. It was really too bad to allow the joking Josh to play this trick on so gallant a fellow; but possibly there would be no harm done in the end, and at least it served to break the terrible monotony of seeing sad sights on the road through the devastated country.

Presently the shaking of the rope ceased, and the voice of the explorer came up from the depths.

“This is certainly a queer deal I’m getting,” he said, complainingly.

“What’s the matter now?” asked Josh, tantalizingly.

“Why, I tell you there’s nothing down here,” replied Hanky Panky. “My eyes have got used to the dark, and I can see perfectly well. All around me is the stone of the well, the water is just under my feet, but high or low I can’t see a single sign of anybody.”

“Didn’t I tell you so?” asked Josh, laughing harshly; “the old well must be a haunted one, I reckon. If that was really a groan we heard it was given by a ghost, or a goblin, and not a living being.”

“Hey! that’s enough, Josh! Get me up out of here quick, I tell you!” called Hanky Panky, shaking the rope vigorously; “you promised you would, remember!”

Josh was chuckling at a great rate; nevertheless when Rod signalled to him he

condescended to lend a hand, and between the two of them they speedily had Hanky Panky up safely, none the worse for his experiment, but looking deeply puzzled.

“That’s the queerest thing I’ve run across for many a day,” he was saying; “but you notice that it doesn’t come any more now, since I went down. Oh! thunder! I spoke too soon, didn’t I?”

The sounds had indeed started in again with even more vigor than before. Hanky Panky, catching what seemed like a chuckle, suddenly turned on Josh.

“I’ve tumbled to your silly game at last, Josh,” he said, pointing a finger at the other in a stern fashion; “somehow I clean forgot how you used to be such a smarty at throwing your voice, and aimed some day to be a regular ventriloquist on the stage. Well, you *did* fool me all right, I own up; and I had my climb down into the old well for nothing. Hope you’re satisfied now. Let’s take another drink all around, and then get along.”

Hanky Panky was one of those good-natured fellows who could laugh at a clever joke even when himself the victim; so that he did not bear any grudge for the way in which Josh had deluded him.

“But I’m glad anyhow that I didn’t lose my grip, and drop into the water,” he went on to say; “because it was terribly cold down there.”

“All’s well that ends well!” croaked Josh, with a happy grin, for he believed he had once more cleared the slate in the account with his fun-loving comrade.

Soon afterwards they left the ruined place and once more started along the road. Again they came upon scenes of desolation, with clusters of natives standing by the ruins of their late possessions, to wave an encouraging hand as the three boys sped past. Doubtless many of them believed Rod and his mates must belong to some section of the brave French army, for their khaki uniforms seemed to proclaim this. And every little helped when the gigantic task of turning the invaders out of France was considered, even the assistance of a trio of half-grown lads.

If things kept up as they were now going Rod confidently believed they would be close to the battle line again inside of two hours. The roar of the guns announced that severe fighting was going on not many miles distant.

They were making only slow progress at this time, so many obstacles impeded their way. Numerous stops were also made so that Rod could exchange a few sentences with some of the people they came upon, so as to pick up information that might prove of advantage to strangers in a section of country new to them.

There was no time when right and left they could not see a myriad of interesting things. Most of them pertained to warfare—marching troops; strings of prisoners being led to the rear; broken caissons and abandoned guns; wrecked

bicycles, and even motorcycles cast aside when of no further service to the retreating Germans; cooking outfits that had been wonderful contrivances before being utterly smashed on their late owners finding they could not be taken along; and other things too numerous to mention.

Rod himself was of the opinion that the enterprising peasants might manage to partly indemnify themselves for their losses by taking possession of some of the various things abandoned, and renewing their usefulness.

It was now getting well on toward noon. Hanky Panky had even been heard to call out that he felt hungry, though Rod could see little hope of appeasing their appetites in that country, so thoroughly cleaned out by the enemy.

Suddenly there came an outburst of heavy firing close at hand. It was so furious that the three boys involuntarily stopped short, and huddled together to compare notes, so that they might decide upon the safest course for them to pursue.

Smoke began to climb upwards above the trees not more than a mile away, where Rod had reason to believe the Marne River ran.

“That’s where the fight is going on, Rod, you can see!” shouted Josh, eagerly, pointing as he spoke; “look at the French batteries wheeling into position, would you? They mean to give the Germans a lot of pounding, looks like. I wonder what it all means; can you give a guess, Rod?”

Rod could, and lost no time in advancing his opinion.

“From what I heard when I talked with that last bunch of natives,” he called out, for the racket was growing more deafening with every minute’s passage, “there’s a ford to the river right about that place. Now like as not the Germans have determined to dispute the passage of the crossing, and left a big force there to hold Joffre’s men in check. The battle for that ford is now starting up, and it will be a pretty stiff fight unless all signs fail.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE THUNDER OF OPPOSING BATTERIES.

Standing there they used their eyes to the best advantage, though none of them felt fully satisfied with their position. Josh looked enviously at a spot only a short distance away. It was something of a small elevation, and he felt positive that if only they could manage to reach it their chances of seeing all that went on would be immeasurably enhanced.

"Yes," Rod was saying, loud enough for the others to hear him, "I'm afraid, too, his regiment is going to be in the thick of that desperate battle for the possession of the ford across the Marne."

"Do you mean Andre?" demanded Hanky Panky, instantly.

"Just who I meant," came the reply.

The others knew that as Rod spoke French, and had talked with a number of people as well as soldiers on the road, he must be primed with information such as had not fallen to their lot. Hence it never occurred to either of them to question the accuracy of anything he might say.

"That would be too bad for all of us," remarked Josh, "if anything happened to Andre, just when we got within stone's-throw of him. But Rod, do we have to stay right here, and do our looking?"

"What makes you ask that, Josh?"

"Well, you see, there's a whole lot better place over yonder, if only we could reach it; but I'm afraid lugging our machines over the rough ground would be too big a job."

At that Rod took a glance, and of course saw the advantages to be attained by a shift in their position.

"It might be done," he told the anxious Josh, "if we cared to try and conceal our wheels somewhere near by, and walked or ran over to the rise."

"Would that be safe?" asked Hanky Panky, fearful lest they after all lose their mounts, and be compelled to walk, or depend on getting an occasional lift from some vehicle going in the direction of Paris.

"Reasonably so, I think," admitted the leader.

Encouraged by his tone Josh began to cast about in the hope of discovering a hiding place that would stand the test. This he speedily succeeded in doing, for

Josh had sharp eyes, and could see things in a flash that it would take another a long time in finding out.

So they made haste to hide the trio of motorcycles in the shrubbery, hoping no one might by accident force a way through just at that particular point, and discover what had been left there.

“Now let’s whoop it up for the rise!” suggested the eager Josh, for the sound of the battle had grown so insistent that he was fairly wild to see everything going on.

They all ran in a bunch, for Rod held Josh in, so that Hanky Panky might not be left too far behind. When they arrived at the place picked out for their station they found that, just as Josh had guessed, it was admirably fitted for their purpose.

Brief though the time had been taken up with this strategic maneuver the fight had evidently progressed beyond the preliminary artillery duel. True, the guns on either side of the Marne were thundering fearfully, and every time a battery sent out its winged messengers of death the very earth seemed to tremble under the boyish trio, who crouched there, and gazed with their hearts fluttering in their breasts like those of frightened birds when held in the hand.

The Germans had left quite a strong detachment of their forces behind to defend that particular ford, which evidently assumed an important position in the eyes of the commander. The Marne could not be crossed with heavy artillery in all that section without the building of a bridge to replace those destroyed by the retreating Teutons, which would take a certain measure of time to execute.

But it was possible to get the guns across here at the ford, for that was what the Germans themselves had done. And a crossing here in force would mean that the pursuing columns of the French must creep that much closer to the precious big guns which the Germans were doing everything in their power to save from capture.

A thousand men might be sacrificed in this endeavor, but what of that? Human material could be replaced readily enough, but it took months to build up one of those magnificent forty-two centimetre mortars with which they meant to batter down the defences of Paris, and win the war.

At the moment the three boys reached their point of observation things were rapidly drawing near a crisis. The French troops were undoubtedly getting wild to be let loose upon the waiting enemy; only their commander knew that the chances were as two to one they would not be able to get across the river so long as that one battery in particular commanded the ford. Its shells were able to sweep over every yard of the crossing, and could cut down those who were wading desperately through the waist-deep water, as though they were helpless

flies.

“What are they waiting for, do you think, Rod?” asked Josh, between the roars of the opposing guns.

“The French leader hates to sacrifice so many of his brave men while that battery is in a position to sweep the ford,” replied the other, without hesitation, showing that he had grasped the situation even in that brief time.

“Well, tell me how he expects to get rid of the same?” continued Josh, though he had to place his lips close to Rod’s ear, and fairly bellow his words in order to make himself heard, such was the increasing din close by.

“Perhaps he keeps hoping that some of his own guns will be able to locate the German battery among the bushes there, and disable it,” said Rod.

Hanky Panky pulled at his sleeve. When Rod turned his head he found the other pointing excitedly upwards, and upon casting his own eyes in that quarter Rod instantly knew what his chum meant.

“Two French aeroplanes going up, sure enough!” he exclaimed.

“Mebbe they mean to try and drop bombs on the battery, so’s to destroy it!” suggested Josh, whose attention had also been drawn to the new feature in the lively drama taking place before them.

Rod nodded his head to signify that the idea struck him as worth while. Even had he attempted to speak just then his effort would have been pretty much wasted, for the din had become something terrible. A thousand French soldiers were cheering, even while being held in check by their officers; they made Rod think of hounds restrained by the leash, and loudly bewailing their inability to jump forward. He could easily imagine with what frantic zeal those men would leap ahead and into the waters of the Marne when the time came.

Up higher and higher soared the twin aeroplanes, climbing in eccentric spirals.

Evidently the daring birdmen intended to attain a certain height where they might feel reasonably safe from the shrapnel sent after them from antiaircraft guns manned by the Germans; when they would try their luck in dropping the bombs they undoubtedly carried with them, in hopes of making a lucky shot.

“It’s going to come soon, I guess!” ventured Josh, when a brief lull in all the firing allowed him a chance to get in a few words.

“Yep,” added Hanky Panky, who was getting a stiff neck with looking up so long; “right now you can see that they’re sailing around like they might be looking for a good place to hover. But they’d better take care, because that shrapnel is bursting just below them, and some time a shell might hit home.”

A loud whoop from Josh instantly followed these words.

“There, one let go a bomb, as sure as you live!” he shouted; “look and see where it hits!”

Quickly following came a report, and the boys could see the earth fly in showers.

“Not by a jugful!” whooped Hanky Panky, also carried away with the excitement of the moment; “they’ll have to aim better than that if they expect to knock the German battery out of business.”

The second airman tried his hand, and while possibly he managed to do a little better than the first the result was also disappointing. Evidently they were at too great a height to be able to strike a small mark like the hidden battery. At that early stage in the war which had been sprung so suddenly on France, her aviators had not as yet become proficient in this sort of shooting; later on when they had been given much practice, the result was bound to be quite different.

When the birdmen had exhausted all their bombs and made no impression on the dangerous battery they were compelled to desist and circle around. Evidently it was the intention of the air scouts while aloft to learn all they could connected with the disposition of the German forces. This information would prove valuable to the French commander, whether able to win the coveted ford or not.

“Will they give up trying to cross over now?” asked Hanky Panky, after it was seen that the efforts of the circling birdmen, much more than half a mile aloft, had not met with any sort of success.

“That isn’t the usual French way of fighting, if all I’ve heard and seen of them cuts any figure in the game!” Josh exclaimed.

Rod, too, seemed to be of the same opinion.

“I think they must be getting ready to make a mad effort to rush the ford,” he went on to say; “you notice that their guns are silent just now; but that’s done so they can burst out with a more terrible bombardment than ever, under cover of which the attack will be started.”

“But why all this row over just one contemptible little ford?” asked Hanky Panky innocently.

Josh snorted at hearing this.

“Why, can’t you see what it means to both sides to control a crossing where the artillery can get over without building a bridge?” he demanded. “To hold up the French here the Germans would be willing to sacrifice thousands of their best men, because it would save their big guns now on the way north. There, it’s coming, I do believe.”

None of them heard the last words spoken by Josh, and for a very good reason. Every gun the French had within a mile of the ford began to bellow in concert, and the ground shook under the concussion. Across on the other side they could see the shells bursting everywhere. It seemed as though they sought out each place where they suspected hostile batteries or columns of troops might

lie in hiding, thus fairly raking the entire vicinity.

This was “preparing the ground for the seed,” as army men would put it. When this fierce “spraying” was well under way no doubt the order that had been awaited so long and impatiently by the concealed French soldiers was to be given; when they would start toward the bank of the river and strike into the shallow water, breasting their way across if possible.

The three boys fairly held their breath with awe, knowing what was coming next. Hanky Panky crouched there shivering like one who had the “shakes,” yet wholly unable to drag his horrified eyes away from the grim spectacle of war that was passing before him. Josh, on the other hand, had arisen to his feet, knowing that there was little or no chance of his being noticed and fired at, unless indeed some German gunner conceived the idea that they were a group of French officers observing the progress of the battle from an eminence.

This dreadful “spraying” with fire had gone on for some little time now when Rod saw signs that told him the expected event was coming. He could not have made his chums hear, no matter how he shouted, and so he contented himself with clutching each of them, Hanky Panky by the arm and Josh by the calf of his leg. They knew what he meant by this action, too, even though not a word was uttered.

The violent gunfire was being kept up, but from several points there suddenly burst into view living streams of French soldiers racing madly for the ford, and every man apparently wild to be the first to attempt the deadly crossing.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A FRENCH HERO.

“Can they ever do it?”

Undoubtedly this was what was filling the heart and brain of each of those boys as they watched the living stream of French rapidly draw nearer the river ford commanded by that destructive German battery, and which thus far they had not been able to reach and silence with their own guns and aeroplane attacks.

The time between the uprising of these troops and their reaching the shallow water of the ford was of very brief duration. Undoubtedly the French had crept up just as close as the nature of the ground would permit them to go unseen.

Still to those anxious hearts on the little rise it must have seemed dreadfully long, owing to the strain they were laboring under. As yet the Germans had held their fire, for not a man of the attacking force had fallen save when they stumbled, only to rise again.

Possibly Hanky Panky may even have deluded himself with the hope that when it came to a pinch the Germans had deemed it best to give up their desperate intention of defending the ford to the last gasp. Josh knew better, because he understood the holdfast nature of the Teutons better than did his chums. And he was mentally figuring on just when the bitter blast would break forth that was going to mow down those valiant men with the red trousers and the blue tunics rushing pell-mell forward with such ringing huzzas.

At least the men separated as they ran, doubtless following the instructions of their officers. This was bound to be of advantage to them, since the fire of the enemy could not cut them down as ripe grain falls before the scythe of the reaper or the revolving knives of the modern mowing machine.

“Some may manage to get across anyhow!” Josh was telling himself, as though seeking comfort.

Now the first of the French had reached the bank. They leaped impetuously into the water and hastened to start across. As they advanced of course they waded deeper, and their pace lessened. Was this just what those cool, calculating German gunners were waiting for? Rod expected to hear the first crash at any second now. How his heart went out to those gallant fellows splashing through the river at the disputed ford. He felt as though he must shut his eyes so as not to

see what was fated to occur; but for the life of him he could not. Some power beyond his control forced him to continue to crouch there and stare with all his might and main, as though he must omit no small detail of the amazing picture.

The ford was now fairly alive with moving figures, all pushing hurriedly toward the other shore, where not a German could be seen. The bushes in that quarter lay there as unassuming as though every one did not conceal a foe with ready rifle waiting for the order to come to pour in a terrific fire.

That was the picture Rod would often recall in days to come. It was stamped on his memory in imperishable colors—the bright sunlight, the hovering clouds of billowy powder smoke, the gay uniforms of the charging Frenchmen, the sombre, oppressive silence hovering over the opposite bank of the river—all these things had a part in the never-to-be-forgotten scene.

Then it seemed as though some volcano, long held in check, must have burst the confines of Nature in a mighty convulsion. From several points there came the thunderous discharge of batteries, while a thousand rifles added their sharper notes to the dreadful chorus.

And the men in the river, what of them?

Scores could be seen to throw up their arms and disappear, the current doubtless bearing them away. Others were forced to turn and start back to the shore they had so recently left, having been wounded more or less severely. Gaps appeared in the various groups, showing what terrible carnage those guns in the leading German battery had already executed.

Still the forward movement had not been as yet effectually stopped. Those who were thus far uninjured kept pushing ahead, even though they must realize that it was into the very jaws of death they advanced. And Rod found himself filled with sincere admiration for the bravery they exhibited. He had read of similar things many times, but seeing with his own eyes an exhibition of such wonderful valor was an entirely different matter.

Oh! how he hoped and prayed that in the end some of those Frenchmen might manage to reach the other shore which they aspired to gain. But when the German guns continued to roar and send torrents of iron hail into the ranks of the adventurous French it began to look very much as though not a single man might be able to accomplish the passage of the disputed ford.

Hanky Panky could stand it no longer. He rolled over and hid his face, while thrusting the forefinger of each hand as deeply into his ears as he could, evidently with the hope of shutting out all that dreadful noise.

Not so Josh, who, though very white, and trembling with excitement, still continued to stand there, drinking it all in eagerly, as one might something that was fairly intoxicating his senses.

The war drama did not last long. Under that murderous fire the French soldiers in the water fairly melted away. Some managed to return safely to the side of the stream held by their comrades, but by far the larger number seemed to have vanished. Further down the river they could be seen, some of them struggling in the water, with others floating along significantly still.

The firing had almost ceased by now, because there was no further need of wasting precious ammunition on the part of the provident Germans. The charge of the impetuous French had been stopped, and if they still meant to carry the ford they must gather what was left of their force for a second attempt.

Still, while that one battery covered the crossing it seemed madness for them to risk the annihilation of their men in another effort.

"It was a fluke, after all!" Josh was calling out in bitter disappointment; "they never had a chance to get over while that awful battery covered the ford. Oh! how I wish a part of them at least had managed to get across. Look, Rod, as I live, one lone Frenchman did succeed in crossing. You can see him crawling along in the scrub there, his red breeches betraying his every movement. Just a single one of all that brave lot, and he'll be either killed right away or made a prisoner, like as not!"

Somehow both boys found themselves compelled to watch the progress of the crawling Frenchman. He seemed only a grain of sand on the seashore compared with the mighty forces employed on both sides, and yet at that particular moment he occupied the centre of the stage in their minds. Without knowing why this should be so they continued to follow his movements with their eyes.

Then suddenly Josh broke out again. He could make himself heard because there was little if any desultory firing now; the Germans were satisfied with the execution already accomplished, while the mortified French held their fire until further plans could be settled upon.

"Rod, what do you reckon that madman means to try and do?" he asked excitedly; "see how he keeps on creeping straight along toward where that battery is hidden behind some sort of barricade. Honest to goodness, now, I believe he means to tackle the entire business all by himself; just like a Frenchman for desperate bravery. He must be crazy to think he can do anything unaided, Rod."

"Don't be too sure of that, Josh," the other told him immediately; "unless I miss my guess that man has got some project he's meaning to put through, come what will."

"Oh! now I see what you mean, Rod; yes, as sure as anything he's carrying something in his hand, and I do believe it must be a bomb that he's meaning to throw over the barricade on to that battery! It's a great scheme, Rod, but with not

one chance in ten to succeed.”

With strained eyes they watched the creeping figure with the telltale red trousers that added so greatly to his peril. Shortly afterwards Josh broke out again in what might be called a lament.

“Too bad, too bad, Rod, they’ve glimpsed him at last, just as I was afraid they’d be doing. You can see some of their sharpshooters further back are sending a rain of balls in that direction, for they make little puffs of dust fly up everywhere they strike. He’s bound to be hit in a jiffy now. Oh! see that, would you?”

There could be no question but that one or more of the plunging bullets had reached their intended mark, for the creeping soldier had rolled over as if in agony.

“He’s done for, poor chap, just as I expected!” cried the sympathizing Josh, while even Hanky Panky once more dared to lift his head and look; but almost immediately afterwards Josh changed his tune from despair to one of new hope—“no, he was only badly injured that time, and not killed, you see, because now he’s going on again. Oh! I take off my hat to that gallant man! There never lived a braver chap, never; and now I do hope he’ll get close enough up to fire that bomb he’s carrying along with him on to that battery.”

Perhaps the marksmen who were amusing themselves in trying to pick another foeman off did not realize what the French soldier really meant to do. Had they grasped the full situation a volley would surely have finished his career, and left his self-appointed mission unfulfilled.

Josh kept tabs of his movements. He even knew when again the crawling figure gave signs of having been struck once more by some of that leaden hail. This he could tell from the way in which the heroic fellow writhed as in pain.

“But, Rod, they just *can’t* keel him over, don’t you see!” cried the admiring Josh, clapping his hands in his excitement; “twice now they’ve hit him, but he won’t give up the game. Why, he has to drag that left leg after him all the while, showing where he’s been hit. Oh! what wouldn’t I give for a chance to help him out; but it’s no use; he’s just got to do it by himself!”

The seconds went on. Perhaps other eyes were following the slow and painful progress of that lone French hero as he crawled along foot by foot, suffering dreadfully no doubt with every movement, yet never for a minute dismayed. Perhaps the eyes of the French commander-in-chief may have been glued on him through his powerful glasses; and realizing what the success of the daring soldier’s mission might mean for a second assault on the defenders of the ford, his heart would begin to pick up renewed hope the closer the private crept to the battery.

There could be no question as to the unflinching spirit that dwelt in the breast of that particular soldier. Rod remembered many things he had read in ancient history, but somehow they all paled into insignificance when with his own eyes he saw this wonderful exhibition of valor unparalleled. The heroic defense of the Pass of Thermopylæ; the swimming of the Hellespont by Leander, yes, and other instances made famous in the annals of history had once struck the boy as wonders in their way, but somehow seeing things was a great deal more impressive than reading about similar happenings.

By now the French adventurer had managed to get close up to the place where the terrible offending battery was hidden. Doubtless he could see much better than the boys at a distance, and knew where it would be possible to throw his bomb so as to accomplish the maximum of damage.

“He’s nearly there, Rod, and oh! I’m scared almost out of my seven senses for fear they’ll get him before he can give that thing a whirl over. There, see, he’s trying to get up on his knees now, though it’s a hard thing for him to do, because he’s so weak from loss of blood, I reckon. Bully boy! now you’re going to take a fling, and here’s wishing you the greatest of luck!”

The brave soldier had indeed managed to raise himself part way and with all his reserve strength hurl the bomb he carried over to where the battery lay concealed.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE WINNING OF THE RIVER FORD.

Immediately there came a loud crash as the bomb exploded. The exhausted French soldier had no further strength to sustain him, for the boys saw him fall over as though he may have died in the climax of his success.

Then came the clear, piercing note of a bugle, like a clarion call. It was undoubtedly the signal for another attempt to force a passage of the river, so essential to the success of the French pursuit of the retiring German armies.

Again did a host of active figures leap into sight from the coverts where until now they had lain concealed awaiting the success or failure of the first action. These were no doubt the reserves intended to be thrown into the breach after some of the others had managed to get safely across and engaged the enemy forces. Now they were taking the initiative in pushing across the ford.

As the others had done these men also scattered when charging, so that no great collective damage might be wrought when the foe started to fire. They were speedily at the water's edge, and it was then that they anticipated meeting with that sudden avalanche of flame and smoke, and the roaring sound of many guns.

Somehow it did not come in the volume expected; in fact, while rifles and quick-firing guns started to take their toll the one offensive battery remained singularly silent.

Rod and Josh did not need to be told that the bold Frenchman must in some way have succeeded in disabling all the units of that battery when he hurled his bomb over the redoubt. Perhaps that terrific crash may have been an ammunition supply exploding and scattering the guns right and left.

No matter what the cause the battery was as still as death, a fact that must have filled the anxious heart of the French commander-in-chief with a fierce joy; for its presence there intact promised to make all his work of no avail, despite the unrivaled valor of his men.

This time the story was to be quite different, it seemed. Some of the leaders in that mad rush were already almost over, and here, there, everywhere they were trying to shoot back as they found a chance to glimpse an enemy hidden amidst the bushes on the bank of the river.

Josh could hardly contain himself. He jumped up and down “like a flea,” as Hanky Panky afterwards explained it in his peculiar fashion. Indeed, to hear Josh letting out shrieks and cries one would have imagined the whole battle of the Marne ford had been staged for his particular benefit, and that he was enjoying the lively scene with all his heart.

Now some of the Frenchmen were crawling up the bank. They found shelter, such as it was, and immediately began to make good use of their guns, aiming so as to cut down those who were rattling the quick-firing weapons not far away.

More and more came up out of the depths, some of them wounded it was true, but with undiminished ardor hurrying on. With the climax of their ambition at hand and an opportunity for a fight at close quarters with the hated enemy granted to them, why should they mind such a small thing as a bullet in the shoulder, or it might be a leg that dragged as they walked?

The fire and enthusiasm that filled their hearts prevented them from falling out of the line. Some in fact would not know they had been injured until it was all over but the cheering, and a weakness began to overcome them, with the excitement on which they had been living having passed away.

Josh was waving his hat wildly now. Despite the noise and confusion he shouted out his views. In so doing he gave the “escape valve” something to do, and likely enough worked no harm.

“And to think it’s all owing to the work of that one brave fellow!” was the burden of his outcries.

“I’m taking off my hat to *him* right now. I salute him, living or dead! His family will be proud of him when they learn what a grand thing he really did. Talk to me about the Cross of the Legion of Honor; why, that man ought to be made a general—if he lives!”

The Germans had by no means given up, even when they realized that after all the French had won the passage of the ford. They had been given the task of defending the crossing with their lives, and showed the customary German disregard for death in staying after all was lost.

But more and more French were getting over now. They came from every quarter, all filled with ardor and a desire to get in the fight over there. The guns too were being brought closer to the river, so that the retreating Germans might be shelled warmly as they left the scene of their stubborn combat.

How they splashed across that shallow place in the stream Rod would never forget. Some, getting off the main ford, found themselves in water breast-high; others actually had to swim for it, holding their guns above their heads so that they might not get wet and refuse to continue the good work of chasing off the Germans.

It was an inspiring sight—of course only to those who favored the French, for to the enemy it must have proven a most discouraging one—to see those men wild to cross to where the engagement was being fought to a finish. Each one, as soon as he could set foot on solid ground, lost no time in starting up the bank and adding his quota to the force of the assailants.

And not one single shot had come from that important battery which, more than any other contributing cause, had brought about the first disaster to the French. There could be no question but what that one unknown private soldier, perhaps now dead, had saved the day for his side.

Luckily none of the Germans seemed to have paid any attention to the little assemblage of three figures in faded khaki on that slight rise of ground. At least no annoying shell had fallen near them, nor did the boys at any time catch the irritating whine of a whimpering leaden missile hastening past close to their ears. All of which pleased Rod very much, for he certainly felt no desire to mingle in such terrible scenes as had been spread before them of late.

Well, the end was in sight, for when the French field batteries began to let go it could be easily guessed that they were sending their compliments after that remnant of the enemy now sullenly retreating, and always with faces toward the foe.

Then came the shrill blast of bugles. This undoubtedly told the French soldiers that victory had fallen to their portion, and that the winning of the Marne ford was an accomplished fact.

Loud arose the huzzas of the survivors. Succor for the injured would quickly follow, since no pursuit was expected to be organized. The work to which they had been assigned was now accomplished, and against difficulties that might have frustrated all their efforts only for the one gallant man who made victory possible.

Rod and his chums cheered with the rest. They seemed somehow to feel that their hearts beat in full sympathy for those Frenchmen who were standing up in defense of their native land.

Josh, more demonstrative than either of his companions, went so far as to actually throw his arms around Hanky Panky and give him such a bear-like hug that the other's eyes almost popped from his head and his breath came in gasps.

"Let up on that sort of business, can't you, Josh!" he managed to cry indignantly as he broke away from the other's detaining clutch; "what do you take me for anyway? Must think you're doing one of the new fangled fox-trot hesitation dances. I've got feelings, I'd have you know; and my ribs are brittle bones in the bargain, not hoop-iron. Go hunt up a tree if you must exercise yourself on something. I object!"

Standing there on the rise of ground they could see the first of the French light batteries crossing the ford, the horses prancing, but forced to drag the guns through the shallow water. Later on heavier artillery would also be coming up to follow the fleeing German army, when the full importance of this ford would be better understood. No wonder the tactics of delay upon which the Germans were working had forced them to defend such a spot to the limit.

“What are we going to do next, Rod?” asked Josh, when they had stood and watched these events taking place for some little time.

“We’ll have to hold off until they get things in ship-shape again,” replied the other; “you see there are the wounded to attend to, the dead to gather and bury, it may be, as well as a lot of other matters to be looked after. They’ll be in no hurry to chase after the enemy, I imagine. Their one object was to carry this crossing, and that they’ve done.”

“But at a terrible cost to them,” sighed Hanky Panky, as he saw the injured being carried to a central point, where doubtless the field surgeons would be on hand, ready to give them first attention; besides, there had been scores upon scores carried down the river whose fate could only be guessed at.

“That’s always what war means, I’m afraid,” remarked Rod, not that he himself was getting hardened by seeing such sights, but because he had a broader vision than Hanky Panky, and could anticipate what would follow when two hostile forces came in contact at close quarters.

“If that was Andre’s regiment that went in at the first,” observed Josh gloomily, “I’m mighty much afraid we’re going to have all our trouble for our pains; because they were almost wiped out. Andre is pretty sure to have been among those who were in the water when that battery got in its heavy work, and—well, the current carried away many a gallant fellow, never to give him up again.”

“Oh! it’s hardly as bad as that, Josh,” remonstrated Rod; “a good many managed to get back again, either wounded or whole. If we’re lucky we may find Andre among that lot. We’ll hope to, anyway; and our business will then soon be over.”

“Well, for one I hope and pray we’re able to turn our backs on this thing before another sun sets,” said Hanky Panky, with such a sad look on his face that Rod was quite sorry they had been tempted to follow up this adventure.

Still, they had risked their lives in a good cause, and if only that little French woman Jeanne and her family could be provided for in the future, despite the schemings of Jules Baggott, he for one would not feel tempted to complain on account of perils undergone and risks taken.

“Most of the French have crossed over by now, you notice, Rod,” observed

Josh, when some time had crept past, and he could hardly restrain his customary impatience any longer.

“And that means you think we should be getting a move on too?” laughed the other, trying to raise the drooping spirits of Hanky Panky by an assumption of levity which truth to tell Rod was himself far from feeling.

“Well, it seems like we must make the crossing some way or other, and while one of those gun caissons we see coming along is going to get over why not find out if they’d let us climb aboard? It’ll save us from getting our feet wet even if it did nothing else.”

“That isn’t a bad idea, Josh,” commented Rod, “and it might be just as well to try it out. These Frenchmen are pretty accommodating, and they’ll like as not take us for British boys, as has happened so many times before.”

Another troop accompanied by a battery had come up and was starting to reach the northern side of the Marne, so as to presently continue the chase after the retreating enemy. It was to the ammunition caissons belonging to this battery that Josh had referred.

The boys hurried forward now. No one thought to question their right to be present. Perhaps this was because of their looks, or the khaki suits they wore, which would be taken for British uniforms. Indeed, quite a number of those who were seated on gun carriage or ammunition chest waved to them in the hearty and friendly fashion known to soldiers after a victory has thrilled their blood, making them light-hearted and gay.

CHAPTER XXVI.

JOSH MAKES A DISCOVERY.

Rod soon fixed the transportation part of it, just as his confident chums felt sure he would be able to do. He quickly selected a certain outfit that had stopped on the border of the ford for a minute or so, while a loose portion of the harness was tightened.

Entering into conversation with the sergeant, who seemed to be in authority, Rod explained in a measure who they were and how they came to be loose on the battle lines at such a time as this.

Then he made his request, and with such simplicity, accompanied by a winning smile, that the dapper Frenchman could not have refused his modest request even had his heart not warmed toward these young friends of France from across the sea.

“We must get over the river, because it is necessary that we find Andre D’Aubrey if he is yet alive,” Rod had gone on to say ingenuously; “and since it would be unpleasant for us to continue our ride if we were soaked to the waist, perhaps M’sieu le Sergeant would permit us to climb up with him on the caisson, and accompany him over the ford?”

“Indeed, it would be a pleasure to have you along with me,” hastily replied the non-commissioned officer of the battery, “and as the harness is now repaired, make yourselves at home here, if you can find a lodgment where your feet will be out of the reach of the water.”

Gladly then did the trio of lads accept of his friendly offer. Trust them for finding a perch where they would be beyond the reach of the river, unless the soldier astride one of the horses managed to lose the shallow line of the ford and stray into the depths.

Luckily this did not happen. The water did come close to their feet so that Hanky Panky was impelled to draw himself up into something of a knot in the fear of getting wet; but the worst was over, so that presently the gun caisson emerged from the Marne, and the boys were able to jump down.

Rod looked about him. It was indeed a stirring picture taken in all, for everywhere the French had occupied the ground so tenaciously defended by the German rearguard.

Hundreds of soldiers were moving this way and that, with the officers gathering as if for a council of war.

Other batteries could be seen coming on the gallop toward the captured ford, as though the birdmen aloft may have sent the signal along to tell them that now the coast was clear they could make the passage in safety. Some of these were heavier guns than any the boys had as yet seen, showing that the French were hurrying all their available resources forward in order to strike the enemy hard while yet in retreat.

“Now what, Rod?” asked Josh.

“We’ll look around a bit so as to get our bearings,” he was told. “It’s true we came here on a mission, but perhaps it might be wise not to bother the commander-in-chief in too big a hurry. He’s certainly got his hands full as it is, and can’t be worried with our private affairs.”

“I guess that’s about so, Rod,” agreed Hanky Panky. “To us Andre’s business may seem mighty important, but why should a general waste a precious minute of his time with any one’s affairs, when he’s got to map out his movements, with a beaten but still fighting foe ahead?”

“Look there, fellows!” exclaimed Josh just then; “unless I miss my guess that must be the hero of the battle they’re fetching in right now.”

“See how the men take their caps off, will you?” said Hanky Panky reverently; “I’d feel like doing the same myself if he came near me, because it was his work that really made the passage of the ford possible. They all know it too, and just now they fairly worship that lucky chap.”

“Oh! I hope it doesn’t mean he’s dead!” exclaimed Josh with a tinge of deep regret in his voice; “that’d be too everlasting bad, you know, after he’d won his promotion, and the cross these Frenchmen prize so much.”

“No, he is still alive, because I saw him wave his hand feebly just then when he passed that group of cheering soldiers,” said Rod quickly.

“Bully for that!” exploded Josh exultantly; “somehow or other I just seem to be taking a personal interest in that brave chap, as if he might be a friend of mine, though of course I wouldn’t know him from Adam. But a thousand pair of eyes saw what he did, and the army of France knows how to honor such a hero. We must find out his name before we leave here, Rod, that’s sure.”

“I’ll not forget to ask it!” declared the other positively, “because we’ll want to write it down in our log. Whatever his name turns out to be it’s bound to go down to posterity as belonging to one of the heroes of the Battle of the Marne.”

“There,” continued Hanky Panky, “see, the general is going over himself to see the wounded man now. Why, even he takes off his military cap. It must be a proud time for the man who threw that bomb and wrecked the German battery.

He not only won the ford for his side, but like as not saved the lives of scores of his comrades.”

Rod was considering his plan of campaign.

“You can see that some of the officers are gathering under that shed yonder,” he went on to explain. “I reckon they mean to hold their council of war there, because it looks like the best shelter around. I wouldn’t be surprised if the German forces had the same places for headquarters before their retreat, because I can see a table there and some camp chairs.”

“Yes, and then, too, it seems to be out of range of the batteries that were on the other side of the river; sort of protected as it were,” Josh observed, for he was quick to notice such things.

“All right,” Rod wound up by saying; “our plan is to hang around until the war council breaks up, and then try to find a chance to speak with the commander-in-chief. All we want to do is to show him who and what we are, and then ask about Andre. He may not have the time to bother with it himself, but I hope he will put us in charge of some subordinate officer who can tell us what we want to know, as well as take us to Andre, if so be the poor fellow still lives.”

While waiting they strolled around the immediate vicinity, being considerably interested in all that was going on.

Josh in particular seemed disposed not to lose anything. He moved this way and that, now watching the labors of a string of men dragging at a rope by means of which they were helping the horses attached to a heavy gun pull the same up out of the river; and a little later even observing the field surgeon and his assistants binding up the grievous wounds of scores of poor fellows who had been more or less injured in the battle.

Rod was seated on a stump and thinking seriously of their own affairs when he suddenly became aware of the fact that his two chums were hurrying toward him. He could also see that they looked both excited and grave, as though something had happened to alarm them.

Of course the first thing that came into Rod’s mind was bad news; he feared that in some way they might have learned about the fate of Andre, and were now hurrying to tell him all their efforts had been in vain, for the husband of poor Jeanne could never sign his name to the paper they carried.

“Is he dead, then?” was the way he addressed them as they came panting up.

“Oh! it isn’t about Andre, Rod!” gasped Hanky Panky.

“What then?” questioned the other, at the same time giving a sigh of relief, for he had feared the worst.

“It’s something Josh here hit on, that’s given us both a bad shock; he’ll tell

you, Rod,” continued the other, who was trembling visibly.

“It’s just this way, you see,” Josh spoke up. “There’s a German soldier hiding close by, a wild-looking chap in the bargain. Whee! but he’s got staring eyes, and he makes me think of a crazy man.”

“Oh! he must be one of their wounded,” said Rod; “when they pulled out in such a big hurry they couldn’t take all with them, and some had to be abandoned. This fellow in hiding that you’ve run across must be hurt in the legs, and couldn’t get away with the rest.”

Josh shook his head with a vim.

“Excuse me, Rod, but I don’t think you’ve hit the real secret,” he went on to say. “This man has stayed here *for a purpose*, and he’s about ready to lose his own life, I’d say, so as to carry it out. I really and truly believe he must have a screw loose in the upper story.”

“Go on,” said Rod, seeing that Josh evidently knew more than he had as yet explained.

“I just noticed him by the merest accident,” explained the other. “He’s hiding in a hole in the ground. I happened to see him lift his head, and noticed that he wore the dark green uniform of a German soldier. Then I discovered something else, Rod, that gave me a cold feeling, and made the chills run down my back.”

“Go on, and hurry, too!” advised Rod.

“It was a wire, Rod, a wire that seemed to come up out of the ground, and disappear by the side of a tree. It headed straight for the shelter that used to be the headquarters of the German staff, and where the French officers are gathering right now, waiting for the general to join them.”

“A wire, did you say, Josh?” demanded Rod, starting up, and looking white.

“Yes, and ten chances to one there’s a mine, planted under headquarters, which he means to explode so as to blow up the French staff, general and all.”

CHAPTER XXVII.

WONDERFUL NEWS.

“If what you suspect is true, Josh,” said Rod hurriedly, “we must do something to baffle the terrible game he is bent on playing. Can you lead us to the place where the man is hiding, and is it possible to get close to him without his knowing about our being there?”

“Sure thing, Rod; why, I could have jumped down on his back if I’d wanted to; but I just moved away as slick as you please.”

On second thoughts, however, Rod changed his plan. What he had contemplated trying seemed too risky; for if the man learned that his plot was discovered he might touch the key and explode the mine before the boys could master him, even though all the staff including the general himself had not gathered as yet under the Headquarters shelter.

“I’ll try and get in touch with the officers before the council is called,” he told his comrades, and immediately started off.

It was an object with Rod to hasten his steps, and yet at the same time try not to arouse any suspicion. If he were detained on the way precious seconds would be lost, and after all he might fail to save the French officers from a dreadful fate at the hands of a crazy German soldier.

Arriving close to the shelter of which mention has been made, Rod boldly singled out a man who he fancied would be apt to listen to him.

“Pardon, Monsieur,” he said hastily, “but by accident myself and friends have just learned that there is a scheme afoot to blow up this shelter while you and your brave fellow officers are in conference. Even now a madman lies hidden close by, his finger on a battery, and ready to close the circuit in haste. I am come to give you warning. Please do not exhibit any alarm, but arrange it so that every one may spring away from this place when you give the word!”

The officer stared hard at him, as indeed he had good reason to. The information was certainly of a thrilling nature, and well calculated to arouse a chill in the region of his heart.

Again that frank and fearless face of Rod convinced his listener of the truth of his story, even though it seemed so remarkable and monstrous. The officer turned to his four companions and said something to them in a low but positive

tone. From their startled looks it was soon evident that they chose to take the warning most seriously.

All at once he uttered a loud cry. It was the signal agreed upon, for every man proceeded to leap away from the shelter and make haste to place as many yards as possible between Headquarters and his own person. Rod had taken care to be on his way before this, since his object had already been accomplished.

If any of those French officers had felt disposed to doubt the truth of the astounding story that had been brought to them by the American boy they found immediate cause to change their minds. Hardly had the last of them succeeded in leaving the shelter than there came a heavy shock, and up into the air arose the fragments of the cover under which they had just been gathered.

Had they remained where they were ten seconds before not one of them would have likely escaped death or severe bodily injuries.

A loud shout from Josh just then called attention to a running figure. The hidden conspirator, seeing that his mad scheme had proven a failure, must have crept forth from his hiding place, and was hoping to escape in the general confusion. But his uniform betrayed him, and presently guns began to sound, until finally they saw him curl up on the ground.

It was later on found that he had only been wounded, and he was brought in, foaming at the mouth. There could be no doubt regarding his condition, for even a tyro might see that he was crazy, perhaps from a wound received in the head in some earlier stage of the great battle.

It was not believed that German officers would connive at such a dastardly scheme as trying to blow up a shelter under which the French staff had gathered for consultation; and in the end it was put down as only the plot of one who was wholly irresponsible.

Of course the three American boys were thanked most heartily by the officers whose lives they had saved. It promised to turn out to be one of the best things that could have happened for them; and, as Josh remarked, their old luck seemed to be working at full speed.

They were soon summoned into the presence of the general, who, with his staff gathered about him, publicly thanked Rod and his chums for their recent act. He shook their hands with considerable feeling, as became an effusive Frenchman whose life was not only valuable to himself and his beloved country in time of need, but also to the wife and children who awaited news of his labors at home, and daily prayed for his safety.

While they stood there the madman was brought past, screaming and carrying on in a frightful manner. He must have been connected with the Engineer or Signal Corps of the enemy forces, to have the knowledge of explosives that he

did, as well as the ability to lay his wires so as not to attract attention.

The boys could admire any deed of daring that was meant to further the cause of a soldier's heart; but to plot to blow up a whole staff in such a treacherous way was something that could only originate in a disordered mind, and filled them with horror.

"Now tell me who you are, and what brings you here at such a time, when France is bleeding from ten thousand wounds, and Paris has only been saved as through a miracle?"

It was, of course, the general who asked this. He was looking into the expressive face of Rod while speaking, and perhaps unconsciously saying to himself that if his oldest boy ever grew up to be such a manly looking young fellow as this American cousin he would be contented; for that was usually the way Rod impressed those whom he met.

Rod was just about to answer and explain as briefly as possible, for he knew how valuable time must be with this brave officer, when something interrupted him.

A number of men were passing and carrying a stretcher upon which lay one of their number. Rod guessed that this must be the hero of the battle when he saw every officer make a salute that could only stand for his appreciation toward valor beyond all parallel.

"That's the man who threw the bomb that saved the ford!" said Josh to Hanky Panky, as the little procession drew near.

Evidently the wounded man had received attention at the hands of the field surgeon, and was now about to be placed in an ambulance and taken to Paris with an escort of honor to guard him. Nothing could be too good for him in the opinion of those who had observed his daring deed.

The general laid his hand on Rod's arm.

"Come," he said kindly, "it seems that you too witnessed the wonderful feat performed by this hero of heroes. Perhaps you would be glad to say you had taken his hand when you return to your native country. I am pleased to say he will undoubtedly live to receive the honors that a grateful France is ready to shower on his head."

"Thank you, Monsieur le General," said Rod warmly; "I speak for my comrades as well when I say we would esteem it an honor to meet him; and we also hope and pray he may live to see victory come to France."

Accompanying the general, they advanced toward the party with the stretcher. The attendants had halted at a signal from the commander-in-chief, and set their burden down. Rod saw the face of the man who had dared all to save his fellows. Somehow it seemed to him that somewhere or other he must have met him

before, although for the life of him Rod could not imagine how that could be.

“This, then, is the one man whose act made the taking of the ford possible,” said the French general; “and when you remember what this day you have witnessed, always place high on the roll of fame the honored name of Andre D’Aubrey, to whom we who have fought the battle for the ford owe all our success!”

“What! *our* Andre, and a hero of heroes at that!” cried Josh, able to grasp the amazing fact, even if much that the general had said was as Greek to him; “now what do you think of that, Hanky Panky?”

As for the party in question, he could only stare and shake his head as though utterly unable to understand what it meant.

Rod suddenly remembered why the face of the man on the stretcher had seemed so familiar. When Jeanne told him all about her troubles he had been looking at the small boy who accompanied her on her milk route with the dog team; and it was Andre’s son whose face was in his mind when he stared at the father, for the lad was certainly “a chip off the old block.”

Things could hardly have turned out better for the three Motorcycle Boys. Why, not only would Andre have witnesses when he signed the document, but high honors awaited him after he had recovered from his wounds. Jeanne in her far-distant, humble home in Antwerp must soon hear great tidings that would bring her much joy.

No wonder then that Rod hastened to pour out the story in his best French.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

When the main facts of the story had been told the impulsive and gallant French general insisted that the paper be signed, with him and members of his staff as witnesses. He also declared that he would see to it that the family of Andre should be brought on to Paris with as little delay as possible; because it was expected that sooner or later the Germans would decide to take Antwerp.

All this filled Rod and his chums with the greatest of pleasure. The wounded man was looking exceedingly happy, for the news he had just received concerning his loved ones filled him with more delight than even the prospect of receiving great military honors, and possibly being made a captain on account of his recent feat.

Nor was this all, it seemed. While Rod was relating his story he had noticed that a man who was not in uniform had approached, and seemed to be listening intently. Thinking that he might be some one who desired to make a report to the general, Rod had paid little attention to this unknown party. Judge of his astonishment and delight as well when the other pushed forward, making a respectful salute to the commander-in-chief, and announced his identity.

"Behold in me the villain of the piece," he remarked grimly; "I am Jules Baggott, the cousin who plotted to keep Andre from receiving the inheritance our uncle had planned to give him. With shame I confess it now, but, my general, never again would I be guilty of conspiring against a member of my family who has won for it and for France such imperishable renown. I, too, saw what Andre did, and even though I had the power to destroy that paper at this minute I would scorn to do so. Here and now I beg his forgiveness. His wife and family have reason to be proud of him, even as we are."

Rod never knew whether Jules meant all he said. He did not altogether like the man's looks; but his words were fair enough, and he acted as though for once in his life he was thoroughly ashamed of himself.

It turned out that Jules could not serve as a soldier on account of lacking the sight in one of his eyes; so there was really nothing to his discredit in his absence from the army. In reality he had become a member of the Secret Service, and doubtless would find a means in that capacity to do his part in the long war that

faced France.

Of course the general could not give them any more of his valuable time. He did shake hands all around again at parting, and assured Rod that he would take a personal interest in seeing that Andre and his family were speedily reunited in Paris. With that the boys believed they had good reason to feel satisfied; and that they could conscientiously give over their adventurous and perilous journey to the battle front where the two rival armies were fighting so desperately day after day.

Hanky Panky in particular displayed considerable delight at the prospect of once more turning their faces toward home. He had, to tell the truth, become weary of all these pictures of savage warfare, and yearned to again gaze upon peaceful scenes such as the country beyond the sea held in store for them. Faces of his boyhood friends were appearing before him in his dreams every single night, and too the loved ones left behind had never seemed one half so precious as now.

“This fighting business may be all very well for those who like it,” Hanky Panky was saying as they prepared to cross the ford again, this time on the ambulance that would take Andre, as well as several other wounded men, to the hospitals of Paris, “but I’m not much of a hand at that game. Baseball and football are the limit of my scrapping abilities. This thing of standing up before a quick-firing battery, and getting punched all full of holes, doesn’t appeal to me at all, though Josh here seems to never get enough of watching men shoot each other down.”

“Oh! say, don’t make me out to be a regular *savage*,” remonstrated Josh, in turn; “I feel just as bad as the next one to see a man get hurt; but my folks came of a line of soldiers, I guess, because some of ’em fought in the Revolutionary War; so it must be in my blood to want to see stirring sights all the time. Now, I wouldn’t be caught attending a bull fight, or even watching two roosters scrap, because that makes me sick; but when men are standing up and sacrificing their lives for love of their country it somehow just thrills me to the marrow, and I never can drag myself away. But all the same I confess I’ll be glad to get back home again. There are plenty of ways to get excitement without being on the battle line.”

They took a last look around them, wishing to carry away a full remembrance of the scene at the captured ford. How often would every item of that never-to-be-forgotten engagement come back to haunt them in memory, as time passed, and they found themselves amidst other surroundings. In the bellowing of the thunder they might start up in bed to again fancy themselves listening to the roar of the guns on both sides of the Marne; in imagination to see the valiant French

as they splashed through the breast-high waters, seeking to reach the bank where the grim Germans held the fort, and poured such a merciless fire upon them.

So they crossed the river again, dryshod, and hastened to where they had secreted their precious motorcycles. According to Rod they would possibly be able to make the French capital before night had fully set in; but even though delayed on the road this could easily be accomplished on the morrow.

Then, after getting a little rest, they would strike out for Havre or Boulogne, and take passage across on the first boat that could give them any sort of accommodations; for in the rush of American tourists to get home people were even willing to sleep in the steerage in order to quit the inhospitable shores of Europe in flames.

“Take your last look back, fellows,” said Rod, after they had said good-bye to Andre and recovered their machines.

They stood on a slight eminence from which they could see the river and the French forces beyond. Apparently the council of war had been of brief duration, and must have settled on starting in pursuit of the fleeing German rearguard, for already the troops were in motion, with batteries hastening along the road taken by the enemy.

“Good luck to you all!” said Josh, waving his hat toward the Frenchmen, whom they had come to regard highly; “and here’s wishing that when the end of the war comes it will bring glory to France; for her noble sons deserve everything that is good. And now, Rod, say the word, and we’ll make our getaway from here.”

“Then here goes!” called out the leader, as he straddled his machine and started his engine.

With a succession of popping reports he was off, Hanky Panky quickly following suit, and Josh bringing up the rear. Thus they started toward Paris, with high hopes of getting to the French capital before long, and then continuing their journey to the coast.

Whether they succeeded in escaping any more thrilling perils or not while in the country of the Great War does not concern us just now; all that can be left to another story at some future date. They had played a manly part in taking up the cause of the poor little woman in Antwerp, and believed they would never be sorry on account of having decided to search for Andre on the battle line before Paris.

THE END.

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