

The BOY SCOUTS *on* WAR TRAILS *in* BELGIUM



By
HERBERT CARTER

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“Close in on all sides and keep them well covered, boys!” said Thad.

“Faster! Thad, squeeze a little more speed out of the poor old thing.”

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THE BOY SCOUTS On War Trails In Belgium

OR

Caught Between Hostile Armies

By HERBERT CARTER

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"The Boy Scouts First Campfire," "The Boy
Scouts in the Blue Ridge," "The Boy Scouts
on the Trail," "The Boy Scouts in the
Maine Woods," "The Boy Scouts
Through the Big Timber,"
"The Boy Scouts in the
Rockies," "The Boy
Scouts Along the
Susquehanna."
Etc.,

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THE BOY SCOUTS ON WAR TRAILS IN BELGIUM.

CHAPTER I.

THE NEWS THAT REACHED THE RHINE.

“It strikes me Allan’s a pretty long time coming with those letters, Thad.”

“Oh! perhaps he’s struck some exciting news worth picking up; you know he’s a correspondent for a newspaper at home in the good old United States, and must always be on the lookout for happenings. Have a little more patience, Bumpus.”

“But you see I didn’t sleep ten winks last night, Thad. After our lovely quiet trip down the Rhine by boat from Mainz this place seemed just as noisy as any boiler factory.”

“No wonder, Bumpus, with trains pouring in from the east and north, every one loaded down with German first-line troops, field artillery, cavalry horses, aeroplane supplies, and all sorts of war toggery.”

“Yes, but, Giraffe, I took notice that *you* slept like a top through it all, just as if we were camping again in the Maine woods, or down in that Louisiana swamp where we had such a roaring good time.”

The boy who answered to the peculiar nick-name of “Giraffe” laughed when the stout, auburn-haired member of the trio, known as Bumpus Hawtree, made this assertion.

“Oh! I’ve got it down to a fine point, Bumpus,” he remarked with a touch of boyish pride in his voice; “I’ve found out how to make mind win over matter. When I lay me down to sleep I just tell myself to forget all troubles; and after counting a hundred sheep jumping over a fence I lose myself the finest way you ever saw. Try it yourself, Bumpus, and see how it works.”

“As a rule I don’t have any trouble getting my forty winks, and you know that, Giraffe,” the fat boy continued, sadly; “but just now I’m terribly worried about

my mother back there in Antwerp. Whatever would she do if this war does break out, so helpless to get away by herself, because of that paralysis she's trying to have cured by a specialist?"

"We've given you our promise, Bumpus," said the one called Thad, "that we'd stick by you through thick and thin, and do everything in our power to get to Antwerp. So cherk up and try to feel that it's all going to come out right in the end."

"Thad, a scout never had a better chum than you've always been to me," Bumpus acknowledged, with a trace of tears in his eyes, as he laid his hand on the other's khaki sleeve; "and I'm going to do my level best to see the silver lining of the cloud. But it's tough being hemmed in by a whole army like we are, and given to understand that it's impossible to enter Belgium again until the skies clear."

These three boys who wore the well-known uniform of scouts were seated in a boat that had apparently been used as a means for descending the historic Rhine.

Thad Brewster was the leader of the patrol to which the others belonged. It was known as the Silver Fox, and formed a part of Cranford Troop. He had worked his way up until his field of experience was so broad that it entitled him to take the place of the regular scout master of the troop when the latter could not accompany the boys on their outings.

Giraffe was really known to his teachers in school as Conrad Stedman. His ancestors had come from this same Rhine country long ago, and as the boy had made a specialty of German in school he was able to jabber fairly well during their trip down the beautiful river. Giraffe came by his nick-name honestly. He had been given an abnormally long neck by a bountiful Nature, and on occasion it seemed as if the boy could even stretch this out to an astonishing extent, just as the giraffe does. He never complained because every one of his mates called him by such a name, for if it hadn't been that he must surely have been dubbed "Rubber-neck," which would have been infinitely worse.

Bumpus Hawtree also had another more dignified name, that of Cornelius Jasper, but it was utterly unknown among his comrades. Whether on the baseball field, in camp, on the trail, in a boat, or any other place where boys might gather it was always plain Bumpus. No one knew exactly why that peculiar name had

been given to the fat boy, except that being clumsy he was always stumbling into trouble, and given to bumping against his chums.

These boys, with some others connected with the Cranford Troop of scouts, had seen considerable in the way of adventure since the first day they organized their Silver Fox Patrol. Wonderful opportunities had come to them whereby they were allowed to visit the Blue Ridge country down in North Carolina; go to the Maine woods on an outing; cross the continent to the great Rockies and enjoy a hunt for big game in the wilderness; and even take a trip down into the Sunny South, where amidst the swamps of Louisiana they had encountered numerous remarkable adventures.

No matter what difficulties beset them, Thad Brewster and his chums had always met emergencies as became true-hearted scouts, and as a rule managed to emerge from the encounter in triumph. Earlier in the same summer that we see them so far away from their home town of Cranford they had been concerned in a wonderful hunt for a valuable missing paper that took them along the banks of the Susquehanna River, and brought them in contact with a number of thrilling happenings, all of which have been fully described in the volume preceding this.

Bumpus Hawtree's father was the president of the bank, and known to be a wealthy man. The boy's mother had suffered from a paralytic stroke, and urged to go abroad to be treated by an eminent specialist, this trip had suddenly been thrust upon the chums.

Circumstances having arisen whereby Mr. Hawtree could not leave his business, he had entrusted the care of the invalid to Bumpus, and even agreed to stand for half of the expense of having his three comrades accompany him.

Thad and Allan Hollister had long hoped to some day take a boat trip down the Rhine, and when they learned that Bumpus was going this fever had attacked them more furiously than ever. Then came Giraffe with the suggestion that he join with them, making a party of four.

It proved to be an irresistible temptation. If Mrs. Hawtree had to remain for a month or so at the sanitarium of the specialist in Antwerp what was to hinder the four chums from carrying out their cherished scheme?

At that time there seemed to be no cloud on the sky of European politics. Servia had indeed put a match under the magazine when some scoundrel assassinated

the heir to the Austrian throne, and the Dual Monarchy was demanding redress; but nearly every one supposed it would end in Serbia backing completely down, and doing whatever her big neighbor insisted upon.

So the trip had been made, the invalid left comfortably in the Belgian city on the Scheldt, after which the quartette of wide-awake American boys hurried across to the German city of Mainz, where they managed to hire a boat that would answer their purposes.

This was fixed up the best way possible for cruising, and they had taken their own good time drifting down the beautiful Rhine. At night when away from any city or town the boys would proceed to camp just as though they were over in America, and navigating the waters of the Mississippi or the Susquehanna.

It would perhaps take a book to tell of the many interesting things they saw and experienced while on this voyage along the German waterway. The task would be a most pleasant one, too; but there are too many more stirring scenes lying ahead of Thad and his friends and awaiting our immediate attention to linger here.

Bumpus had been greatly worried of late. The reports had grown more and more serious the nearer they approached Cologne, and evidences multiplied that went to tell them the great German nation was taking no chances of a sudden invasion from the French border.

They had seen trainloads of soldiers all sweeping toward the west and south. Heavy traction engines had been noticed moving slowly along country roads, and drawing enormous guns behind them. Thousands of motor trucks, each also loaded to the limit with men in helmets, had been seen scurrying along.

All these things pointed to a growing fear that some terrible calamity was impending over poor Europe, so that possibly the long talked of World's War might be nearer than most people across the Atlantic dreamed of.

To comfort Bumpus, Thad had solemnly promised him that no matter what happened they would do everything in their power to forge ahead and reach Antwerp. When he made that brotherly promise Thad could not have foreseen one-tenth of the tremendous difficulties that would have to be surmounted before it could ever be carried into execution; but once it was given he had such a tenacious will that the leader of the Silver Fox Patrol was bound to try and keep

his word.

Their other comrade, Allan Hollister, had gone into the city for any mail that might be awaiting their arrival at Cologne. Sitting there with the magnificent twin spires of the famous cathedral in plain sight, the others were impatiently awaiting his return.

It may have been ten minutes after the little talk occurred with which this chapter opens that a boy was discovered hurrying toward the boat. From the fact of his wearing a khaki suit like the ones Thad and his other two chums sported, it could be set down for granted that this must be Allan Hollister.

As he drew nearer, all of them could see that his face was grave. This gave Bumpus a new pang, for he feared he would never be able to make the journey across Belgium, and join his invalid mother, who would be waiting for him in Antwerp.

Allan silently handed each of them some mail, but after a glance at his Thad voiced the feelings of his other two allies when he said:

“You’re bringing us bad news, Allan; it’s written on your face, and there’s no use keeping it back any longer. What’s happened?”

Allan was the second in control of the patrol, a good woodsman, and a stout-hearted scout. He braced himself with an effort, and after drawing a big breath went on to tell them the thrilling news he had heard when getting the mail.

“The war is on—German armies have crossed the frontier into Belgium—King Albert has refused to let them pass through his country, and there is a terrible battle being fought at Liége, with thousands of men killed and wounded on both sides. The whole of Germany and Austria have flamed up, and it’s going to be a fight to the death with the biggest nations of Europe on the battle line!”

CHAPTER II.

A BOLD UNDERTAKING.

No one said anything immediately. Bumpus had turned very white, and a pained expression crept across his round face, seldom seen there.

“My poor mother!” they heard him mutter, as he stared over into the mysterious west, in the direction where Antwerp was supposed to lie, with part of Germany and the whole of Belgium between.

Under ordinary conditions there would have been only one way out of the scrape for the four chums. This would have been to make as rapid a retreat as they could, passing further into Germany, and managing by some good fortune to get over into Holland where at Amsterdam they might secure passage to London by steamer.

Thad would have laid out their campaign along those lines only for his sacred promise to poor Bumpus, who being very set in his way might have attempted the task of getting to the Belgian city by himself, and of course making an utter failure of it, because Bumpus never did many things right.

“So, the worst has come, after all,” said Thad, presently; “and the torch has been put to the powder magazine that will blow up pretty much all Europe before the end is reached.”

“Will Great Britain fight, do you think, Thad?” asked Giraffe, in somewhat of an awed voice for one so bold as he had usually proved himself.

“That’s to be seen,” replied the other, gravely; “but we know that France and Russia will fly to arms, and I don’t see how England can keep out of it. You know she has sworn to maintain the neutrality of Belgium even by force of arms if necessary. If the German army is over the border that settles it, I’m afraid.”

“Whew! but there will be a fierce old row!” declared Giraffe; “and just to think of our being over here at such a wonderful time. Mebbe we won’t have lots to tell Step Hen, Davy Jones, Smithy, Bob White, and the rest of the fellows when we get back home again.”

“Yes, when we do!” echoed Bumpus, dolefully.

“Here, cheer up, Bumpus; don’t look like you’d lost your last friend,” the boy with the long neck told him. “Remember what Thad said about our hanging to you all the way through, don’t you? Well, it still goes. Even the whole German army can’t keep us from getting over into Belgium, and hiking for old Antwerp. We’ll pull up there sooner or later in pretty fair shape, and smuggle Ma Hawtree across the Channel to England’s shores, mark my words if we don’t.”

Thad and Allan both said something along the same lines. Perhaps they may not have felt quite so sanguine as Giraffe, but that did not prevent them from trying to bolster up the sagging courage of Bumpus.

Of course the latter began to show immediate signs of renewed hope. How could it be otherwise when he had the backing of such loyal chums?

“But what can we do when the whole country is just swarming with soldiers, all heading in the direction of the border?” Bumpus wanted to know. “We’ve got our passports, I admit, but in time of war they wouldn’t be worth the paper they’re written on. And, Thad, no common person can ride on one of the trains these days, I’m sure.”

“Yes, that’s right, Bumpus,” the other admitted, “and in making up our plans we must omit travel in the regular way.”

“The border is something like forty miles away from here, I should say,” suggested Allan, who had of course looked the thing up on the map.

“There’s the Netherlands a bit closer,” Thad explained, “if we chose to cross over the line; but we might find it hard to get into Belgium that way. One thing sure, we must be on the move to-day.”

“Do you mean we’ll hoof it, Thad?” demanded Giraffe, who, being a good walker, evidently did not see any particular difficulty about managing twenty to thirty miles a day over good summer roads.

With Bumpus it was quite another matter, and he held his breath while waiting to hear what the patrol leader had to say.

“If we have to we might make it,” Thad presently returned, as though he had considered the matter himself at some previous time. “Then who knows but what we might be lucky enough to run across some man owning a car, who would either rent it to us or give us a lift to the border.”

“But, Thad,” objected Allan, “you know what we heard about all cars? As soon as the order for mobilization went out it was flashed from the Russian border to Alsace and Lorraine, and from that minute every car worth owning in the entire German country would be the property of the Government. Why, if we owned even an American-made car right now it would be taken away from us, to be paid for by the military authorities. I’m afraid it’s going to be a case of shank’s mare with us.”

“Let it,” said Thad; “we’ve got to make a start inside of an hour or so!”

That was the prompt way in which most of the matters engineered by Thad Brewster were put through. Somehow his manner of saying it thrilled the others, for there could be seen a new grim look come into their faces. Even the woe-begone countenance of Bumpus took on fresh hope.

“Do you really mean that we’re going to start out into the west, Thad?” he asked, with glistening eyes.

“Just what we’ll do, Bumpus!” he was told with a reassuring smile on the part of the patrol leader such as always carried fresh cheer to anxious hearts.

“How about getting rid of the boat that’s carried us down the Rhine so splendidly?” questioned Giraffe.

“That’s already been arranged for,” was what the other told him; “all we have to do is to hand it over to that boat builder, and get his receipt for the same. We have paid the last thaler we owe, and there’s no reason why we can’t leave our duffle here with the same man, to be sent for later on when the war is over and railroads are taking on freight again for America.”

“It sounds good to me,” said Giraffe. “I’d hate to lose a few things I brought along to make myself comfortable with—the red blanket, for instance, that’s

been with me on so many camping trips. I hope there's a good chance of seeing our stuff again some fine day."

"Well, talking isn't going to help us any, so what do you say we get busy?" suggested Thad; and as the others were all agreeable they soon made quick work with packing up their belongings, so they could be left in charge of the owner of the boatyard on the outskirts of the city.

All the while they worked the boys could hear a thousand and one sounds connected with the feverish rush of military trains crossing bridges, and starting off anew toward the Belgian border at three points beyond the mobilizing centre of Aachen or, as it was once called, Aix la Chappelle, almost due west by south from Cologne.

When the hour was up they had accomplished all the preliminaries looking to the start on foot across German territory. The owner of the boatyard doubtless wondered what they meant to do, for he asked a number of curious questions. Still he readily agreed to store their packages until such time as he received instructions how to ship the same to America, accompanied by a tidy little sum to pay his charges.

"If you asked my opinion," remarked Giraffe, after they had left the place and started off, "I'd say that old chap didn't wholly believe the story we told. Right now he may think we're really a party of British Boy Scouts, over here in the land of the Kaiser to learn some of the garrison secrets, so in case of an invasion later on the beefeaters would know where the weak places in the defences are."

"Do you think he would go to the trouble to inform some of the military authorities of his suspicions, and get them after us?" asked Bumpus, looking concerned, as well he might, for every delay promised to make his task of rejoining his ailing mother more difficult.

"Let's hope not," said Thad; "but these Germans certainly do have the greatest secret service ever known. They get their news in a thousand ways, I've heard; and this war is going to give the world the biggest surprise it ever had."

When Thad made that remark he little knew what wonderful things were fated to come to light connected with the spy system of Germany, which would prove to be the most elaborate ever conceived by any nation, modern or otherwise.

“Next to Americans, they’re the most wonderful people under the sun!” boldly declared Giraffe, whose ancestors had lived along that same Rhine river, so that he could not help but feel very kindly toward the whole Teuton race.

There was Bumpus who was on the other side of the fence, for the Hawtrees came of good old English stock. Hence he and Giraffe often had friendly little tilts, each standing up for the land from which his ancestors sprang. That little remark about the “beefeaters” was meant as a sort of sly slur at Bumpus by the boy with the long neck, though for once it failed to arouse any comment.

Having been compelled to pass the city in order to find the boatyard to which they had been directed, the boys were on the northern side of Cologne at the time they began their long tramp. Little did they dream what amazing incidents were fated to fall to their portion before that journey came to an end. It would have thrilled them through and through could they have guessed even one-half of the hardships and the adventures that awaited them on their bold undertaking.

With small bundles thrown over their shoulders after the manner of scouts’ knapsacks, they left the river behind them and faced the west.

“We’ve enjoyed meeting you, Old Father Rhine,” said Giraffe, waving his hand toward the stream as though he looked on it as a very good friend, “and we’ll always keep a little corner of our memory sacred to this glorious trip; but we’ve got something to handle now that’s a heap more serious than just loafing in a pleasure boat, and eating three square meals a day.”

“First of all,” said Thad, “we might pin the little miniature American flags we brought with us to our coat lapels. Then folks can see that we are Yankees, and not Britishers.”

“But we haven’t run across much bad feeling for the English among the Germans,” Bumpus ventured to say.

“Huh! wait and see what happens if Great Britain dares to take up the challenge the Kaiser’s thrown down when he crossed the Belgian border,” asserted Giraffe. “The first shot a British man-o’-war takes at a German vessel and it’s going to be unsafe to talk in English over here. You’ll even have to change that snore of yours, Bumpus, and give it a Dutch twist. Now if your name was only Gottlieb you’d pass for a native easy enough, with your red face and round figure.”

Thus chatting they made their way along the road leading away from the city to the cathedral. Many persons they chanced to meet gave them a respectful salute, no doubt at first thinking they might belong to one of the German troops of Boy Scouts so common all over the empire. When they glimpsed those tiny flags which the four lads so proudly wore, their eyebrows went up and they were noticed to say things in an undertone, one to another.

On several occasions Thad thought it best for them to step off the road and settle down in some fence corner, or under a shed it might be. Each of these times there passed a company of soldiers hurrying toward the city, and evidently making for a mobilization point so that they might occupy a place previously arranged for in the grand concentration scheme of the nation's army.

These delays were not numerous, but they served to hold the boys up more or less, so that by the time noon came they had not covered more than three miles of territory beyond the suburbs of Cologne.

"There's a ramshackle old car stalled over yonder," Thad announced about this time, "and I propose that we see if anything can be done to hire or buy it. All good cars are seized by the military on sight, but they'd pass such a wreck by. If we find we can repair it, and can get even five miles an hour out of the machine, it'd be our policy to commandeer it, if our pocketbook will stand the strain."

CHAPTER III.

GIRAFFE MAKES A BARGAIN.

“That’s the stuff, Thad,” declared Bumpus, enthusiastically.

No one considered this an odd remark for the stout boy to make, because they knew from past experience that he was not an ardent pedestrian. Bumpus was not built for action along those lines; he “het up” too easily, as he was fond of explaining, and even now could be seen mopping his perspiring brow with his bandanna handkerchief.

The man with the disabled car was so busily engaged that he did not notice the approach of the four chums until they reached the spot. Apparently he was about ready to give it up as a bad job, for he scratched his head helplessly, and had a look of utter chagrin on his face as he turned toward them.

Thad had previously asked Giraffe to conduct the negotiations, using his best German to produce results.

The man was apparently some small tradesman in one of the towns so thickly scattered about that region. He stared hard at the boys, understanding immediately that they had a foreign look. Still the Rhine country attracted many thousands of pilgrims each year, and myriads of honest people helped out their living by what the tourists left behind them; so he must have been used to seeing strangers.

Perhaps the news that had reached his ears concerning the breaking out of war may have been the cause of his puzzled look.

While Giraffe engaged him in conversation, the others took a look at the engine of the car. Both Thad and Allan had a fair smattering of mechanical knowledge, and it did not take them long to size the situation up, as the latter termed it.

“An old rattlebox, sure enough, Thad,” observed Allan, knowing that the owner could not very well understand what he was saying.

“I’ve seen a few worse machines, but I believe I could count them on the fingers of one hand,” the patrol leader admitted.

“It’s easy to see what the matter is, though the man doesn’t seem to know,” was what Allan remarked next.

“Yes, and so far as that goes it can be remedied without a great amount of time and trouble,” continued Thad.

“Would it pay us to make an offer for the discard?” asked Bumpus, anxious to have a little say in the matter.

The other two exchanged looks.

“Let’s take another squint at the thing before we decide,” remarked Thad.

“Agreed,” his chum added. “I never did like to buy a pig in a poke, as they used to say.”

Once more they examined the engine, and then took a look at each of the pretty well-used tires. Meanwhile Giraffe had exhausted his vocabulary, and both he and the old German owner of the stranded car stood and watched what the others were doing.

Bumpus bustled around like a busy beaver. From the way he poked his head under the hood of the machine, touched this part of the machinery and then that, one would have thought he might be an experienced mechanic; and yet what Bumpus did not know about such things would fill many volumes. But then it pleased him to look wise.

“Did you ask him if he cared to sell the old trap, Giraffe?” questioned Thad.

“Yes,” the other scout replied, “I put it up to him, and he told me he didn’t care if he did, providing he could get his price, and that it was in cash.”

“The cash part we could meet easily enough,” continued the scout leader, “but I’d want to know what sort of a price he means to put on the wreck. It’s of little

use to him as it stands, for he can't do a thing with it."

"I told him so," said Giraffe, "and that if we chose to buy the car it would only be to have a little fun out of it, and then throw the old tub in the discard."

"It's only fit for the scrap heap," ventured Bumpus, pompously.

"Well, get him to set a price on it, spot cash, and if it's too high we'll step out with shank's mare again," Thad told the negotiator.

Accordingly Giraffe brushed up his high-school German and set to work. The man listened to what he was saying, nodding his head meanwhile. His eyes had a cunning look in them Thad thought, that seemed to tell of covetousness.

"Whew!" they heard Giraffe say in an explosive way, after the other had committed himself.

"What is his lowest figure in cash?" asked Thad.

"He nearly took my breath away," declared the other; "actually asks five hundred marks for an old trap like this!"

"It's highway robbery, that's what!" commented Bumpus, in dismay.

"He says all the decent cars are being taken over by the military authorities," continued Giraffe; "and that this sort of machine is the only kind that it's safe to own."

"Well, so far as that goes he's right," admitted Allan.

"Yes, but he couldn't get twenty-five dollars for the tub if he put it up at auction!" Bumpus asserted, just as though he were an authority on all such subjects; "and here he asks a plump hundred for the bunch of scrap iron."

All the same Bumpus kept an eager eye fastened on Thad, as though he were in hopes the patrol leader might yet find some way to negotiate a deal; for Bumpus would a thousand times rather travel in the slowest and most uncertain car ever known than to walk.

"Offer him two hundred marks cash down," said Thad; "and that's a heap more

than it's worth. The balance is for the accommodation. We'll likely throw it away after we've used it a bit."

"All right, just as you say, Thad," remarked Giraffe, and turning to the German owner of the car he started in once more to dicker.

He had hardly gotten part-way through his speech before the others saw a broad smile appear on the red face of the man, who began to nod his head eagerly. At the same time he thrust out his hand toward Thad.

"What d'ye think of that, boys!" exclaimed Giraffe, apparently both surprised and disgusted; "he snapped me up like a flash. Two hundred marks it is, Thad, and the trap is ours for keeps."

"Oh! why didn't we set it at a hundred," groaned Bumpus; "a fine lot of traders we are, I think. No David Harums in this bunch. We're easy marks."

"Yes, two hundred of them," chuckled Allan.

Thad meanwhile, fearful lest the man might change his mind, counted out some bills and handed them over to Giraffe.

"Write out a receipt in German, Giraffe, and have him sign the same before you give him the money," he told the go-between.

This Giraffe soon did, and the man signed it without hesitation. Then clutching the money, he said something to Giraffe, nodded his head several times to the rest of the boys, and hurried away.

Somehow his actions, coupled with the way he glanced back over his shoulder several times caused the four scouts to look at each other in surprise.

"What do you think he means to do, now he's got the money?" Bumpus asked.

"Oh! put for home and hide it away in a stocking, most likely," Allan laughingly remarked.

"He acted as if he was afraid we'd repent, and want the money back," suggested the patrol leader. "That price was about twice as much as the rattle-trap is worth, you see."

“You don’t think he’s hurrying off to get into town and report that there are suspicious characters on the road who talk English, and may be spies from across the Channel?” ventured Giraffe, uneasily.

“Worse than that, it may be,” said Bumpus mysteriously.

“Explain what you mean, then,” demanded Giraffe.

“Mebbe he *stole* the car somewhere,” suggested the other, “and before we know it we’ll be hauled up for the job.”

The thought was far from pleasant. In the present disturbed state of the Rhine country any one who did not have the stamp of the Fatherland on his face and in his tongue was apt to fare harshly if placed under a cloud by any circumstances.

“Well, the sooner we get busy and fix up our new purchase the better, I should say, no matter where the man got it,” Allan went on to remark.

Thad thought the idea so good that, taking off his coat, he started in to working at the engine. He had enough experience to know what was wrong, and how to go about fixing the defect, with Allan at his back to give occasional bits of advice which helped out considerably.

Bumpus and Giraffe hovered around. They could not be of any material assistance, and did not want to get in the way so as to delay things. So they talked matters over, and every now and then would step closer to see how the workers might be getting along.

“I only hope she holds out till we’re safe over the border, don’t you, Giraffe?” remarked the fat boy, fanning himself with his hat, for the August day was pretty warm, and there did not happen to be a breath of wind blowing at the time.

“Yes,” replied the tall scout, “because once we get beyond where the fighting is we can move around without being held under suspicion.”

“There, Thad seems to be fixing things up, and I do believe he’s going to try the engine to see if it works!” exclaimed Bumpus.

It took several efforts to get the result Thad was after, but all at once the loud thumping told that he had succeeded.

“Hurrah!” cried Bumpus, showing signs of excitement.

“All aboard!” exclaimed Thad.

Fortunately the car happened to be headed in the direction they wished to go, so there was no necessity for turning, which might not have been an easy task. All of them soon stowed themselves away in the body of the car, though it required some crowding, due principally to the fact that one of their number took up enough space for two ordinary fellows. Of course that was not the fault of poor Bumpus, who was willing to squeeze himself into as small a cavity as he possibly could.

When Thad started the car they actually found themselves moving along at what seemed to be a fair rate of speed, after their recent slow progress afoot.

Bumpus almost held his breath for a short time. He acted as though he feared he must be dreaming, and that he would presently awaken to a bitter disappointment.

After they had actually covered a full mile, and the machine was still moving ahead, Bumpus could restrain his exultation no longer.

“Ha! this is the life!” he exclaimed with a broad smile on his happy face. “A fellow would be a fool to walk when he could sit here in his own private car and whirl along the highway at this dizzy pace of five miles an hour. Thad, that was a dandy idea of yours about buying the wreck; and Giraffe, I want to give you great credit for doing the bargaining. Here we are headed for Belgium in fine shape, and with our cares yet to come.”

Being boys, and with abounding spirits, they did not believe in crossing bridges before they came to them. So while unaware of what the uncertain future might hold for them they did not mean to worry. It was enough, as Bumpus said, that the present looked sunny, with not a cloud on the horizon.

In that jolly frame of mind they started to do the next mile with slightly increased speed, as the engine “got its second wind,” as Giraffe called it.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BLOCKED WAY TO THE BORDER.

They passed over a second and even a third mile without having any trouble. Now and then they overtook or met people on the road but although the natives stared at seeing four boys in khaki riding in that dilapidated old car they did not offer to molest them.

Thad knew, however, that they had a rocky road to travel, for many times they must run up against soldiers, who would not be apt to let things pass so easily.

“We’re coming to a bridge ahead there, that spans the river,” he told the other three presently.

“I wonder will it be guarded,” remarked Giraffe; “I’ve heard so much about the wonderful way every little thing has been mapped out in case of war being declared by Germany, that I reckon each man, young and old, knows just what his part is to be, and has rushed off to do it the first thing when the news came.”

“Yes,” added Thad, “we were told that the older men of the Landstrum would stay at home and guard bridges, water plants, Zeppelin sheds, gun factories and all such places. And unless my eyes deceive me I caught the glint of the sun on steel at that bridge right now.”

“Yes, that’s a fact, Thad; I see soldiers, and they’re watching us come on,” Allan observed, with a tinge of disappointment in his voice.

It was with more or less anxiety then that the scouts approached the bridge.

“I don’t suppose it would be wise to risk rushing it!” said Bumpus, and the idea of such a thing was so ridiculous that Giraffe laughed aloud.

“Just imagine us bearing down on the guard in this wheezy old trap!” he

exclaimed; “why, old Don Quixote on Rosenante wouldn’t be a circumstance to us. He fought windmills, and we’d have to tackle German soldiers armed with guns. Well, our only chance would be to *scare* them nearly to death, so they’d be unable to shoot.”

“We’ll not think of taking any such risk,” said Thad, severely, though of course he knew very well Giraffe was only joking.

With many a groan the car was brought to a stand at the bridge. Three middle-aged men in uniform stepped up, and one who seemed to be a non-commissioned officer addressed them in German.

Of course it devolved on Giraffe to do the honors, and so he proceeded to tell just who they were, how they came to be on the Rhine, and how necessary it was that they get back to Antwerp so as to take the sick lady away.

All this had been arranged between Giraffe and Thad beforehand; and possibly the former had practiced his speech at a previous time, so that there might be no hitch.

Meanwhile Bumpus was waiting and listening, hoping for the best. The gruff old German soldier looked at their passports, and then at the little American flag which each one of them had fastened to the lapel of his khaki coat.

He shook his head, and it was in the negative, Bumpus noticed, with a spasm in the region of his heart.

Then followed some more conversation between Giraffe and the soldier; after which the former turned to his comrades with a look of pain on his long face.

“He says we’ve got to turn and go back to Cologne again, boys,” Giraffe informed them. “He has his orders to not let a single person cross the bridge who doesn’t live around here, and is known.”

“But we are Americans, and he might have some consideration for us,” complained Allan, though he knew just as well as anything, from the severe look of the soldier, that talking would be useless.

“It makes no difference,” Giraffe said, “orders are orders with him. I really believe if the Kaiser himself should come along he’d have to go back again. He

says we might as well give over our foolish scheme of getting across the border into Belgium, now that war has been declared, and the fighting is going on.”

Poor Bumpus looked heart-broken.

“Then we’ll have to give up this beautiful car, and just when we were getting so used to it, too,” he fretted, as though that were the worst and most cruel blow of all.

Thad knew it was folly to think of trying to swerve that old man, who had an iron jaw, and may have been with the army many years ago when Paris was taken and France humbled.

“Well, we must make out we’re going to do what he suggests, anyway,” he said, in a low tone to the others.

Then he began to manoeuvre so as to make the turn. It required some dexterity, for the old car did not respond to the wheel very readily. In the end, however, the turn was negotiated successfully, without any accident. Bumpus had been clutching the side nearest him as though fearful lest they might be precipitated down the embankment into the river.

It was with despondent faces that the boys started back along the road which they had so recently traveled in such high spirits. Bumpus, however, believed that things were not utterly hopeless. He had caught the words spoken by Thad, and to his mind they could have but one meaning.

“Do we give up the ship at the first storm, Thad?” he asked plaintively.

“We have to make a show of doing what they ordered, you know,” explained the pilot at the wheel; “but I noticed on that little map I bought in Mainz that there’s another good road leading to that Belgian border. We can try that and see what luck we have.”

“Was that it about a mile back, leading off to the right as we came along?” asked Allan, quickly, showing that he, too, had kept his eyes about him, as every wide-awake scout should at all times.

“Yes,” Thad told him.

“And you mean to take it, do you, Thad?” demanded Bumpus, oh! so eagerly.

“We can make the try, and see what happens,” he was told. “Of course, if every bridge and culvert on the road has its guard, we’ll not be apt to get very far before we’re hauled up again.”

“Well, let’s all hope that if that happens it’ll be a man without that iron jaw, and one who might listen to reason,” Giraffe ventured, for he was feeling badly over the utter failure of his attempted negotiations with the guard.

They rode on in silence for a short time, and then Allan cried:

“There’s your road ahead, Thad; and we’ve lost sight of the bridge long ago, so they couldn’t see us dodging into the same. There are some people coming along, but they’ll not notice what we’re doing.”

“I hope you haven’t changed your mind, Thad?” remarked Bumpus, anxiously.

“Certainly not, Bumpus,” he was informed, and that satisfied the stout chum, for he sank back again into his place with a grunt.

It turned out that the second road was almost as good as the other, a fact that caused the boys to congratulate themselves more than once.

“They certain sure do know how to make roads over here in the Rhine country,” Giraffe declared; “fact is, they do about everything in a thorough way that makes a Yankee sit up and take notice. No slip-shod business will answer with these Germans.”

“Yes, they even turn you back when your passport is O. K., and you’ve got rights they ought to respect; they’re thorough all right, but it’s too much red tape to suit me,” Bumpus complained.

“No kicking yet awhile, Bumpus,” Giraffe warned him; “you notice that we’re still on the move, and headed for the upper corner of Belgium’s border. If we’ve got any decent sort of luck at all we ought to make the raffle.”

“I’m afraid we’re coming to some sort of town,” Thad told them, “and as there’s no way of turning out here we’ll have to take our chances.”

“I did see a side road back a piece,” remarked Allan.

“Yes, and running to the northwest in the bargain,” added Giraffe.

“That would mean if it kept on straight it would finally bring up at the Holland border, wouldn’t it?” Bumpus wanted to know.

“I don’t suppose we’re twenty miles away from Holland right now,” said Allan.

“If we had to come to it, would you try to get across the line there, Thad?” asked the stout boy, and when he was told that “half a loaf would be a lot better than no bread,” he seemed to be satisfied that all was not lost.

As they proceeded the evidences of a town ahead of them became more and more evident. Neat houses, each with its well kept garden, could be seen on both sides of the road. Women and children, many of them wearing wooden shoes, stared at the car as it wheezed past, bearing the four boys.

Doubtless the sight of their khaki uniforms caused a general belief that they must in some way be attached to the army, for several boys ventured to give them a salute, which the pilgrims hastened to return in every instance.

“Even the kids over here have got the military spirit born in ’em,” remarked Bumpus, after a very small specimen had waved his hand in real soldierly fashion.

They were now entering the town, though it could hardly be called by so pretentious a name, since there was really but the one main street running through it, with others cutting across.

“Too bad!” they heard Thad say; “but we’re going to be held up again.”

Several soldiers stepped out in the road. One seemed to be an officer, from his uniform, though he did not carry a sword. He held up his hand in the manner of an autocrat who must be obeyed, and of course Thad stopped the car just before coming to the little squad. The other three soldiers carried guns, and with such an array of weapons it would certainly have been the height of folly for the boys to think of running the gantlet.

To the surprise of Thad, the officer spoke in excellent English. Perhaps he had at

some time been stationed in England, or else in the United States, though that did not necessarily follow, as undoubtedly many Germans were proficient in other languages.

“You must turn back!” he said, severely; “I do not know that I would be exceeding my authority if I ordered your detention under arrest.”

“But we are American tourists, as our passports will show you, sir,” Thad explained; “and all we want to do is to leave the country. One of my comrades here has an invalid mother in Antwerp and he is wild to get to her, so he can take her back home to America. Surely you will not want to keep us here against our will, where we would be a burden on you, and with four more mouths to fill?”

“It is sad,” said the officer, with a shrug of his shoulders, “but now that war has been declared, and we do not know what will befall the Fatherland, we must do many things that would never happen in times of peace. So while I am sorry for the boy with the sick mother, it must not interfere with my orders, which were that no one should be allowed to pass on toward the Belgian border unless he showed proof that he was in the service of the Central Government.”

“I am sorry to hear you say that, sir,” Thad told him.

“There is still more,” continued the other, sternly; “this is the second warning you have had to turn back. We received word by telephone from the bridge to look out for four American boys in scout uniforms. Be careful how you risk a third offence, for I fear it would result in your being thrown into prison. And remember, it is a long way from the country of the Rhine to your Washington.”

What he said gave the four chums a cold feeling. They knew he meant that no matter how innocent of any intention to do wrong they might claim to be, if they persisted in breaking the rules laid down by the German Government for war times, why they must take the consequences, which could not be very pleasant.

All of those castles in the air which Bumpus had been conjuring up during their short ride now came tumbling in ruins to the ground.

“I guess we’ll have to give it up, fellows,” he groaned, “and take our medicine the best way we can. We’ve tried our hardest to get out of this beastly country; and no one can blame us for not succeeding. But I hate to think of my poor sick mother over there, waiting and waiting for me to come to help her, that’s what!”

CHAPTER V. AT THE FERRY.

“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again!”

Giraffe was one of those fellows with a disposition very much like a rubber ball; when crushed down by some sudden disappointment he would come up again on the rebound.

“Here’s that other road!” remarked Thad; “and do you see any one following after us, to watch, and find out what we do?”

“Nope, coast clear back here,” said Bumpus, nearly bursting a blood vessel in his endeavor to look.

Thereupon the pilot deliberately disobeyed the orders of the officer stationed in the town. He turned into the side road, and thus gave positive evidence of an intention to once more try to run the blockade. At the same time Thad understood what risks he was taking; only there may arise situations that demand radical cures, unless one means to lay down meekly and submit to Fate.

Bumpus began to show signs of renewed interest.

“It may be a case of two strikes, and then a swat over the fence for a home run, Thad!” he announced, after they had gotten well started along the new trail, which did not seem to be built along the same order as those other roads, though not at all bad in that dry season of the year, early August.

“Let’s hope so,” replied the pilot. “From the way this road runs we’ll have to give up all notion of getting across the line into Belgium. We’ll be lucky if we can make it Holland.”

“Well, along here where a tongue of Holland runs down between Germany and

Belgium,” explained Allan, who had looked up these things on the map, “and which is a part of the Limberg country, it isn’t over twelve or fourteen miles across. There’s one place at the Holland town of Sittard where the gap can’t be much more than four miles, so you see how easy it would be for us to run across that neck, and land in Belgium.”

“With this lightning car,” observed Giraffe, “we’d hit the border, give one grand splurge, and then bring up on Belgian soil.”

“Limberg, you said, didn’t you, Allan?” remarked Bumpus; “I guess I know now where that strong cheese comes from. I only hope we don’t strike any factories on the way. It always makes me feel faint, you know.”

“Huh!” snorted Giraffe, the taint of German blood coming to the surface, “that’s because some people don’t know a good thing when they strike it.”

“Well, Giraffe, you ought to be glad then that I don’t, because sometimes you complain of my appetite, as if I could help being always hungry.”

“Thad, of course we’re bound to strike that river again, if we keep on heading into the northwest?” suggested Allan.

“Yes, for it runs into Holland on its way to the sea far above where we hope to cross,” admitted the other.

“This doesn’t seem to be a very important road, for we haven’t come across a single soul on it so far,” Allan suggested, significantly.

“And from the marks of wheels I’d be inclined to believe few vehicles ever come this way,” continued the patrol leader; “but what makes you say that, Allan?”

“Oh! I was only wondering if it really kept on to the river, or turned back after a bit,” the other explained.

“That is, you hardly think such a road would deserve a bridge, which must be a pretty costly proposition, the way they build them over here, to last for centuries; is that it, Allan?”

“Yes, you’ve struck it to a fraction, Thad. Now, supposing there should only be a

ford for a crossing, we couldn't take this car over."

"Certainly not," came the ready reply; "but the fact that so many cars travel the roads of Germany in these modern days makes me feel pretty sure there will be some kind of way for getting over the river, even without a bridge."

"Do you mean by a ferry?" asked Giraffe.

"More than likely," he was told, "but we're going to know right away, for I had a little glimpse of the river through those trees back there. We ought to be there in a jiffy."

A "jiffy" might mean almost anything, but with that slow car it stood for more than five minutes. Then Allan heard Giraffe, who had abnormal vision, give an ejaculation that had a smack of satisfaction about it.

"It's a ferry, I guess, Thad!" said the tall scout, who had that neck of his stretched to an enormous extent that gave him a great advantage over his comrades.

"What makes you say so?" asked Bumpus, who could see absolutely nothing as yet.

"I notice a rope stretched across the river," Giraffe told him, "and yes, there's some sort of a barge or float up at the landing on this side."

Allan just then announced that he, too, could see what Giraffe was trying to describe, and there could be no doubt about its being a ferry.

"Here's luck!" cried Bumpus, puffing out with new expectations.

"Let's hope they haven't gone and stuck a soldier alongside the ferryman so as to keep him straight!" grunted Giraffe; "and, Thad, I suppose I'll have to do the interpreter act again, if the chap doesn't talk United States?"

"We depend on you for that, Giraffe," he was told.

The road led directly down to the edge of the water. There was some sort of landing there at which the ferryboat put up. It allowed the traveler who had a vehicle of any sort to pass directly from the shore on to the deck of the monitor

which was used for a ferryboat.

No one was in sight when they first arrived.

“If he doesn’t show up couldn’t we take charge of the boat and run her across to the other side?” Bumpus was asking, as though about ready to try anything once.

“Toot your horn, Thad, and see if it’ll wake him up,” Allan suggested. “There’s so little to do on his lay that p’raps the ferryman takes a nap between trips.”

“That’s a good idea,” assented Thad, and accordingly he used the auto horn to some advantage, making certain doleful sounds that were easily calculated to awaken any sound sleeper.

Immediately a man appeared in view. He may have been taking a nap for all they ever knew. He was an old fellow wearing wooden shoes and a knit cap. As he approached the car he seemed to look them over curiously. Probably it was seldom indeed that any one outside of the natives came his way.

“See him take in our little American flags, will you?” remarked Bumpus, while Giraffe entered into a labored conversation with the ferryman; “he must know what they stand for, too, because I could see his eyes light up when he first noticed the same.”

Giraffe at that moment turned to them.

“Yes, you’re right about that, Bumpus,” he said; “this man says he has a son and his family out in Cincinnati, and wants to know if we’ve ever met Hans Kreitzner. I told him I wasn’t quite sure, because there were some people in America I’d never yet run across, though I hoped to round them all up later on.”

“Don’t josh the poor old fellow, Giraffe,” urged Bumpus; “as for me, I’m so glad because we haven’t run across a pesky military guard here at the ferry I’d be willing almost to promise to look his son up when I got back home—by mail, of course, and tell him I’d met his respected paw.”

“How about taking us on his ferryboat, Giraffe?” asked Thad.

“I hope he hasn’t got his strict orders, like all the rest of the men we’ve run across to-day,” ventured Allan.

Giraffe nodded his head in a way that stood for hope.

“Seems to be all right, fellows,” he assured them. “Old Hans here has agreed to set us over on the other side. Perhaps when I promised to double his fee it made him jump after the silver hook more nimbly.”

“Yes, there he goes now to get his ropes unfastened,” said Bumpus. “Whew! from the way he’s tied the old batteau up I should think he hadn’t had a passenger all this day. He’s as slow as molasses in winter, and that can’t be beaten.”

Giraffe looked at the speaker and grinned. When Bumpus called anything “slow” it must move about as tediously as an ice wagon, or one of those enormous German guns drawn over the hard roads by a powerful traction engine.

“Let me crawl out first, Thad,” the fat boy remarked, “if you’re meaning to move the car aboard the ferryboat.”

“Bumpus is afraid of you, Thad!” cried Giraffe; “he thinks you may make a slip and dump the whole business over the side of the boat; and Bumpus doesn’t care to go in swimming with his suit on. If it should shrink when he tried to dry it, whatever would he do for another?”

All the same, Giraffe himself was not averse to leaving the little old car while Thad was taking it carefully aboard the flatboat used as a ferry, showing that he might be just as guilty as Bumpus.

“Well, now!” exclaimed the fat scout on noticing that even Allan joined them, “seems like we might all be in the same boat, doesn’t it?”

“We expect to be, right away,” Giraffe told him, calmly.

Thad did not let the car play any trick. He soon had it aboard the ferry, and about as well balanced as any one could have accomplished. The old man had just about finished undoing the last rope, and in another minute they might expect to find themselves moving out toward the opposite shore, by means of the pulley fastened to the rope above, and the long stout pole which was intended for pushing in the shallow water.

“Thad, there’s somebody coming on a gallop up there!” announced Giraffe just

then; “and I do believe it’s a mounted soldier in the bargain!”

“Oh! thunder!” gurgled Bumpus, almost collapsing; “that’s always the way things go. We get just so far, and then the string pulls us back again.”

“Don’t let on that you see him,” said Thad, quickly. “The old man is pretty deaf I should say from the way you shouted at him, Giraffe. He doesn’t hear the man calling. Now, if he is so busy pushing off that he fails to look up, we ought to be half way out in the stream before that horse gets down to the bank.”

“He’s coming with a rush, I tell you!” said Giraffe, who had better opportunities for seeing than any of the others, so that it did appear as though at times it paid to have a neck that would stretch.

The ferryman had now thrown off the last rope and was stooping down to take hold of the setting pole. Another minute or so would decide the question.

Bumpus was so worked up that he could not keep still. As usual, he advanced some wild idea, for while not as a rule fertile in expedients there were times when it seemed as though that slow brain of the stout boy worked furiously.

“There, hang the luck, fellows, the ferryman has seen him!” burst out Bumpus, in the deepest disgust; “he’s going to wait up for the soldier, and take him aboard.”

“Our cake will be dough,” added Giraffe, gloomily, “if it happens that the man on horseback comes from the town where we got turned back, and orders us to go back with him, to be shut up in a German dungeon. I’ve heard a lot about what terrible nasty places those fortress prisons are, but I never thought I’d be in danger of finding out for myself.”

“Do we have to give in so tamely as all that?” asked Bumpus, with a spurt of spirit that would have become a warrior; “suppose now he does try to browbeat us, ought four husky scouts from good old America get down and kiss the shoes of just one bullying German soldier, because he wears a helmet on his head. Thad, it’s up to you to say the word, and we’ll all jump on him!”

“Don’t be so rash, Bumpus!” Giraffe warned him, while Thad said:

“We’ll wait and see what happens before we lay plans that must make every man of the Kaiser’s army our enemy. Here he comes now. Every one keep a still tongue in his head but Giraffe; and while about it let’s hide these little flags. If he asks who we are tell him the truth, though, remember, Giraffe!”

CHAPTER VI.

SCOUT TACTICS.

The horseman was now coming down the bank. Already he seemed to eye the four passengers aboard the ferryboat, as though they interested him more or less.

“Giraffe,” muttered Thad.

“What is it?” asked the other, in a whisper.

“You might take occasion to ask the ferryman while we’re crossing, whether we can strike the road leading north to Grevenbroich, after getting over. Get that name, do you?”

“Yes, and I’ll do it as a sort of blind,” continued the other; “he’ll naturally believe we’re meaning to put up there instead of heading across country.”

The man was undoubtedly a soldier, but Thad came to the conclusion that he must now be on some important mission rather than simply riding to a concentration camp. In fact, he soon decided in his own mind the other might be a dispatch-bearer, for he noticed what seemed to be a small leather pouch partly hidden under his long coat.

They were soon moving across the stream. The man had dismounted before leading his horse aboard the craft, since the animal showed positive signs of not liking the ill-smelling old car. None of the scouts blamed the intelligent animal either, for the mingled odor of gasoline and burnt grease was anything but pleasant; although they believed that “beggars should never be choosers,” and that it was bad luck to “look a gift horse in the mouth.”

Giraffe did not forget his instructions. When they were about half-way across he spoke to the old ferryman, and apparently asked for directions about the way to the town mentioned by Thad, for he plainly said “Grevenbroich.”

The man with the setting pole answered him, and even pointed several times in a northwesterly direction, as though assuring him that the place mentioned lay in that quarter.

As though regretting one thing he had done, Thad took out the miniature Stars and Stripes and fastened the little flag to his coat again. He realized that the man would readily guess they were not Germans, and it was better that he know their nationality than to suspect them of being English.

He looked sharply at the emblem, and his heavy eyebrows went up, but he did not say a single word to indicate what he may have thought.

The boys were only too well satisfied that matters should be as they were. They had feared something much worse, and that the soldier would order them to turn back again.

“What did he say about Grevenbroich, Giraffe?” Thad asked, so that the horseman could plainly hear him mention that name.

“Oh! it lies off there some ways,” said the other, also pointing.

“How can it be reached from this road?” further inquired the scout leader.

Giraffe shrugged his shoulders. It was a new habit he had picked up since coming abroad, for over there on the Continent nearly every one depends on contortions of the facial muscles, and movements with the hands and shoulders to add emphasis to what they say, or else take the place of words.

“I couldn’t understand all he said, you know, Thad,” he explained, with a broad grin, “because he speaks such terrible German, not at all like our teachers gave us at school. But as near as I could make out, this road comes to a place inside of a mile or so where it branches in three different directions.”

“Well, now,” said Bumpus, “you wouldn’t dream it was of so much importance.”

“One road runs southwest to the city of Duren, where the railroad from Cologne goes, and where all the soldiers are pouring through on the way to Belgium. Then another runs almost north, and lands you at Grevenbroich; while the third keeps on until it strikes the border at the Holland town of Sittard.”

“Gravenbroich is the place for us!” said Thad, meaning to ring the changes on that particular name until it had become impressed on the mind of the listening soldier who must naturally believe they were headed thither.

They believed they had deceived him when the landing was made, for after paying the ferryman he sprang on his horse and galloped away, never once looking back over his shoulder.

Thad willingly handed the man the sum agreed on, and the old fellow was very polite, making sure that everything was secure before allowing them to get the car off the float.

“That was what I call luck,” said Giraffe, as they lost sight of the river and the queer ferry.

“Soon we ought to come to the three forks of the road,” announced Allan; “when we must decide whether we want to go to Duren, Grevenbroich or the Dutch border.”

“As if there could be any doubt which we’d choose,” observed Bumpus.

A short time later and they found themselves drawing near the split in the road. Just why there should be so many feeders for so ordinary a road none of them could understand; they simply found it so, and acted accordingly.

“Of course we strike out over the middle one, Thad?” Giraffe remarked; “but I say, what’s going to happen, now that you’ve pulled up here at the forks?”

“Wait for me a minute, while I take a look and see which way our friend with the horse went,” the other told him.

“Thad never forgets he’s a Boy Scout, and able to find things out in a way that would never occur to any ordinary fellow,” said Allan, not without a touch of genuine admiration in his tone; for he realized, much to his regret, that there were times when the same could not be said of him, skillful tracker that he was, as all Maine boys are supposed to be.

The three of them sat there in the car and watched Thad. Apparently he had not the slightest trouble in finding what he was looking for, since the hoofs of the horse had left plain imprints on the dusty road.

“He’s turned up the road that leads to Duren, all right, as sure as anything!” announced Giraffe, after they had seen Thad pass along that way for a short distance.

“That means a good riddance of bad rubbish,” laughingly remarked Allan.

When a minute later Thad returned he looked satisfied.

“He started on that way, and so far as I tracked him he kept right along, so it looks as if we might be well rid of him,” he reported.

“Guess all that talk about Grevenbroich told on him,” insinuated Bumpus, proudly, as though the idea had originated with him, and he felt that the credit should come his way also.

They had just started off and gone about a hundred yards when Giraffe was heard to snort in disgust.

“Played a neat game on us after all!” he exclaimed; “we’re a fine lot of babes in the woods to let a German soldier bamboozle us in that way. Look over yonder and you can just manage to glimpse him through little openings in the trees.”

“Oh! he’s galloping off in the direction of Duren!” cried Bumpus; “and I warrant you after going along that road a piece he came back on the side, to hide, and was there watching us all the while.”

Thad shook his head as though he did not like the situation.

“You see,” he explained, “if he had any suspicion before about us, it must have doubled when he saw me following his tracks, and then watched us come along this road. He knows now all that talk about Grevenbroich was hot air, and that we’re making for the Dutch border.”

“Yes, and going lickety-split at that!” added Giraffe, contemptuously, as the engine emitted several sounds as closely approaching groans of protest as any inanimate object could produce.

“Well, what’s to be done about it?” asked Bumpus, uneasily, looking behind him, as though half anticipating seeing a squad of Uhlans with their bedecked lances chasing headlong after the suspicious car.

“Nothing,” replied Thad. “All we can do is to keep pushing on, trusting both to luck and our sagacity to pull us through.”

“There’s one comfort about it, boys,” Allan told them; “every rod we cover means we’re just that much nearer safety. If we can only get within a mile or so of the border, and the cranky old motor holds out we’ll give them all the laugh, even if it means a hot chase at the end.”

“I wonder if the old tub would be equal to showing a clean pair of heels if you hit up the pace for all it was worth,” questioned Giraffe. “I’d be afraid we’d all go up in a cloud of smoke and fire. These sort of machines are always balking or else exploding.”

“Oh! now you’re just saying that to bother me, Giraffe,” complained Bumpus; “but I’ve got too much confidence in our pilot to be afraid of trouble. It may stop on us, that’d be the worst that could happen.”

“Now you notice we’re coming to a place where it’s well settled, for you can see fields on every side, and gardens, too. Yonder are some women and boys getting in the harvest; and here comes an old man, his cart loaded down with some kind of roots or potatoes. I hope there isn’t a town ahead of us, where we’d find that the officer had telephoned about us.”

It was Giraffe who said this. When making out to be tormenting Bumpus he was evidently only voicing his own fears.

“No, the road chart shows no place worth mentioning along this section,” Thad assured them; “but you know the soil here is something like that in Holland, and very rich. Westphalia and Rhenish Prussia are the garden spots of Germany, so we’ll see plenty of farms and grain fields.”

Indeed, as they passed along they saw people working in the fields on every side, but it was always the same, not a single stalwart young man, only boys, women and very old men. The rest had all obeyed the call to the colors, and were already either fighting at the front, or else in concentration camps, preparing for the time when they would be needed to fill awful gaps in the ranks.

All at once the engine stopped short.

“That’s what I call a low-down trick!” said Giraffe, as Thad sprang out to throw

back the hood so as to take a look, and see what was wrong this time.

“Oh! we must expect something like that to happen every little while,” he was told by Allan; “it’s a poor arrangement at the best, and pretty well worn out in the bargain. But we agreed to make the best of it, and so what’s the use of knocking?”

The three of them sat there for a little while, as Thad pottered at the refractory machinery. Then Allan jumped out to assist him, saying that “two heads might be better than one,” as often proved to be the case.

“Wake me up when you’ve found out the trouble, and rectified the same,” said Giraffe, pretending to stretch himself out over the seat, and make ready for a nap.

Just about three minutes later he had reason to change his mind. It was Bumpus who did it, and if Giraffe suddenly started up it was not because the other had been malicious enough to thrust a pin into his leg.

“Say, looky here what’s bearing down on us, Thad, will you?” the fat scout had called out, and Giraffe was up on his feet like a flash.

As he turned and looked back he saw something that was not apt to make him feel happy, to say the least. Along the road came a swarm of women, boys and old men. They must have been recruited from the fields near by, for they were carrying all manner of pitchforks and such tools that looked dangerous when held in the hands of aroused tillers of the soil.

Whether the people of the farming country could have received word concerning the four boys in the old car, and meant to effect their arrest; or mistook them for some other parties who may have been disturbing the peace in that section of the country, Thad and his chums were fated never to learn.

It was quite enough for them to know just then a threatening cloud had appeared above the horizon, and that unless they could fortunately get a quick start out of that particular neighborhood they stood a good chance of finding themselves warmly beset.

CHAPTER VII.

DODGING TROUBLE.

“Gee whiz!” burst out Giraffe, of course using his favorite expression to denote his great astonishment; “why, they must be running to interview us, fellows! And say, I don’t just like the way they’re hollering one single bit. They even act as if they might be real mad!”

“Same old story,” mumbled Bumpus, sinking back into his seat with a look of sudden misery on his round face; “out of the frying pan into the fire. Hardly off with one trouble before we’re taking on a new one! What’s the end going to be, I’d like to know?”

“Thad, how’s it coming on?” asked practical Allan, as he once more leaned over the hard-working mechanic, ready to lend a helping hand if possible, though only one could properly work at a time.

“I think I’m getting it straight now,” came the quick response that gave Giraffe fresh cheer.

“But it’ll be too late in another five minutes,” declared Bumpus, trying to figure just how long it might take that oncoming crowd of German country people to arrive on the scene.

“Less than that, Bumpus,” said Giraffe, better used to judging distances; “three would be the limit. Are we intending to haul off and try to defend ourselves, or do we just throw up our hands and tell ’em we surrender? They’re mostly women and old men, which accounts for ’em not getting over ground faster.”

“Yes, but such women!” echoed Bumpus; “every one looks like a regular Amazon, because they’re so used to working in the fields. Besides, I don’t like the way they handle those pitchforks they’ve been using to handle the hay with.

It makes goose-flesh come up all over just to think of having the tines of a pitchfork stuck into me. Guess we'd better call it off, and be good if they surround us."

"It may all be a mistake, after all," said Allan.

"Don't see how that could turn out," grumbled Giraffe.

"These honest people may be taking us for some other boys who have been pestering the life out of them," Allan hastened to explain.

"Hope they find out the truth then before they start to prodding us with those old forks!" Bumpus breathed.

Then silence fell upon them. Thad was working furiously, while the other three held their breath in suspense, mingled faintly with the hope that died hard.

The oncoming crowd was now quite close. Their appearance became even more awe-inspiring as they drew nearer the scene; and their loud, angry cries did not soothe the nerves of the anxious scouts.

Bumpus was even fumbling in one of his pockets with the idea of taking out a supposed-to-be white handkerchief, and waving it, to indicate that they did not mean to resist the coming onslaught.

Just then Thad gave a cry.

"Oh! have you got it, Thad?" gasped Bumpus.

For answer the patrol leader slammed down the engine hood, and seizing hold of the crank gave it a whirl. There was no response! Bumpus groaned fearfully.

"All is lost!" he exclaimed in abject despair.

Thad made a second try, but with the same disappointing result. This time Giraffe sank back in his seat, a look of resignation on his angular face. Two bad turns was apparently his limit.

It proved fortunate that Thad was not constituted that way. He had known engines to require as many as half a dozen trials before they consented to be

good and turn over. So Thad went at it again, with even more energy than before.

What a thrill passed over them all when with a roar the engine started in to make the old car quiver from end to end. Bumpus and Giraffe could not restrain their pent-up enthusiasm; their recent scare only added to the vim with which they gave a shout.

Thad made a leap into the front seat of the car. Allan had already settled down to do the honors temporarily, for every second counted with that mob not thirty feet away. If the car was stalled five seconds longer it would be all up with the scouts.

Nothing so bad as that happened, for away they went with a jump, amidst the angry cries of the disappointed crowd. The country people did not mean to give up without further effort, for most of them continued to run. They must have seen that the car was an old and ramshackle one, and cherished hopes that they might yet overtake it.

Giraffe stood up and waved his campaign hat excitedly as he cheered in the good old American way.

“Bully for the machine!” was the burden of his cry; “she’s actually doing her little five miles an hour, perhaps even more. Say, this is getting too reckless for my blood. I forgot to take out any life insurance, Thad, before starting on this break-neck trip. Be careful, please, and don’t spill us out!”

Soon they saw the last of their pursuers, and the road seemed to be clear in front. The boys of course began to chatter concerning this latest happening, trying to figure out what had caused this sudden and mysterious feeling of enmity on the part of the workers in the harvest fields. In the end, however, they had to give it up as an unsolved puzzle; nor did they ever learn the facts, since they came to that part of the German Fatherland no more.

Allan consulted the little road chart which, before they started down the Rhine on their wonderful cruise, had been purchased in Mentz, principally to know the nature of the many sights that were to be met with along the historic banks of that famous river.

“As near as I can make out, this is where we are right now, Thad,” he mentioned, making a pencil mark on the paper. “I know it from many reasons, and one of

them is that fine old Dutch windmill we just passed on the knoll. It's marked here, you can see, as if it had some historic connections."

"You're right about that part of it, Allan," said the scout leader after taking a quick glance at the chart, for his attention was needed at the wheel, since the progress of the car was inclined to be erratic; in fact, as Giraffe had several times declared, "she did not mind her helm very well, which made their course a zigzag one."

"Well, how much further do we have to go before we get to the Dutch line?" Bumpus asked, with more or less concern; for every two minutes he had kept twisting around, almost putting his neck out of joint, with the idea of making sure that they were not being pursued.

"I'm figuring what course we'll have to take in order to avoid several German towns that are marked here," returned Allan.

"That's right, we have no use for even the cleanest towns agoing just now," ventured Giraffe, "though I'm getting pretty hungry, to tell you the truth."

"That's cruel of you, mentioning it," spluttered Bumpus, "when I've been fighting all the while to forget that I've got an awful aching void inside of me that's wanting to be filled the worst kind. But how far do we have to go, Allan?"

"Not more than five miles more," came the answer.

"That sounds encouraging, I must say," remarked Thad; "if the cranky old thing holds out another half hour we might be on the border; and once across, our troubles will be done with for awhile anyhow."

"Then she must be making all of *ten* miles an hour, Thad!" exclaimed Giraffe, pretending to be greatly excited; "why, I can feel my hair beginning to stand up with the nervous strain! It's the nearest approach to flying I ever expected to meet up with. If we have an accident when going like the wind they'll have to collect us in baskets. I'm going to hold on to Bumpus here, let me tell you!"

"What for?" demanded the fat scout, suspiciously.

"Oh! nothing much, only sometimes it's a mighty fine thing to have a good buffer when you meet up with trouble," said Giraffe, calmly.

“Don’t mind him, Bumpus,” said Allan; “nothing is going to happen, for the motor seems to be on its best behavior. Let’s hope we’ll find only a Dutch guard on the road when we come to the border line.”

“I think that’s apt to be the case,” ventured Thad.

“So do I,” added Allan, “because the Germans as yet couldn’t be expected to care who left their country for Holland; while the Dutch would want to make sure there was no infringement of neutrality, no using their territory by one of the belligerents for passing around and taking the enemy by surprise. If either German, Belgians, French or British soldiers happen to land on Dutch soil they’ll have to be interned there until the close of the war.”

“Well, all I hope is that they won’t include Boy Scouts in that class,” ventured Bumpus, whose sole thought those days was to reach Antwerp and the suffering mother, who must be very anxious for her boy, knowing he was at the time in Germany and doubtless caught in the mad whirl accompanying the mobilization of millions of troops.

“They might if we were German scouts,” Thad told them, “but we can easily prove that we belong on the other side of the Atlantic. I think they’ll be pretty kind to us on that account, and do anything we might ask.”

“Well,” remarked Giraffe, with a longing look in his eyes, “if we happened on a nice clean tavern over there it might pay us to stop and get a Dutch dinner. I’ve heard a lot about what appetizing dishes those housewives can serve, and I’d like to say I’d eaten just *one* meal in the Netherlands.”

“Count on me to vote with you, Giraffe,” observed Bumpus, “though of course if it was going to delay us any I’d be willing to stand the famine till we got over in Belgium, and had to put up for the night on account of darkness.”

“For that matter, we will have a moon about nine o’clock to-night,” said Thad, “but I’m afraid you’ll have to excuse me from driving this crazy car over roads I don’t know, by moonlight. It’s bad enough in broad day.”

They continued to push steadily on. At no time were they out of sight of farms and gardens, all of them as neat as anything the boys had ever seen. They often remarked on the great difference between the thrift of these German market gardens and the ordinary shiftless way of doing things seen in their own country.

“Of course,” Allan said, in trying to excuse this want of neatness, “we have all sorts of people come over to us, and they bring their habits along with them. Some are as careful about keeping their places clean as these Germans, while others never knew a thing about thrift in the native lands, and have to be taught. But on the whole we seem to get along pretty well.”

“How goes the mad whirl now, Allan?” asked Giraffe.

“Not more than two miles away from the border, my map says,” came the reply.

“That sounds good to me,” Bumpus assured them, rubbing his hands together much as a miser is supposed to do when gloating over his gold; “huh! two little miles oughtn’t to keep us long on the way.”

“Not when you’re navigating the roads in such a whiz-cart as this,” chuckled Giraffe, as he started to get partly out of his seat to look around him, so as to discover anything new worth calling his companions’ attention to.

“Why, hello—we didn’t make all that dust back there, did we?” the others heard him saying, as he shaded his hand to look, and then almost immediately went on to exclaim: “as sure as you live it’s a little squad of horsemen, and they’re coming along at a fast gallop! What’s that they’re holding so that the sun glints from the ends like it does when you use a glass in heliographing a message? Boys, I do believe they must be lances!”

“Lances!” burst out Bumpus, in sudden alarm; “why, that would mean they are the German rough riders they call the Uhlans; and Thad, if they’re coming after us they’ll overhaul this old pony go-cart as easy as falling off a log!”

CHAPTER VIII.

THE COUNTRY OF WINDMILLS.

Of course everybody became tremendously excited; at least everybody but Thad, who somehow seemed to be able to retain his coolness in the presence of peril better than any of his comrades.

“There are four of them!” announced Giraffe, immediately, “and they’re digging their spurs into their nags for all that’s out. I guess they know we’re meaning to cross over into little old Holland, and they want to nab us before we can get over the border line!”

“They must have been sent after us by that smart officer we ran up against at that town; the one who turned us back, and threatened to arrest us!” Allan remarked, this being the one explanation of the pursuit that flashed into his mind.

“Either that,” added Bumpus, “or else the chap who was on the ferry with us told of the meeting after he got to Duren, and they sent out that squad with orders to bring us in, dead or alive!”

Thad was saying not a word. He seemed to be devoting all his attention to manipulating the old car so as to get every atom of speed out of it possible. Besides, since its course was so erratic he had to be very careful how he steered, as even a slight blunder might mean a smash-up.

Thad had not even made the slightest attempt to look back and see their oncoming pursuers. He was content to take the word of his mates for it that they were making great headway, and closing in on them at a rapid rate.

“This is getting mighty interesting, let me tell you!” exclaimed Giraffe, as he twisted his long neck again and again in order to watch the rush of the cavalymen, and then try to judge whether the car could gain an offing before

being overhauled.

“I can see what looks like the border post ahead there another mile!” Allan now told them.

That was indeed cheery news, and must have revived their drooping courage. Still naturally Giraffe immediately expressed a desire to know on what sort of foundation Allan fixed his assertion.

“What makes you think it’s the crossing where we strike Holland?” he demanded.

“Because I can see soldiers in uniforms, and they don’t happen to be the gray kind we’ve seen most Germans wear, either. Yes, and they’ve got what looks like high-peaked caps, which I’ve read the Dutch troops use.”

“Bully!” exclaimed Bumpus, and the others knew he must be greatly worked up, for as a rule Bumpus never used words like this, leaving that to Giraffe.

“How are they doing now?” asked Thad.

“Catching up hand over fist,” replied Giraffe. “It’s going to be an open question whether they reach us before we cross the line, or not.”

“Oh! I think we’ve got a good chance to slip over, unless something happens to our cranky old engine,” Allan asserted, for it was his nature to be sanguine, just as the tall scout could not help looking at the gloomy side of things as a rule.

“Now they’re lashing their mounts like everything,” reported Giraffe; “and seems to me they do get more speed out of the horses.”

Bumpus did not attempt to get up any more, so as to look. He had a firm grip on the side of the quivering car, and was staring ahead. Perhaps he was trying to figure how happy he would be if only they could rush across that border line, and secure the protection of those Dutch soldiers.

They were drawing very close to the haven of refuge, so that it was easy for all of them to see the little squad of guardians stationed there to see that the strictest neutrality was maintained. While the Netherlands might seem to be a small country, still she has an active army of some five hundred thousand soldiers, and

history tells how bravely the Dutch have always fought when their country was invaded.

Germany would not want to have such a foe on her flank. Besides, many of those harbors of Holland would be extremely valuable to an Allied navy seeking to strike at the heart of the gun foundry region of the Fatherland.

Giraffe was becoming more excited than ever. He fairly quivered as he reported the lessening of the distance between the fleeing car and the pursuing horsemen.

“Faster! Thad, give her all the juice you can! [Squeeze a little more speed out of the poor old thing](#), and we’ll do it yet!” was the burden of his appeal.

Of course Thad was trying everything he could to coax the motor to do just a little mite better. Small things count at a time like this, and even the wobbling motion that the car continued to keep up as it ran was counting against them, more or less.

But the race could not last long now. The Dutch border guard had spread out, and seemed to be ready to do some threatening with their guns.

“I only hope they don’t mean to shoot at us,” Giraffe was heard to say when he noticed this; “if only we had a big enough flag for them to see they’d know we were Americans, and friends. I wonder how it would do for me to shout out that word as we come up?”

“It would do no harm, Giraffe!” Allan told him.

Accordingly the tall scout began to make frantic gestures as he stood there, trying to balance himself in the swaying car. He had an idea that he was using his arms to denote their peaceful intentions; but possibly the puzzled Dutch soldiers might imagine him stark crazy.

“Americans! We’re American boys!” he kept shouting.

Bumpus tried to pull him down.

“They’re shooting at us back there, Giraffe!” he pleaded, “and you might get hit.”

It seemed that the Uhlans were using their weapons, though when going at that wild pace they could not have had much hope of doing any execution, unless by some accident.

A dozen seconds more of suspense followed, every one of which must have seemed an eternity to the fleeing scouts. Then they reached the line of the Dutch border guard and were thrilled to know they had actually left German soil behind them.

Thad immediately shut off power, and applied the brake, for he had seen that one of the guard made a motion easily interpreted. Giraffe was dancing about in the car, though Bumpus after having his toes trodden on several times promptly shoved him out.

The Uhlans had given up the pursuit. They evidently felt so chagrined over having failed to overhaul the fugitives that they would not even wait to exchange words with the Dutch soldiers, but wheeling their horses started back along the dusty road.

Of course the Dutch guard at once gathered around. Giraffe wondered whether his poor command of German would serve him in this case as well as it had done under other conditions. He was saved from this anxiety, however, for the one who seemed to be in command of the post immediately addressed them in fair English. He must have taken his cue from the way Giraffe shouted that word "American"; and then, now that they had come up, it was easy to see those miniature flags pinned on the lapels of the scouts' khaki coats.

He proceeded to ask questions, and Thad was only too well pleased to answer. The passports were shown, and seemed to satisfy the soldiers. There would be hundreds, yes thousands of non-combatants presently seeking an asylum on the neutral soil of Holland; and those warm-hearted, hospitable people would show the world that they had no superiors when it came to holding out a helping hand to those in distress.

"We have Boy Scouts over here in Holland," the non-commissioned officer proudly told them; "and they have won the respect of the whole Nation. Only here in Europe, you know, every boy has to look forward to serving the colors at some time in his life, so they all expect to be soldiers of the Queen later on."

"I hope you will not think it necessary to detain us, sergeant?" Thad asked, after

he felt sure they had made a good impression on the Dutch.

“Please stretch a point if you can,” pleaded Bumpus, “for I am wild to get over in Belgium where my poor sick mother is waiting for me.”

The soldier scratched his head as though a little puzzled.

“We would know what to do if you were enlisted men of any country at war,” he explained; “it would then be our duty to intern you until peace came. But orders have not been so clear about what to do if citizens of the United States choose to cross our country. I might hold you until you could communicate with your Minister, Dr. Van Dyke; or on the other hand I might just wash my hands of you, and let you go as you pleased.”

“Oh! that’s most kind of you, sir!” exclaimed Bumpus, possibly meaning to help the soldier choose the latter course; “all we want to do is to cross over this neck of Holland and enter Belgium, so we can go around the fighting line without getting caught in the mess. That, we’ll never forget this kindness, will we?”

It was really clever in Bumpus to exert this species of flattery in order to gain his end. Perhaps it did influence the Dutch sergeant more or less, for he smiled amiably and offered his hand to Bumpus.

“Get across as quickly as you can,” he told them; “for my superior officer will be due here presently, and he might look at things in a different light from what I do. I spent several happy years in your country once, and then came back home to marry, and serve out my time in the army. Good luck to you, young mynherr, and to all of you. That is all; you can go!”

They lost no time in making a fresh start. The superior officer might happen to come along ahead of time, and spoil all their plans.

It was with considerable satisfaction Bumpus looked around him at the new sights that met their eyes as they passed across that narrow strip of territory belonging to Holland, and which stretches down between the other two countries as if it were used as a convenient buffer, and for no other purpose.

“There’s a real Dutch windmill, yes, and I can see some more of the same kind!” Bumpus was telling them, pointing excitedly as he spoke.

“Oh! they’re as common as dirt, you’ll find,” Allan told him. “They not only pump water but are used for a great many other purposes. A Dutchman would almost as soon think of doing without his vrouw as his windmill.”

“Given half an hour, and if this road isn’t too wobbly we ought to be at the Belgian frontier,” Thad announced.

“We’ve carried everything by storm so far,” said Giraffe, exultantly; “and there’s some hope we may get to Antwerp. If the Germans over the line couldn’t hold us in check we oughtn’t to be much afraid that the Belgians will try to detain us.”

“I wonder now if that can be an inn we see ahead there?” suggested Bumpus, with a most intense longing look on his face as he shaded his eyes with one hand the better to see.

“It looks like some sort of a road-house,” Thad ventured.

“Yes,” added Giraffe, almost as eagerly as the fat scout, “and I can see what must be a swinging sign hanging there. Thad, hadn’t we better take a chance, and say we’ve tasted one meal in Holland?”

“What about you, Allan?” asked the patrol leader.

“I think I could tackle any sort of stuff just about now. We had an early breakfast on the boat, you know, and it’s now getting along in the afternoon. I’m willing to try most anything once.”

Thad laughed.

“I guess that settles the question,” he told them.

“Then we stop over, do we?” demanded Bumpus.

“Three against one would carry the day, because scouts believe in majority ruling,” said Thad; “and to tell you the truth, I’m pretty savage myself for something to eat. So we’ll pull up, and see what they can give us at this hour.”

CHAPTER IX.

AT A WAYSIDE BELGIAN INN.

“It looks all right to me, fellows!” remarked Bumpus, as they approached the inn where a swinging sign announced that travelers and their animals could be entertained.

“Yes, and if the grub is as attractive as the surroundings,” added Giraffe, “I’d wish it was night time right now, so we could put up here. I’ve heard how neat as wax these Dutch vrouws are about their beds and food, and it’d sure suit me to try the thing out. But of course, since Bumpus here is in such a hurry to get to Antwerp, we couldn’t think of that.”

“You don’t blame me, I feel sure, Giraffe?” mentioned Bumpus, with a vein of mild reproach in his mellow voice.

“Sure not,” instantly replied the tall scout, for he felt that those blue eyes of his chum were filled with surprise; “I’ll do everything I can to help get you there in a rush, even to going hungry if I have to.”

“Oh! we haven’t come to the starvation point yet, I hope,” the red-haired chum told him, as the car stopped in front of the road-house, and all of them clambered out.

Giraffe patted the seat as he left it.

“After all, you’ve turned out to be a heap better than you look, old stick-in-the-mud car,” he said, meaning it as a compliment; “appearances are often deceptive, and in the pinch you didn’t fail us.”

“We ought to be thankful for that,” said Thad. “I know my heart seemed to be up in my throat more than a few times when we were making that last mile of the mad race. I thought sure the engine would give up the ghost with a groan, and

leave us there stranded on the road to be taken prisoners by those Uhlands.”

“Oh! we’re the lucky bunch, take it from me,” said Giraffe; “but here comes mine host, smiling all over at the honor we do his house to stop our elegant car before the door. I’ll try him in my best Teutonic first; but I hope he can understand United States Dutch like our friend back at the border post.”

The landlord joined them. He wore a long white apron, and had a clean look that impressed all of the boys immensely. His face was as rosy red as health and good living could make it.

It turned out that, while his English was faulty, he could understand the language fairly well, and that was the main thing.

When the boys explained to him that they were hungry, and hoped he could get them up some sort of a dinner, he readily promised to do the best he could, though of course, he explained, it was long after the usual hour for dining.

So they found a way to wash up, and then sat on the broad porch resting while awaiting the call to dinner. Their car attracted more or less attention; but Giraffe was of the opinion this was because of its dilapidated appearance more than anything else.

“I’d hate to be seen driving such a wreck over around Cranford,” he remarked, “but here it was a case of take it or leave it, and there you are.”

“Just you go slow about running that machine down,” warned Bumpus, shaking his head threateningly; “it’s served us a noble purpose, let me tell you. Think of all the tiresome tramping we’d have been forced to do only for our great luck in picking up this vehicle.”

“Yes,” said Allan, “we’ll never know, I suppose, where that man got it, or whether we bought a stolen car; but it stood the racket splendidly, and we won the day against the crack horses of the German cavalry.”

Just then the urbane landlord came to announce that dinner was served, and there was a hasty exodus from that porch. The boys had sharp appetites, and everything tasted just right, for there is no better sauce to any meal than hunger.

“If this is only a picked-up dinner,” said Bumpus, as he sighed and shook his

head when Thad asked him to have a fourth helping, “I’d like to sit down to one of the regular ones, just to see what it would be like.”

“All through?” asked Thad. “If you are, I’ll settle the bill, after which we’ll cut for the western border line. We ought to get over a few Belgian miles before night comes on.”

Even the thought of finding themselves on Belgian soil thrilled the scouts. It was easy to understand why this should be so. There the two armies were fast in a death grapple, with the Germans doing the assaulting, and the heroic forces of King Albert trying to delay the passage of the invading hosts across their land as much as was possible. The mere idea of being close to a battlefield was enough to fill their boyish hearts with eager anticipations, for without experience along these lines they could not as yet realize the horrors of war.

The settlement proved to be an easy one. This Dutch landlord at least had not learned the tricks of his trade, so far as overcharging travelers was concerned, for his prices were exceedingly moderate.

When once more they found themselves on the road, and headed into the west, the boys began to discount their arrival at the other border line.

“Of course we’ll run smack up against more Dutch soldiers on guard there,” said Allan; “because by now they’ll be mobilizing all their forces, so as to be ready if they have to enter the war to preserve their country. You’ve often heard of Dutch courage, and they do say these smiling soldiers don’t know what fear is.”

“Let’s hope that this road across into Belgium isn’t guarded as yet,” ventured Giraffe, “or else that they’ll be glad to get rid of us.”

It was not a great while later that they discovered a white post alongside the road. There had been one just like it back where they came over from the country of the Rhine, and from this they judged they had arrived at the dividing line.

Several soldiers now appeared, attracted by the noise made by the exhaust of the car, for the muffler worked poorly even when used.

“They’re giving us the high sign to pull up, Thad,” announced Giraffe, as the Dutch guards were seen to make motions.

Some difficulty was experienced on this occasion, for none of the Dutchmen could speak any English. Giraffe worked hard to explain just who they were, and how they simply wanted to be allowed to cross over into Belgium on a peaceful errand.

Bumpus hung on his words, and looked so appealingly at the puzzled guards that it could be easily seen he hoped there would not be any miserable delay.

By dint of extravagant gestures, displaying the little flags on their coats, saying the word “American” lots of times, then “Antwerp,” and finally pointing toward the southwest, in the end Giraffe seemingly managed to convince them that all the boys in the old car wished was to be let alone, and continue their journey.

Finally one of the guards nodded his head, shrugged his shoulders, spoke to his companions, and after about ten minutes’ delay they stepped aside, as if to signify that the way was clear, and they would not interpose any further objection to the boys going on.

“Hurrah!” cried Giraffe, as he settled back in his seat, “get her moving, Thad, before they wake up and change their minds! I kind of think I mesmerized that big chap some. He looks half dazed still.”

“I think you must have talked such a mixture of German and American that he began to think we were all crazy,” laughed Allan; “but no matter, we’re thankful for even small favors.”

“Why,” said Bumpus, who was vastly relieved by this sudden change for the better in their fortunes, “as for me, I’d be willing to be looked on as demented if only it carried the day for my plans. We’re across the line, Thad, wouldn’t you say?”

“No doubt about that, Bumpus.”

“And this is really Belgium we’re running over?” continued the delighted stout scout.

“Yes, really and truly,” Giraffe told him; “but it looks as like Holland as two peas in a pod. If it wasn’t for the Dutch guard, and the white border post, none of us would ever know we’d changed countries.”

After that they continued to forge ahead at a fair pace as the balance of the afternoon slipped away. Once the engine chose to balk, which necessitated an overhauling on the part of Thad and Allan. Happily the trouble was again located and rectified, so that they did not lose a great deal of time.

“There’s one thing sure, Thad,” said Giraffe, who had been prowling around while the repair work was going on, looking into a number of things; “we couldn’t think of going much more than another hour.”

“Gas tank getting low, is it?” asked the other, who had seen Giraffe meddling in that quarter, and could make a good guess as to what discoveries he had run upon.

“Just what it is,” replied Giraffe; “about enough juice to do us till we want to stop for the night. We must manage to buy ten gallons or so in the morning, no matter what they ask for their old petrol, as they call it over here.”

“There, you see how obliging a car we’ve happened on,” said Bumpus. “It holds out till we get ready to stop over, and then asks for a fresh supply. I think this must be a French make of car, it’s so very polite.”

“Yes, just so,” said Giraffe; “do you know, I’ve been suspecting for some time it was swearing in French every time it groaned and grunted when Thad was driving the engine so hard.”

The next hour passed and once again fortune seemed to favor the boys, for just as the sun was about to sink out of sight they came to a village where they discovered a quaint-looking inn.

When they found that there was plenty of room, and that they could be supplied with a supper and a breakfast, the boys asked for nothing better. The car was taken into a sort of barn, where cattle were munching their feed, and left there.

As before Thad and his chums managed to find the pump, and washed up the best way possible, after which they sat around in the taproom, waiting for the welcome call to the table.

There were a number of men over by the bar, where they talked in their own language, which of course the boys could not understand. But Giraffe seemed to think one of the natives took an unusual amount of interest in the new arrivals,

since he looked their way again and again, and called the attention of another fellow to the wearers of the khaki uniforms.

Of course, it might be that the possession of these same garments had aroused the curiosity of the man; but Giraffe fancied he had a sinister look on his face, and being possessed of a suspicious nature, the boy actually got up and sauntered over to the door, after he saw the party go out.

Looking that way, presently Thad discovered that Giraffe had actually vanished.

“I hope now he doesn’t get himself in any scrape,” Thad told the others, for he knew only too well the impetuous nature of the boy with the long neck.

Allan and Bumpus did not think there was any reason for fearing such a thing. According to their way of looking at it, everything seemed peaceful, and Giraffe was acting foolish in entertaining any suspicions.

About five minutes later, with supper as yet not placed on the table, Giraffe entered the room about as silently as he had left it a while before. He hurried over to where his three chums were lounging, and they began to rouse themselves at noticing an expression of excitement on the other’s face.

“What’s wrong now?” asked Thad, just as though Giraffe could always be looked on as the bearer of bad news.

“I told you so,” came the answer; “that fellow with the sneaky eyes is a bad egg, and he means to do us trick or I miss my guess.”

“Are you only saying that in a general way, or do you know something?” asked the scout leader, in the voice he used when giving orders to the troop in place of Dr. Philander Hobbs, the real scout master, who was often absent when the boys were enjoying an outing in camp or on the trail.

“I followed him outside,” continued Giraffe, sinking his voice to a mysterious whisper, “and saw him talking with some other tough-looking fellows; and, let me tell you, they acted mighty suspicious.”

CHAPTER X.

THE THROB IN THE NIGHT BREEZE.

Thad may have thought that, up to this point, Giraffe was allowing his suspicions to overcome his better judgment; but he now saw the other was unusually serious. So the scout leader considered it wise to ask a few questions.

“How many others did he talk to, Giraffe?” was what he first wanted to know.

“There were two, all told,” came the answer; “I think one was that fellow with the coarse laugh, and the other may have been the man almost as broad as he was long, and who made our Bumpus here look like a baby.”

“Huh!” grunted the party referred to, “I always told you I wasn’t such great shakes when it came to topping the scales; but you’ve got us interested, Giraffe, so give us the whole story while you’re about it, please.”

“Did they only get their heads together and talk?” Thad continued.

“Oh! that was just the beginning,” admitted Giraffe; “and if it stopped there, how would I know that they were bothering themselves about a party of boys who had dropped in to spend the night? It was what they did that gave them away.”

“Tell us about it, then,” said Thad.

“Well, when I saw them making for the barn, I kind of suspected they meant to look over our car, and I slipped along after ’em. Course my having been a scout helped me a lot to do that without giving myself away,” and there was a vein of justifiable pride in the way the tall boy said this.

“Was it our car they looked over?” asked Allan.

“They were nosing all around it,” replied Giraffe, “when I glimpsed them

through a knot-hole. Would you believe it, that man with the crooked eye was lighting matches to let them see better. And they certainly did overhaul the car from stem to stern.”

“Thad, it might be they thought we left something valuable in the car, such as a pair of expensive field-glasses, you know?” suggested Bumpus, as though seized with a bright thought for once.

The others waited to hear what the spy thought of that idea. Giraffe, however, did not seem to consider it an answer to the riddle.

“No,” he said decisively; “they acted as if they were more concerned about the car itself, for they even tested to see whether there was any amount of petrol in the tank, and looked the engine over in the bargain.”

“Then they want to make us an offer for the car in the morning?” Bumpus once more advanced; “but I hope none of you’ll feel tempted to part with it, while we’re still so far away from Antwerp.”

“They don’t look as if they had pockets full of money,” Giraffe told him scornfully. “My idea was that they mean to steal the car some time during the night!”

Thad sat, and seemed to be turning it over in his mind.

“Do you mean for their own use, Giraffe?” he asked finally.

“No, if you ask me plainly, Thad, I don’t,” the other admitted.

“That’s queer,” muttered the fat scout, who would not stay squelched; “why do people go around taking cars if not for themselves, I’d like to know?”

Giraffe lowered his voice still more, and in consequence Bumpus felt an additional thrill pass through him, it was all so mysterious.

“For their Government they might,” he said. “How do we know but what these Belgians are so patriotic they think it only right strangers should be made to contribute to the good of their army? They must have great need of every kind of motor conveyance just now, to bring up their troops. The German army has tens of thousands of big motor-trucks, we heard. Well, they looked over our old car

with the idea of running her off if it seemed worth while.”

“Thad, do you take any stock in that idea?” asked Allan, as though somewhat in doubt himself.

“It might be possible,” was the reply of the patrol leader. “But there’s one thing I do know, and that is, no matter what they want our car for, they mustn’t be allowed to take it!”

“Hear! hear!” said Bumpus joyfully.

“While we all feel sorry for poor little Belgium, dragged into this terrible war when she hadn’t done a single thing to bring it on, still we’ll need that car ourselves for some time yet.”

“Yes,” added Bumpus, “and, Thad, for one I’m willing to turn the machine over to the Belgians, such as it is, if they can make any sort of use of it, just as soon as we strike Antwerp.”

“Same here,” added Giraffe; “but I haven’t quite told you all yet.”

“What, is there another chapter to the story?” asked Bumpus, getting ready for a second edition of those thrills.

“I watched them come away from the barn,” continued Giraffe; “though of course they didn’t know anybody was around. They walked along the road a bit, and I saw them stop to speak to another man. And, Thad, he was a soldier!”

“Is that a fact?” remarked the other, deeply interested of course.

“He wore the uniform of an officer, I want you to understand!” Giraffe added; “and that’s the main reason why I think they mean to steal the car for the use of the Government. Perhaps they haven’t just got to the point here of taking anything they see in sight, like the Germans are doing, we were told.”

“There’s the call to supper,” said Bumpus, struggling to his feet with considerable difficulty. “What’s the last word about this business, Thad?”

“Just this,” he was told, “we’re going to try and protect that car to-night, if we have to camp out there in the hay and guard it.”

“Second the motion!” said Giraffe, with all the vim he was capable of showing, for he dearly loved excitement and action.

“Now, don’t say another word about it while we’re eating,” warned Thad. “There may be people at the table or nearby who could understand English. We’ll talk of other things we’ve met with in the past. There are heaps of incidents that might be worth while bringing up again, you know.”

“I should say there were,” admitted Giraffe; “fellows who have hit the trail down in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina; tramped and camped up in the pine woods of Maine; had a summer cruise through the Lake Superior region; spent a time down in the swamps of the Sunny South; and even hunted big game away out among the Rocky Mountains, shouldn’t find it hard to rake up things to talk about, it strikes me.”

The meal passed off pleasantly enough. There was plenty to eat, and all cooked in a way that satisfied their boyish tastes. At the table were several other people, but as they conversed in Flemish and the boys did not understand much of what was said, they made no attempt to enter into the general talk.

After eating all they wanted, they left the table and sought the outside of the inn. It was quite dark by now. At Giraffe’s suggestion they sauntered over to what he called the “barn” to make sure the car was all right.

Thad happened to have a small pocket electric flash-light with him, which he found very valuable at various times when a means for illuminating was required. Making use of this he detached the spark-plug, and thus rendered the car useless until another could be obtained capable of filling the gap.

“That might keep them from stealing the car,” he observed, “and again it wouldn’t. Even if I had a chain, and locked the wheels, they could file it off, given a little time. So on the whole I think we’ll have to camp out here. The night’s warm, and it won’t be the first time all of us have hit the hay actually.”

“But we’d have to let the landlord know,” suggested Allan.

“I’ll do my best to tell him privately, if you say so,” declared Giraffe.

“At the same time find out what our bill is and we’ll pay in advance,” said Thad.

“What’s the idea in doing that?” Bumpus wanted to know.

“Just to let him understand we haven’t any intention of slipping off, and beating him out of an account,” explained the other. “And, Giraffe, another thing you can do; that is, if you are able to tackle it.”

“Tell me,” said the other simply, just as a Missourian might say, “Show me!”

“Give him to understand that we’re armed, and would defend our property to the last gasp,” was the astonishing declaration Thad made, though he could be heard chuckling at the same time, as though himself more or less amused.

“But we’re not, Thad, you know; we haven’t got more than pocket knives along with us this trip. Even those we used aboard the boat we packed up with the other junk, to be sent across to America when we wrote to that boatyard man.”

It was Bumpus who made this protest; the others understood that Thad must have some sort of little scheme of his own which he intended to make use of; so they only waited to hear its nature.

“We’ll find some of the tools to handle,” he told them, “and in the half dark even a monkey wrench, if you know how, can be made to look like a revolver, especially if you click! click! when aiming the same!”

“That’s right,” was the comment of Giraffe; “for I’ve seen the game worked myself, and to tell the truth had my knees knocking together as if I had the ague till the chap who was giving me the grand scare had to laugh outright, and broke the game up.”

“Well, we might as well go back and sit on that porch till we feel sleepy. Then Giraffe can tackle the landlord and have it out with him.”

Thad’s suggestion appeared to strike them all favorably, and it was not long afterward when they settled down to making themselves as comfortable as possible. There was more or less conversation, though gaps came between, for the boys found themselves rather tired. They had not slept as well during the last night or two as they might, owing to numerous things, worries of the mind more than of the body.

“I’m wondering what that queer far-off throbbing sound can be?” Giraffe

happened to mention all at once; “I’ve been hearing it for some time, and it comes as regular as a clock, once in so many minutes.”

“And I’ve been listening to the same,” admitted Thad.

“Then perhaps you can give us an idea what causes it?” asked Bumpus, after he too had caught the odd sound, the like of which they could not remember ever having heard before.

“I believe it’s the discharge of a monster siege gun!” was Thad’s startling declaration, which of course provoked a series of outcries.

“Do you mean away over at Liège, where we’ve been told the Germans are trying to batter down the conical-top steel forts by dropping monster shells on them from points miles away?” Allan asked in a hushed voice, as though thrilled by the thought.

Thad went on to say that he could not think of any other reason for the strange sounds. He also told them to notice that some of the men they had seen inside the inn had come out, and seemed to be listening to the sounds as if they had a sinister meaning to them.

It was indeed a strange experience for the scouts. They had been in contact with a great many remarkable happenings in the past few years, especially since the troop had been organized at Cranford; but never had they expected to be sitting and listening to the deep-throated throb of giant guns engaged in a terrible battle of opposing armies.

Although they tried to picture the stirring scene, of course it was utterly beyond their capacity; for no one who has not looked on a battle can imagine what it is like.

Giraffe even had the nerve to express a wish that some time or other he might be privileged to see what a modern engagement was like; but of course it was only a thoughtless boyish desire. Before he was through with this journey over the war trails of Belgium possibly he would regret having ever made such a remark; for there might be some things come into his experience that he would be glad to forget.

Long they sat there in the warm night air, listening to the sounds that came, now

faintly, and anon in a louder key, according to the character of the breeze that wafted them to their ears.

Then Thad, seeing that Bumpus had allowed his head to fall forward on his chest, told Giraffe he had better seek the landlord and sound him on the scheme of their sleeping in the hay-mow within the barn.

CHAPTER XI.

WARNED OFF.

“I’ve been thinking it all over,” said Giraffe, “and I’ve got it arranged. You know our landlord isn’t much on the American lingo, and I expect to have some little trouble making him understand; but I’m getting my hand in at this interpreter business, and I’ll make it or bust the boiler trying.”

“Don’t forget,” cautioned the patrol leader, “to give him to understand that we love the fresh air, and really prefer to sleep in the open, being scouts. Yes, and you can hint at the same time that it would be a serious thing for any rascals if they tried to steal our car.”

“Do you suspect the landlord knows anything about the raid, if there is going to be one?” asked Giraffe.

“Perhaps he doesn’t,” Thad told him, “but there’s no harm giving him that hint; he may manage to push it along and save us some excitement.”

“Huh! that doesn’t bother me any,” remarked the other disdainfully; “you know I live on excitement. But I’ll try and do all you say, Thad.”

He was gone some time, almost twenty minutes, and when he once more appeared on the porch it was with his arms full of blankets. Bumpus was sound asleep in his chair and breathing as peacefully as though safe at home in his own bed.

“Gee! but I’m weak,” said Giraffe, sinking down in a seat, the blankets being dropped to the floor. “Oh! it isn’t because of the heft of those coverings, you know, but the way I had to work to get that old innkeeper to understand. When he did finally get it through his head he was as nice as pie about it—insisted on getting four clean blankets for us, and hoped we’d have a pleasant night.”

“Then that part is settled,” remarked Hugh. “He took the money, of course?”

“Sure thing, Thad. Did you ever hear of one of his kind shoving any cold cash aside when it was offered to him?”

“Did he act as if he felt disappointed at our wanting to stand guard over our old car?” asked Allan.

“Why, he tried to tell me that people were very honest around this place, and never even fasten their doors. Fact is, you can’t find a lock in the inn, only a hook to keep the doors from flying open. But I must say I couldn’t see any sign of his being upset by our action.”

“Then I reckon he doesn’t know the plan of those men, if they do really intend to try and run the car off,” Thad concluded.

Giraffe yawned.

“I tell you, I’m as sleepy as they make ’em,” he remarked. “Suppose we trek over to the barn and get busy. Me for the hay.”

“There’s Bumpus here to be looked after,” suggested Allan.

“He looks so happy it’s a pity to wake him up,” said Thad; “but of course we couldn’t think of leaving him here on the porch all night.”

He shook Bumpus gently as he said this. The fat boy gave a grunt, but beyond this there was no sign of life about him.

“Wake up, Bumpus!” said Thad, giving him a little rougher treatment.

“Oh! leave me alone, can’t you?” grumbled the other; “’tain’t mornin’ yet. When the coffee’s ready I’ll climb out, I tell you. Leave me be!”

Bumpus evidently imagined that he was in camp somewhere, with some of his chums bent on routing him out at an unearthly early hour. Thad this time gave him so sturdy a shake that Bumpus began to sit up and rub his eyes.

“Hey! what’s all this, anyway? Where am I at? I was dreaming that——” he commenced, when the impatient Giraffe interrupted him.

“Never mind what you were dreaming, Bumpus; we’re going out to the barn to sleep, and, unless you want to be left alone here on the inn porch the rest of the night, hump yourself and trot along with us. I’ve got a blanket here for you, see?”

Of course Bumpus stirred himself at that. He quickly realized he was indeed far away from the dearly beloved camp up on Silver Fox Island in Omega Lake, near his home town of Cranford.

Once out at the so-called barn they began their simple preparations for sleeping in the hay. The moon had arisen and flooded the world with light on that August night. Everything looked so peaceful and lovely that Thad found it hard to believe tens of thousands of human beings were engaged in a terrible and sanguinary battle only a comparatively few miles away from that spot.

Still, whenever he listened carefully, and the night wind happened to be just right, it was easy for him to hear that uneasy grumbling which he knew must come from the fighting line, where the Germans were battering the steel fortresses at Liége day and night.

With the supply of petrol down to the last dregs, and a section of the necessary working parts of the engine secreted, it would seem as though thieves might have some trouble in carrying the car off, even if they came to the barn. But Thad did not mean to take any chances.

When each of them had been apportioned his bed in the hay, within touch of one another, Thad gave a few last instructions.

It was understood that no one was to do anything to betray their presence until Thad uttered the signal. Even Bumpus had it sternly impressed on his mind that if he felt a hand shaking him he was to simply hold his breath and lie quiet, waiting for the next move.

Thad’s little electric torch came in very handy in selecting their sleeping quarters, though he did not use it more than was necessary.

Finally all settled down to get what sleep they could. Bumpus had been forced to lie on his side so that he might not make any of those queer snorting sounds which so often amused his fellow-campers, and frequently excited their ire in the bargain.

Thad, being a light sleeper, expected to be aroused should any one open the door. The sudden influx of moonlight was calculated to accomplish this, but he did not depend on that alone. Having found a small, empty tin can, he fixed it so there would be something doing in case the door moved, enough noise made to arouse him, whereupon he could touch each of the others.

Some time must have passed before Thad was awakened by this same small clatter. He felt Allan move on one side of him, showing that the second leader of the Silver Fox Patrol was on the alert.

“Give Giraffe a shake, Allan!” he whispered in the other’s ear.

“It’s all right, for he kicked me just then!” replied the other, in the same cautious tone.

It only remained to arouse Bumpus. Thad would have let the fat scout sleep right along, only he was afraid his heavy breathing might awaken suspicion, and lead to an investigation before they were ready to spring their surprise.

For once Bumpus proved to be on his guard when Thad bending over shook him, and at the same time whispered in his ear:

“Wake up, Bumpus, and keep as still as a mouse!”

They lay there, hardly daring to breathe, for all of them could tell that some one was opening the wide doors of the barn, since the moonlight began to flood the interior. It was quite thrilling for the boys to be lying there straining their eyes so as to see to advantage.

Dark figures flitted in through the opening. They could hear low-muttered words, and might have understood what the intruders were saying only that none of the scouts happened to be up in the Flemish language, which was like so much Greek to them.

But from the fact that the prowlers immediately gathered around the car and seemed to be once more examining the same, it was easy to understand their motives at any rate.

Thad waited to make sure that their night visit might not have been caused by some other motive than a desire to steal the property of himself and chums.

When after considerable fussing around he saw that the men were actually starting to push the car outside, he knew it was folly to hold back any longer.

So Thad gave the signal. The other three had doubtless been waiting, like hounds held in the leash, for the call to arms. Instantly Allan and Giraffe sprang erect, while poor, clumsy Bumpus, trying to be exceptionally swift, got his feet entangled and actually rolled out into full view.

Thad instantly turned his torch upon the astounded schemers. The intensity of that white glow must have done much to demoralize them. If anything more were needed, it was supplied when the three figures extended their right hands and seemed to be covering the intruders with what looked like dangerous pistols.

“Get out of this, you rascals, or we’ll open fire, and shoot you down like dogs!” Thad shouted, and the whole three of them waved their weapons in a most suggestive manner that could not well be mistaken.

It is of course doubtful whether those fellows understood a single word of that dreadful threat. They did know, however, that they were caught nicely in the act of stealing other people’s property, and that safety could only be secured by a hasty departure.

It was surprising the way in which they vanished through the open doors. Even the big man mentioned by Giraffe as being equal to three of Bumpus seemed to slip away as if on wings of fear. So the four scouts were left to shake hands with each other over their great victory.

“It was almost too easy,” said Giraffe, who seemed disappointed because he had not been able to get in a single blow.

Still Thad said they should be satisfied with having chased the thieves off, and in this fashion saved their property. He fastened the doors again, set his tin-can trap, and told the others he was going to finish his sleep out, as he did not fear any further annoyance.

In fact, the balance of that night passed without anything happening to arouse the four chums. Morning found them ready for breakfast, and congratulating each other on the success of their little game.

“We’d be out a car, such as it is, this morning,” asserted Allan, “if we hadn’t

camped out here.”

“Don’t suppose we’ll ever know just what they meant to do with her,” suggested Bumpus; “and we don’t care much, either. When a fellow’s been robbed it doesn’t matter to him what becomes of the stuff. But seems to me I smell cooking going on.”

That was enough to excite Bumpus, and Giraffe as well. They were soon enjoying a hearty breakfast, and as the landlord asked no questions they did not think it worth while to tell him about the night alarm.

The next problem was to secure a supply of petrol. While there was no scarcity of the fluid as yet, still every one who owned any seemed to suspect that the time was near at hand when it would become very valuable, especially if German raiders overran this part of Belgium, and commandeered every gallon they could discover.

Upon asking the landlord he put them on the track, and in the end they were able to purchase just five gallons, at about three times the usual price. Still this would enable them to make a start, and there was always hope that they could pick up a further supply as they went along, even if it had to be in dribblets, a gallon here and another there, to eke out.

Leaving the roadside inn, the boys were feeling in fairly high spirits, especially Giraffe, who declared that with such luck on their side they were bound to get to Antwerp some way or other, sooner or later.

“I tell you we’re just bound to do it,” he said, with spirit, as they moved along the road, “and if all other channels are blocked, what’s to hinder us backing up again and crossing the border into Holland? We could make our way to Rotterdam, and there take a small boat through the inside passages to the Schelde River, so as to get to Antwerp all right. So keep that in your mind, Bumpus—when the Silver Fox boys settle on doing a thing it has to come, that’s all!”

CHAPTER XII.

THE PENALTY OF MEDDLING.

“The thing that’s bothering me,” said Bumpus, a little later on, “is this. If the military in Belgium here are so hard up for cars that they’d even think to take such a tough-looking machine as this, how are we ever going to keep hold of the same, somebody tell me?”

“We’ll do the best we know how,” Thad informed him. “For one thing, every time we chance to run across any Belgian soldiers I intend to coax the engine to puff and groan the worst you ever heard. It’ll help discourage envy on their part. We’ll act as though it’s stalled every twenty feet, and that we’re having a dickens of a time with it.”

That idea amused Giraffe, who laughed heartily.

“It certainly does take you to get up some of the smartest games going, Thad,” he ventured; “and I guess now that’d be the best dodge to save our palatial car from being commandeered by the army. When they see what a cantankerous mule it is, they’ll ask to be excused from trying to bother with such a kicker.”

Perhaps the car understood what they were discussing. At any rate, it proved to be most accommodating, and tried to give them as good an excuse for calling it hard names as it could. At the very next rise it refused to work its passage and only for Thad’s expertness in backing into a gully they might have had a wild return ride down the grade, with a fair chance for an upset.

“Hey! look at that, will you?” puffed Bumpus, after half tumbling from the car, when the others jumped nimbly out; “now we *are* up against it good and hard. If the poor old tramp refuses to make the climb, however are we to get over the rise?”

“Take off your coat, Bumpus,” Thad told him.

“Oh! do we have to really *push*?” asked the fat scout, looking at the balance of the hill, and scratching his head in a manner that told how little he enjoyed the prospect ahead.

“It’s the only way,” Giraffe explained, “unless we want to leave the car here, and continue our long journey afoot!”

That caused Bumpus to get out of his coat hastily.

“Anything but that!” he declared. “And when you get me started at a thing I guess I can do my share, all right.”

He proved as good as his word, because Bumpus was strong, even if he seldom cared to exert himself, on account of indolence. When four husky, well-grown boys get busy, with their shoulders against a vehicle that has balked on a rise, they are able to accomplish a good deal.

There were several things in their favor. In the first place, the car was far from being a very heavy one; then the hill did not have a steep grade; and they were half way up when the engine refused to do its duty; besides, they could rest several times by allowing the car to back into the gully again.

Bumpus did his full share of the work, though with many a grunt. In the end they reached the top and then got aboard, after Thad had made sure the engine would do its duty again.

“Now for a good, long coast down-grade,” said Bumpus, as though that pleasure would pay up in part for his recent labor; as he expressed it himself, “It helped take the bitter taste out of a fellow’s mouth, anyhow.”

“What were you limping about the last part of the way, Bumpus?” asked Allan, as they continued their journey, after reaching level ground again.

“Guess I must have worked too hard,” explained the other, with a grin, “because it seemed just like I’d strained my muscles some way. Feels some sore at that, and it’s lucky I don’t have to do any walking about now.”

“Thad, what would you call that thing away off yonder? Sometimes it disappears

in among the fleecy clouds, and then comes out again. From here it makes me think of one of those big buzzards we used to watch soaring ever so high up, while we were down in Louisiana.”

Thad gave a steady look.

“It’s an aeroplane!” he told them positively.

Allan had apparently come to the same conclusion himself, for he instantly echoed the assertion of the patrol leader.

“No hawk about that, or buzzard either, if they have such things over here in Belgium,” he said. “See, there’s another of the same kind further on. They must be German Taube machines, and are being used to spy on the positions of the Belgian forces down below.”

All of them looked and wondered, as was quite natural, for although they had of course seen aeroplanes maneuver many times at county fairs and other places, this was their first experience at watching the evolutions of war machines doing scout duty.

“You see how valuable they are going to be in this war,” Thad remarked. “From a safe position thousands of feet above, the aviator can see every movement of troops, note the coming of reinforcements, take stock of the position of every battery of big guns, and by a code of signals inform his side just how to direct their fire in order to do the most execution.”

“Whew! it’s wonderful when you come to think of it,” Giraffe exclaimed, with a whistle to indicate the state of his feelings; “and I can see how an up-to-date war with such a country as Germany is bound to give the world heaps of surprises and thrills.”

“Just stop and consider,” said Allan, still gazing at the far-away soaring objects among the light clouds, “what those chaps are seeing as they sail around up there. It must be a wonderful spectacle, and I’d give a lot to be up there half an hour or so.”

“But it must be dangerous work at that, I’d think,” observed Bumpus.

“All aeroplane work is,” admitted Giraffe, “and if you once started to take a drop

it'd be the end. You'd never know what had happened; but, say, I'd pity the poor fellow underneath when *you* landed, Bumpus!"

"I didn't mean that, Giraffe," expostulated the other; "don't you suppose now if those are German airships the Belgians must be cracking away at them with their guns and trying to bring them down?"

"They'd be silly not to, Bumpus," replied Giraffe, "and if we only had a glass along the chances are you'd be able to see some of the bombs or shrapnel exploding up there. But it's hard to hit such a moving target, and besides I reckon the pilots fly high enough to be well out of range."

Since leaving the roadside inn they had covered quite a few miles, with nothing out of the way happening, except that little trouble on the slope of the hill. Thad had studied the little chart he carried with him, and tried to lay out a route which he hoped would carry them beyond the danger line.

He understood that the invaders must be stretching out toward the west so as to control that section of country. There was a chance that at any time the boys might meet with a raiding band of rough-riders connected with the German army; but he hoped this would not happen, for it was likely to spoil all their plans and set them back.

"Why, this is getting too sleepy for anything," Giraffe was complaining finally. "We don't even have any housewife rush out and threaten us for running over her dog, or killing a poor old hen. Why, even the ducks can waddle out of reach of our slow-poke car. It makes me feel like I'm going to a funeral."

"You're the same old Giraffe," declared Bumpus, chuckling, "always finding fault. Now the only thing that makes me sad is because I never yet had a chance to show what I know about driving a car. I took three lessons last spring, and later on Thad might let me spell him some."

"I'll get out first, if ever you do!" vowed Giraffe; "I don't care to be splashed up against a wall, or hoisted twenty feet up in the branches of a tree, to hang there with my head down. And I don't think Thad's reckless enough to take chances with such a green driver. Bad enough as it is, with a wobbly car."

Bumpus did not answer, but there was an aggrieved look on his round face, which would indicate he did not agree with Giraffe at all, and still considered

that he might be trusted.

The sun, being well up, was beginning to prove pretty warm, so that it was not surprising to hear Giraffe express a desire for a cool drink.

“Since such things as road-houses seem to be as scarce as hens’ teeth along here, and you can’t expect to get any soda or sarsaparilla, suppose we keep an eye out for a spring, and call a halt to water our dusty throats?”

Everybody seemed willing, and Bumpus even went to the trouble to produce an old well-battered tin cup he had picked up somewhere, as he remarked:

“And if you do run across a spring, Giraffe, please fetch me that full of nice cold water, will you? My leg still pains me, and I’d better not get out. I hate to give any one trouble, but it’s a case of necessity. Get your fill first, and fetch mine when you come back to the car. You were always a good friend of mine, Giraffe.”

“No trouble at all,” the other told him; “but first catch your rabbit before you start cooking the same. We have yet to find the spring. Here, stop making such faces, Bumpus; I know your throat is full of dust, but you can’t hurry things that way, for even two swallows don’t make a spring!”

Bumpus pretended to feel faint after hearing that, but recovered almost magically upon hearing Thad say he believed he saw what they were looking for up ahead.

“These Belgian country people are always thinking of others,” he said, “and they mark a spring near the road with a white stone so passers-by can know it.”

“Yes,” added Allan, “and ten chances to one we’ll find it as neat as wax, with some sort of a clean mug to drink out of.”

“I hope this isn’t going to turn out a false clue, that’s all,” remarked Giraffe, “because I’ve gone and got my mouth watering for a drink, and the disappointment might prove fatal to me.”

Two minutes afterwards they halted.

“Yes, it is a spring, I do believe!” said Giraffe, making one of his flying leaps out

of the car.

“Here, you’re forgetting all about my cup!” screeched Bumpus, and of course the impatient one had to come back in order to keep his promise.

The spring was at some little distance from the road, it being necessary to negotiate several fences before reaching the white stone marking the spot where the ice-cold water gurgled forth.

“You were wise not to try the venture, if your leg pains you, Bumpus!” Allan called back; and the one left behind in the old car doubtless agreed with him there.

Giraffe was swallowing his second cup when the others arrived on the scene. He looked as though he might be enjoying himself hugely.

“I’m on the water-wagon now!” he warbled, making way for them, and pointing to a stone mug that lay close by for the use of thirsty travelers.

It was water that could hardly be excelled anywhere, and Allan, filling the mug, insisted on Thad drinking the contents. After that he dipped in for himself, while Giraffe came along for his third helping.

“One good turn deserves another!” he chuckled; “and it seems as if I never could get enough of this splendid stuff. I mustn’t forget to fetch poor old Bumpus his share, and if he wants more I’ll have to trot back here and get—— Hey! what’s that mean, Thad? The car’s running away with Bumpus, as sure as you’re born!”

The trio by the spring stared for a few seconds as though they thought they must be dreaming, for it seemed utterly impossible that such a thing should come to pass. And yet there was the car hurrying along the road, with the fat scout clutching the steering wheel, and looking half scared to death as he tried to keep from running into the gullies that lay to the right and to the left!

CHAPTER XIII.

REPENTANT BUMPUS.

There was no mystery attached to it all, and Thad understood the whole occurrence as soon as he saw the car moving down the road with Bumpus in it. As usually happens, meddling was meeting with its customary reward.

Bumpus, as they very well knew, had long been desirous of learning how to run a motor car. Of course his father, being at the head of the Cranford bank, owned a big car, and had a chauffeur to run it; but he had issued positive orders that under no conditions was the boy to be allowed to ever handle the steering wheel. He knew Bumpus, and his capacity for doing the wrong thing, and meant to take no chances of having a smash-up.

Boys are human. What is denied them they most of all yearn to possess. Perhaps had Bumpus never been restrained from trying to run a car, his first little accident would have ended his vaulting ambition. As it was, this desire fed on the fact that it was a forbidden luxury for him.

When, therefore, Thad and the other two scouts were making their way toward the spring, with the intention of satisfying their thirst, he found himself tempted to clamber awkwardly over into the front seat, so as to sit there, and grasping the steering wheel try to imagine himself a bold chauffeur.

The engine was throbbing in restraint, and the trembling motion of the car gave Bumpus an additional opportunity to believe himself IT.

How he ever came to do it no one ever knew. Bumpus himself was so startled when he felt the car give a sudden leap forward that his wits almost left him. He always stoutly maintained that, so far as he could remember, he had done nothing at all to influence the start, but of course this was a mistake, for cars do not run away without some help.

Bumpus still gripped that wheel in a frenzied clutch. He stared hard at the road ahead, which to his excited fancy seemed to consist of a zigzag course as crooked as any wriggling snake he had ever watched.

At one second it seemed as though he were headed for the gully on the right, and no sooner had he wildly given the wheel a turn than the car, in sheer ugliness, Bumpus thought, started for the other side of the road.

The ditch there did not look a bit more tempting to the greenhorn chauffeur, and so he would strive to avoid being overturned by a contrary whirl of the wheel.

There he was going along at a rapid pace, with the crazy car making the most eccentric dives and plunges imaginable.

“After him!” shouted Thad.

He feared for the car, but most of all he felt great concern for Bumpus himself. With all his faults, the fat boy was a general favorite among his comrades of the Cranford Troop. In fact, everybody liked him on account of his sunny nature, his happy-go-lucky disposition, and his genial, child-like and bland smile.

Hardly had Thad given this shout than all of them were on the go. They did not attempt to return to the road over the same course taken in reaching the wayside spring, but started along a diagonal line. This was to overcome the lead which the runaway car had already obtained.

Thad shouted out directions which if heard and understood by Bumpus would have allowed him to bring the car to a sudden stop. Perhaps in his excitement the boy who clutched the steering wheel could not make head or tail of what Thad was calling. Then again it may have been the rattle of the cranky old car prevented him from catching the tenor of the directions.

In fact, as Bumpus afterwards frankly confessed, it would have made little difference whether he heard and understood the order or not. He only had two hands, and they were both needed every second of the time to keep that wheel moving, and thus prevent an accident.

The three scouts found many obstacles in their way from the spring to the road. They climbed fences with a surprising agility, and mounted a wall as though they were hounds coursing after a hare.

The long-legged Giraffe proved himself to be a trifle better than either of the others at this sort of thing, and consequently he came upon the road first. When Thad and Allan arrived he was some little distance along, running like a deer, and utterly regardless of the clouds of dust created by the eccentric motions of the reckless runaway car.

Thad was used to judging distances, and after making a rapid mental calculation he decided that, barring some accident, Giraffe was sure to overtake the car before many minutes had passed.

He only hoped they would come to no abrupt bend in the road, where the inexperienced chauffeur would lose what little command he now possessed over his refractory vehicle.

Of course, Thad did not attempt to voice his opinion. He needed every atom of breath he could get in order to keep up that burst of speed; and, besides, in that choking dust it would have been folly to have opened his mouth.

The car was doing as well as at any time since it came into their possession. Perhaps it meant to show them that even a car may have feelings, and resent constant slurs. Only for that zigzag motion, which consumed more or less time, Giraffe might have found it a much more difficult thing to catch up with the runaway.

More than once it seemed to Thad that his heart was trying to crowd up into his throat and choke him. This came about whenever he saw Bumpus make a more desperate lunge than usual and come within an ace of landing in the ditch, the car wrecked, and his own neck placed in extreme peril of being broken.

As Giraffe afterwards privately said, "There seems to be an especial little cherub aloft given the task of protecting children and fools"; and, if this were true, the angelic being had Bumpus in charge on that wild run.

Now Giraffe by dint of a spurt was close behind the car. Thad still chasing after, with Allan close beside him, waited in suspense to see how the tall comrade would manage. He knew just how he would act under similar conditions, and had enough faith in Giraffe to believe he could do at least as well.

They saw him lay hands on the rear of the car. Then he seemed to make a mighty effort, and the next thing they knew he was clambering, scrambling, getting

aboard any way at all, so that he accomplished his aim.

No doubt he was also holding his peace so that poor, clumsy Bumpus might not be still further “rattled” with the knowledge that help had arrived in his sore extremity.

Then all at once Giraffe was seen to bend over and clutch the steering wheel. It was heartening to notice how quickly the car stopped that erratic wabbling, and settled down to doing a fairly straight run.

No doubt Giraffe was not telling Bumpus just what he must do with his freed hands, for they saw the fat boy lean over, while the car began to run slower and slower until it came to a dead stop.

Then for the first time did Thad allow himself to say a word. The relief from all that suspense was so great that he had to give expression to his satisfaction, which he did by gasping:

“Thank goodness, he did it—bully for Giraffe!”

“It sometimes pays to have *extra* long legs!” was the characteristic remark made by Allan, as they both ran on, though at a reduced pace.

When they arrived at the now motionless car they found an extremely repentant Bumpus awaiting them.

“Don’t ask me how it happened, Thad,” he said sadly, “because I don’t know. I was sitting there, turning the wheel this way and that, and trying to imagine how it felt to be a real chauffeur, when all at once she gave a snort and a kick, just like an army mule that feels the lash, and commenced to start whizzing along the road. Oh! look at me, soaking wet with perspiration. Whew! I’ve had a lesson I won’t forget in a hurry. You don’t catch me fooling with a buzz saw again in a hurry, I promise you.”

With such a contrite culprit owning up to his faults what could Thad say? To scold Bumpus seemed almost cruel, and besides, Thad was feeling too well pleased over the successful outcome of the adventure to hurt the poor fellow’s feelings any more than was absolutely necessary.

Giraffe was not quite so tenderhearted, though feeling flushed with satisfaction

over his recent victory.

“Guess you know now why your dad wouldn’t let you learn to run your big touring car at home, don’t you, Bumpus?” he jeered.

“I’m beginning to think he knew a heap better than I did about it,” admitted the humble Bumpus.

“It takes brains to run a car,” asserted Giraffe meaningly. “Some people never should try it, because they get rattled at the least little thing out of the ordinary, and go all to pieces.”

Bumpus heaved a great sigh; then one of his old-time smiles crept over his face, now white no longer on account of alarm.

“Well, I’m mighty glad I didn’t quite do that, Giraffe, by bringing up in the ditch, you know,” he started to say. “Gimme a little credit for escaping smashing things to splinters. And, Giraffe, I want to say that I’m ever so much obliged to you for doing what you did. It was a noble deed, and there are few fellows who could have carried it out half as well as you.”

After that splendid compliment, of course there was no use of Giraffe feeling hard toward the one who had just given them all such a scare. He smiled back at Bumpus, and the subject was dropped, so far as finding fault or laying down the law went.

“What shall we do now, Thad?” asked Allan.

“We might go back again to where we were,” suggested the other, with a curious look toward Bumpus, which the other noticed, and understood.

“What for, Thad?” he demanded. “If you’re meaning to let me get a drink, I refuse to allow it. I’m going dry, to make up in part for what I did. Serves me right, and I’ll get it rubbed in all the time I’m being half choked by the dust.”

Thad saw he meant it, too, and knew that Bumpus could be very stubborn when he wanted to. Besides, perhaps it would be just as well for him to punish himself in this way, since the more he suffered the less likelihood there was of the incident being repeated.

“Just as you say, Bumpus,” he remarked, as he climbed into the car again; “we’ll keep our eyes on the watch for a chance to stop at one of these cottages where they have a well in the yard, and you can get a drink there.”

“Thank you, Thad; it’s a lot more than I deserve,” said Bumpus; “but I tell you I had the surprise of my life when she gave that snort, and started to run away with me. I’m shivering yet with the excitement; just feel my hand, will you, Giraffe?”

Another start was made, everybody feeling satisfied that there had been no serious outcome of the adventure. To have had the car put out of the running would have caused them considerable distress; but they might have even forgiven that if only their jolly chum came through the accident unscathed.

It was really Thad himself who discovered a wayside cottage, with a well in the yard. Possibly Bumpus, bent on severe atonement, would never have called their attention to the same if he had been the only one to glimpse it.

He even began to demur when Thad said they would stop and ask for a drink; but Giraffe told him not to be foolish.

“Think we want you to get choking pretty soon, and scare us half to death?” he told the fat boy severely; but then Bumpus knew very well this was all assumed, and that Giraffe really wanted him to assuage his raging thirst.

So they came to a stop, and when a woman accompanied by several children came out of the cottage, Thad managed by signs to ask permission to drink at her well. She quickly understood what he wanted, and nodded an assent, even starting to draw a fresh bucket of water, though Thad took the rope from her hands, and completed the job.

CHAPTER XIV. MORE HARD LUCK.

During the next few hours they made progress, but the distance covered did not count for many miles. There were several reasons for this. In the first place Thad found he had made a mistake in the road, for his chart was not as accurate as it should have been, and of course to rectify this they had to go back and try it all over again.

Then Giraffe complained of being hungry, and that necessitated looking for some place where they might get something to eat. Coming to a village finally, they saw another tavern, and as money “talks” with people who keep caravansaries of any sort, arrangements were made whereby they might be supplied with a meal.

So an hour and more was consumed in waiting for this to be cooked, and in afterwards eating the same. No one, however, begrudged the time or the money, for what they had proved to be quite appetizing, with its flavor of French cookery.

Another cause for delay consisted in the fact that the road they were following mounted several rises, and as they had already learned, to their cost, the tricky old car disliked hill climbing above all things. So they were compelled to display their scout knowledge of “first aid to the injured” in the way of lending a helping hand.

They came upon many people as they pursued their way. Some were going in the same direction as the boys, while others came from the opposite quarter. They could not help noticing that all looked unusually excited; while some of them seemed to be carrying heavy burdens. These were doubtless possessed with the idea that the German cavalrymen would be raiding through that entire section at any time now, and if they hoped to save their most cherished possessions it was

time they took them to some place of security.

The day was passing, and only another hour remained for them to push on. Thad was not at all satisfied with the poor progress they had made.

“We’ll try and do better to-morrow,” he told them as they jogged along, the engine making more noise than ever, it seemed. “If only we can get to a point where there’s no danger of being stopped by commands of raiding Uhlans we can figure on reaching our destination—hello! what’s gone wrong now, I wonder?”

The engine had given a last weak throb and refused to carry on the work any longer. Thad, Allan and Giraffe all jumped out and started to investigate.

“Oh! ginger! what do you think of that?” the last named was heard to exclaim, as though he had made a startling and unexpected discovery.

“What is it, Giraffe?” asked Bumpus, who had not descended from the car, but for all that was deeply interested in everything that went on.

“Tank’s clean empty!” burst from Giraffe.

Thad and Allen stared hard at each other.

“You must be mistaken, Giraffe,” said the former.

“You certainly have made a bad guess,” added Allan, “because we put in five gallons just an hour ago, and couldn’t possibly have used more than a third of that amount by now. Try again, Giraffe!”

“Look for yourself,” said the tall boy, with a shrug of his shoulders that stood for disgust, and perhaps a little indignation as well, that his word should be doubted.

An investigation revealed the fact that there was hardly a drop in the tank.

“Here’s the reason,” said Thad, pointing with his finger to where plain signs of a leak could be seen; “the reservoir has gone back on us. It must have sprung that leak in the last mile or two, and drained the tank.”

“Oh! what tough luck!” exclaimed Bumpus, and then settled back in his seat in

the consciousness that these comrades, so fertile in resources, would speedily find some solution for the problem.

Thad glanced at Allan, shook his head, and smiled dismally.

“Looks as if we’re bound to run the whole gamut of car troubles before we’re done with this machine, doesn’t it?” he observed. “Of course there are several things we might do. One is to pull the car aside so as not to block the road, and then strike on in hopes of finding a village, where we can either put up for the night or else get some gas, enough to bring us on.”

“Failing that,” said Giraffe, “what’s to hinder hiring a farmer and his horse to pull the machine along to town? It’s a common occurrence over in our country, and these Belgians are ready to do anything like that to earn a dollar or two. And if you say the word, Thad, I’ll be glad to strike off right now to either get the juice or hire a horse to tow us out of this.”

That was always the way with Giraffe, for there never breathed a more willing comrade than the tall scout.

“It’s nice of you to make that offer, Giraffe,” the patrol leader told him, “and I guess we’ll have to take you up on it, since there seems to be no other way.”

“We’d find it pretty tough to try and push the car a long ways,” ventured Bumpus, always remembering the effort it took to surmount the low hills they had struck; “and as to camping out here without a bite of supper, I’d rather be excused from trying it, even if I had to go for help myself.”

Of course no one would dream of allowing such a thing as this last hint covered; and doubtless Bumpus knew that he was perfectly safe in making it.

“Then I go, do I, Thad?” asked Giraffe, looking actually pleased at the chance to make himself “useful as well as ornamental,” as he himself called it.

“Yes, if you will,” he was told; “we’ll promise to stay here and watch the car, though it’d be hard for any one to steal it without a bit of petrol in the tank to run the engine. Take your time, Giraffe; no need of sprinting. If you can’t get the gasoline, bring a horse and a driver.”

“We’re not so very proud!” laughed Bumpus.

“It’ll only be another experience,” ventured Allan; being boys they could grapple with troubles without being greatly discouraged, for as is often the case they saw something of a frolic in each successive adventure, something to be remembered and retold later on with more or less pride.

“While you’re away, Giraffe,” continued Thad, “we’ll see if we can mend the hole in the petrol tank. I believe I saw a little soldering outfit in the kit of tools. Just as like as not this isn’t the first rust hole that’s happened in that same old tank. If we can’t do it, some plumber will have to undertake the job, for we can’t go ahead otherwise.”

So Giraffe walked on, taking great strides with those long legs of his. Bumpus, who being so stout only made mincing steps, always declared Giraffe must have inherited the famous Seven League Boots they used to read about in the fairy story books.

Giraffe waved his hand back to his comrades before turning a bend, and that was the last they saw of him on his mission for help.

Thad and Allan were soon busily engaged. They made a little fire close by, where the small soldering iron could be heated. Bumpus having asked if he could be of any assistance, and being told to the contrary, solaced himself by sitting there and watching all they did.

“No telling but what I might want to mend a hole in a coffee pot some of these fine days,” he remarked, complacently, “and it’s just as well that I learn how to handle the tools. I believe in a scout’s knowing things every time”; then as though his conscience suddenly smote him he hurriedly added: “but once in a while you may run up against a snag, like I did when I fooled with that driving wheel. Think you c’n fix it, Thad?”

“It begins to look that way, Bumpus,” the other told him; “we seem to be making some progress, anyway.”

“Oh! we’ll get the hole mended all right,” Allan remarked, confidently; “but it’s always going to be a question how soon another will come along. The tank is worn out, and not worth much.”

“We can only hope it serves our purpose, and after that who cares?” ventured the now philosophical Bumpus.

In the end the leak was repaired, and so far as they could see the tank would do its duty again as a reservoir, providing any petrol was to be had.

By this time the boys were thinking they ought to see something of their messenger. Giraffe would surely have had plenty of time to run across some wayside cottage where they had a horse that could be hired.

“I expect,” Thad explained, to account for the delay, “he’s got his mind set on getting some juice, and so he’s gone on to the next town. Well, if he fetches it with him we’ll get along in a hurry all right.”

Sitting there in the car, which had been dragged to one side of the road, they settled down to wait. The day was done, and with the setting of the sun thoughts of supper naturally came into the mind of Bumpus, because that fierce appetite of his gave him little peace.

“What if he doesn’t show up to-night, Thad?” he remarked, voicing a fear that had latterly been tugging at his heart.

“I hope it doesn’t come to that,” replied the other, looking serious. “We’d be worried about him. Of course we can put up the top of the car. It’s a pretty ragged top at that, but would keep the dew from falling on us. As scouts we’ve camped out in a good many queer places, and ought to stand a little thing like that.”

Bumpus did not much relish the prospect, but being a wise fellow he kept his disappointment to himself. The minutes crept on, and pretty soon darkness had engulfed the stalled car. Still no Giraffe. It looked very strange, for they could not imagine what might have happened to their chum.

Another hour passed.

The moon even peeped into view over in the east, and there was no welcome hail in the cheery voice of the absent chum. Bumpus gave himself up to the most agonizing speculations. He possibly saw, in his mind, poor Giraffe undergoing all manner of tortures, from being shot as a German spy on account of having tried to converse with some one in the Teuton language, to being taken prisoner by a band of raiding Uhlans.

And while engaged in thinking of all these things Bumpus actually fell asleep.

He could do that about as easily as any one Thad had ever known. Hearing his regular breathing, and seeing that Bumpus was lying back in the corner under the hood which had been raised, Thad gently placed the one thin cover they possessed over the sleeper; and after that when he and Allan wanted to converse they lowered their voices so as not to disturb Bumpus.

“What do you think has gone wrong, Thad?” Allan asked, as though not fully satisfied with his own conclusions.

“It’s hard to say,” replied the other; “but let’s hope it’s only because Giraffe is dead set on getting the juice, and nothing else will suit him. We know once he makes up his mind he can be dreadfully stubborn, almost as bad as Bumpus here, for a fact.”

After that they sat there and exchanged sentences only once in a while. The time was August, but all the same the night air began to feel more or less cool; and Thad was even wondering whether it would not be a good idea to resurrect the fire they had used for heating the iron, so as to ward off this chill, when suddenly he heard sounds along the road that gave him a thrill.

Instantly his hand sought the arm of his chum. Allan may have been half dozing, but as he felt that warning touch he was instantly wide awake.

“Listen!” whispered Thad.

More plainly than before came the sounds, and Allan, too, was thrilled when he made out what seemed to be voices, mingled with a clanking noise such as would be made by soldiers bearing arms. Yes, and now he plainly caught the thud of horses’ hoofs on the hard road.

“Sit tight!” said Thad; “there’s nothing we can do to help ourselves. Even if it is soldiers they may be Belgians maneuvering to get in the rear of the Germans. But we’ll soon know the worst, for the sounds are coming closer all the time.”

So, sitting there while Bumpus slept peacefully on, the two chums awaited the explanation of the mystery.

CHAPTER XV.

AT THE END OF A TOW LINE.

This state of uncertainty was of short duration. Then Thad chuckled softly.

“I certainly heard Giraffe’s laugh then,” he told Allan; “and you can tell now it’s only a single horse that’s thumping along. After all Giraffe had to give up on the petrol business, and come down to getting us towed in.”

Soon they could see moving figures on the road, and catch the creak of heavy wheels much in need of axle grease. It proved to be a cart, and seated in the same was Giraffe, together with a couple of half-grown Belgian lads.

“Thought I was never coming, didn’t you?” the tall scout remarked, as he jumped to the road; “well, I kept trying to get some gas all through the village, but it was no use. When I contracted to buy a supply I must have bitten off a bigger wad than I could chew. And I had a number of things happen, too; tell you about the same later on. Now, we’ll get busy hitching our chariot to a star. This was really the best I could do, Thad.”

He was of course assured that no one dreamed of blaming him; and that they would be very well satisfied to get somewhere or other, no matter what the means of locomotion turned out to be.

The two stout Belgian boys soon managed with the help of Giraffe to fasten the stalled car to the rear of their queer-looking cart. Ropes had been brought along for that very purpose, Giraffe foreseeing the need of such things.

When the start was made the car gave a jerk. That served to arouse Bumpus, who had continued to sleep calmly on despite all the talking.

“Oh! so we’re going on again, are we? Did Giraffe fetch the stuff, and—my stars! whatever is that ahead of us; and a towing rope in the bargain? Oh! I see

now; we're being carted into town, for a fact!"

Giraffe was full of his recent hunt for liquid fuel.

"I never saw the beat," he told them, "how everybody wants to hold on to what little petrol they've got. I offered double price, but they shook their heads and as near as I could understand tried to tell me they needed every drop for their own use. Now that the war has broken out nobody knows what will happen. After chasing around till I was tired out, I made up my mind it was a case of the tow-line for us, or stay out here all night. I took the tow, and here we are."

"How far away is the town you mention?" asked Thad.

"All of two miles," he was told; "but it wasn't the distance that kept me. I had to waste so much time trying to make them understand. Then one party would direct me to a certain house where I might buy some petrol. Result, half an hour wasted and not a thing gained."

"Is there an inn in that town, Giraffe?" asked Bumpus, softly.

"Thinking about your grub, ain't you, Bumpus?" chuckled the other; "but that's all right. There's an inn, and I told the landlord we might show up later on. He even promised to cook us some supper when we came, charging extra for the same, you understand, Bumpus. It was in front of that same inn I saw the soldiers."

"Germans?" asked Allan, quickly.

"No, a Belgian battery of field guns that is heading for the fighting line," the late messenger explained. "They came in with a whirl while I was there, and watered the horses dragging the guns at the trough in front of the inn. It made a pretty sight, let me tell you, for the moon was just rising. I'll never forget it as long as I live."

"They didn't offer to bother you, did they, Giraffe?" asked Bumpus.

"Sure they didn't," replied the other, scornfully. "Why, I soon found that one of the gunners could speak pretty good English, and I had quite a little talk fest with him while the horses were drinking their fill at that trough."

“Did you pick up any information worth while, Giraffe?” asked Allan.

“What I got only made me feel sour,” the other replied.

“Why should it, Giraffe?” Bumpus wanted to know.

“Because I was told the Germans seemed to be sending out thousands of their hard-riding cavalymen to scatter through this part of the country and terrorize the people,” explained Giraffe.

“There would be another meaning to such a move, I should think,” ventured Thad.

“Right you are there, Thad,” continued the other. “That gunner let me understand it was believed the Germans, being held up so fiercely by the forts at Liége, were trying to make a flank movement so as to threaten Brussels from this side. And Thad, he said there wasn’t more’n one chance in ten we’d ever be able to get through the lines.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Giraffe,” remarked the patrol leader.

“But we don’t mean to give up yet, do we?” queried Bumpus, who never liked to quit; he had plenty of faults, but that of yielding could hardly be called one of his shortcomings.

“It doesn’t look like it,” admitted Thad; “for we’ve got our tank mended, and if there’s any gasoline to be had for love or money we’ll push on to-morrow, taking what comes, and making the best of it.”

“And always remembering,” said Giraffe, “that in case the worst comes we can go back to the Dutch border, cross over, and make for Rotterdam. That’s what the Belgian gunner told me. He was a fine young chap, and if he comes through the fighting all right I expect to hear from him after I get home again.”

As he never did, Giraffe was later on forced to the sad conviction that his new-found friend must have given up his young life in defence of his beloved country, as thousands of others did likewise.

They continued to talk as they made slow progress. It was snail-like, after having become accustomed to the ten-mile-an-hour gait of the car, when it was doing its

best. Still, no one complained, for half a loaf was a good deal better than no bread.

“I’d a lot sooner be caught in this fix than to stay out there all night, crammed in the car,” remarked Bumpus, and then continuing he said, with a vein of reproach in his mellow voice: “but, Thad, Allan, it wasn’t just right for you to tuck the only wrap we had along around me, like I was a big baby. I’ve got to learn to take my knocks like the rest of you, and I want you to let me meet my share, or else I’ll be unhappy.”

“There, we’re getting close to the village now,” said Giraffe, pointing to where houses could be dimly seen in the misty moonlight.

The hour was pretty late when they hauled up in the inn-yard. The landlord had kept his word, and supper was being cooked even then, a fact Bumpus discovered as soon as he could scent the odors in the air.

“Oh! mebbe I’m not glad you decided to take a horse when you couldn’t get any gas, Giraffe,” he remarked, sniffing vigorously; “now, I wonder what he’s having cooked for us. If it’s as good as the stuff we had at noon I’m going to find out how it’s made. Then some time or other when we’re camping out with the rest of the boys I’ll spring a big surprise on you all.”

“I think that everything considered,” said Thad, “we have reason to be thankful things are no worse. So far as I can see there’s been no damage done; and here’s the landlord coming to tell us supper is ready.”

“Hold on, Bumpus, you forget that you’ve got a game leg, don’t you?” called out Giraffe, as the fat boy jumped to his feet in readiness for a rush.

“Oh! that’s got well again,” Bumpus assured him blandly. “Fact is, the scare I had when I was run away with by that car did the business for that lame leg. But if both of them happened to be crippled that wouldn’t keep me from feeling hungry, would it?”

Since no one had ever known anything to do this of course there was no chance for Giraffe to make any response. The supper turned out to have the same appetizing flavor which Bumpus had so much admired at noon, and after a great deal of effort Giraffe managed to extract the information from the landlord that it was all a little French trick of rubbing a bit of garlic on the pan in which the food

was being cooked, and which gave it that flavor.

“I see all sorts of trouble ahead for us scouts,” ventured Giraffe, after he had imparted this information to Bumpus, “if ever he takes to carrying a string of garlic along with him on our hikes.”

They really enjoyed that supper immensely. Possibly it was because they had such keen appetites after waiting so long in the cool night air; but no matter what the cause they left the table satisfied.

“Next thing is to get some sleep,” remarked Bumpus.

“We’re going to step out a bit first, Bumpus, and push the car under a shed, so it will be hidden,” Allan told him.

“Oh! we don’t have to lie around again to guard the same, I hope,” suggested the fat scout, who was hoping to have clean sheets and a mattress for a change, instead of just ordinary hay.

“No, we’ve decided to cut that out this time,” Thad explained, “because we don’t believe there’s going to be any stealing done. I’ll cripple the machine again by taking away some part; and with no petrol aboard it ought to be safe.”

They were given a couple of large rooms that overlooked the front of the house. When Thad thrust his head out of a window he could see the road, and the watering trough where as Giraffe had told them the horses of the Belgian field battery rushing to the front had stopped to drink.

All seemed peaceful and quiet. If a dog barked occasionally, or a nearby rooster gave vent to a few crows, as was his habit at certain hours of the night, none of the tired lads were likely to pay any attention to such common sounds. They figured that given two more days, with as much progress accomplished as had marked the one just passed, and they should be beyond the danger line, with what could be called a clear field ahead of them.

So doubtless as they settled themselves to sleep, two in each room, and with good clean and comfortable beds under them, their last thoughts must have been of hopes for the morrow, and wishes for as few interruptions as possible.

Allan was Thad’s bed-fellow, which of course left Bumpus and Giraffe to pair

off—"the fat and the lean," as the tall boy remarked when proceeding to get most of his clothes off and try that "dandy-looking bed."

Thad could not go to sleep very easily, for a wonder. It was not that he had any reason to anticipate coming trouble, for as far as he could see there was nothing of the sort in sight. So many things persisted in crowding into his mind that for once his plan of settling down did not seem to work very well.

It must have been fully eleven o'clock before he dropped off; and the last thing he remembered hearing was a series of odd little snorts coming from the adjoining room, which he knew must be caused by Bumpus lying on his back. Giraffe on his part was certainly sound asleep, or he would never have stood for such noises.

Then Thad awoke.

He heard the clatter of many horses' hoofs outside, together with the jangling of accoutrements. It gave him a shock and he immediately sat upright in bed. This awoke Allan, and he copied Thad's example as soon as he caught the strange and significant noises coming in through the open windows.

As the two boys sat there listening, hardly knowing what all this rattle of iron-shod hoofs might signify, they heard a loud voice give a command, which was evidently intended as "halt!"

What thrilled Thad and his chum, however, was that the order was not given in English, French or Flemish but in plain, unmistakable German.

"The Kaiser's men have struck this place, Allan!" said Thad, as with quivering hands he threw back the bed clothes, and jumping out started toward the window, bent upon seeing what it meant.

Allan was at his heels, and upon reaching the open window they looked out, to discover a sight that was calculated to impress them so strongly that it could never be forgotten.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GERMAN RAIDERS.

The moon was well up in the heavens and this made it almost as light as day out there in the open. Both the scouts could see that scores and scores of men mounted on fine horses had halted for a breathing spell. Down by the pump as many horses as could gather around were drinking their fill at the very trough where only a few hours before the animals drawing the guns of the Belgians had stood, according to what Giraffe had told them.

Crouching there in the window the boys stared and listened and took it all in. It happened that the moon was on the other side of the inn so that the wall here was well in shadow. This prevented Thad and Allan from being noticed, and they had the good sense to remain perfectly still so as not to attract undue attention.

There could be no telling what these hard-riding Uhlans might do. Doubtless nine-tenths of all the terrible stories told about their cruel work could be set down as pure fiction; but even then some among them might be reckless enough to fire a shot at a shrinking figure, half seen in a window, under the impression that it might turn out to be a "sniper" getting ready to shoot into their ranks.

The landlord had come out, and was now talking with one of those who seemed to be in charge of the band. None of the boys had known up to this time he could speak German; and Giraffe in particular would be surprised to know it, for had he only been aware of the fact on his previous visit it would have saved him much time and effort.

When Thad remembered about the Belgian battery having been on the identical spot such a short time before he was strongly impressed with the strange vicissitudes and contrasts of war. And had that same battery but lingered in hiding it would have been in a position to strike a blow at the invaders not often encountered.

Remembering that they had companions in the other room Thad started to creep through the connecting door, with the intention of waking them. Then they too could afterwards boast of having looked upon a band of those dashing hard riders known as Uhlans, and who with the Russian Cossacks have had the reputation of being the most terrible fighters of all Europe.

He had his trouble for his pains, for he found the bed in the other room empty, with Giraffe and Bumpus over at the window watching all that was going on below.

“Keep quiet, and don’t draw any attention if you can help it,” Thad whispered to the others as he reached the spot where they crouched.

“Some of the officers are coming inside,” said Giraffe; “I reckon they’ve ordered the landlord to fetch up his best wines. It would be just like them to make him clean up his wine cellar for the benefit of the troop. And just our luck not to have paid our bill yet; for he’s bound to make good his losses on his guests.”

“Oh! let us hope they won’t think to set fire to the inn, because his stock of drinks gives out,” whimpered Bumpus, doubtless already picturing in his mind what sort of work he could make of climbing out of the window and down the water pipe, in case such a dreadful catastrophe did come about.

“Here, you’re shivering at the window, fellows,” whispered Thad; “and I’d advise you to go and get a blanket over your shoulders, if you want to stay and see all that happens.”

“You don’t think they’ll burn the house, do you, Thad?” asked Bumpus; “I want to know, because it’d take me some little time making a rope ladder out of the sheets. That’s the best way to get down from here, because it’d be too big a drop for a fellow like me.”

“Oh! don’t worry about that,” Giraffe told him; “there won’t be any burning done. You stand more chance of freezing to death right now; so get that blanket, Bumpus. Hold on, stay where you are, and I’ll fetch one for you; it isn’t safe to have you moving around so much.”

Thad soon went back to his own room and provided himself with the bed covers which he divided with Allan. There was really nothing new to report. More men and horses kept pushing up to the pump and the water trough. The handle of the

former kept up a continual groaning as strong arms worked it constantly, to keep the trough from running dry.

“Here the officers come out again,” remarked Allan; “they’ve had their wine, and mean to let the landlord off easy this time. Perhaps they’re in too big a hurry to stay long in one place. That was the call to mount we just heard. And, Thad, this is about as thrilling a scene as we’ve ever looked at.”

“Yes,” added the other, “and inside of a week half of those fine strapping big fellows may be dead, for all we know. They take their lives in their hands when they go galloping across an enemy’s country this way. Any hour they are likely to find themselves in a trap, with deadly rapid-fire guns pouring a hail of bullets into the troop, cutting down horses and men. It’s terrible just to think of it.”

They saw the Uhlans begin to gallop away, with a sense of great relief. The little pennons at the ends of their long lances fluttered in the night air. Seen in the mellow moonlight it was an inspiring picture that made the hearts of the onlookers beat faster than usual.

“I don’t like that, though,” Thad was muttering as he watched, with the last of the troop leaving the watering trough.

“What is it, Thad,” demanded Allan, who had just barely caught the low words.

“Don’t you see which way they’re going?” asked the patrol leader.

“Why, they seem to have come into town from the left-hand road, and are leaving by the one that runs toward the southwest,” replied Allan.

“Well, that’s our course to-morrow, you know,” Thad continued, with a meaning in his voice that could not well be mistaken.

Allan gave a low whistle.

“I see now what you mean, Thad,” he remarked. “It begins to look as if that Belgian gunner Giraffe talked with knew what he was saying when he said we didn’t have more than one chance in ten to slip through. If there are many more detachments of Uhlans like this floating around, so as to fairly cover the country, we’ll be hauled up as sure as anything, and chased back.”

“Yes, because they’d be afraid we might carry important news to the enemy, and set the Belgians on their trail,” Thad went on to say.

They had no further reason for staying up in the chilly night air, with a comfortable bed so close at hand, and a few minutes later the two chums were tucked under the covers once more.

“You don’t think they bothered our car, do you, Thad?” asked Allan, as he prepared to coax further sleep to visit his eyes.

“I hope not,” he was told. “I did see several of the men go into the shed and move around the stables, but they must have been looking for sound horses, and not broken-down wrecks of cars. As they didn’t carry off any horses that I could see I reckon all the good ones have already been taken for the Belgian cavalry and field batteries.”

When eventually morning came it found all the scouts up bright and early. Even Bumpus astonished his mates by showing no desire to remain in bed after being aroused.

“Course we’re going on, boys,” he decided, as they were dressing; “just because there’s a bunch of German rough-riders cruising around these parts isn’t enough to make us back down and show the white feather, I hope.”

They all assured him that so far no one thought of doing such a thing, which information doubtless gave Bumpus more or less satisfaction.

“I wouldn’t like to promise that we’ll be able to break through, though, Bumpus,” Thad warned him. “It’s all going to depend on how the Germans have scattered over the country down in that direction. If we have a lot of luck we’ll escape them; but don’t forget that we’ve still another scheme up our sleeve in case this one fails.”

This fleeting visit by a troop of the enemy had aroused the Belgian village as nothing that had ever before occurred could have done. The women were out gossiping over the low fences, or else gabbling in groups in front of the houses. Boys, old men, and those who from some physical defect were debarred from participating in the active service of the army could be seen talking in knots.

Although as yet they had not heard the crash of gun, and seen men falling in

scores before the modern rapid-fire guns, or those using shrapnel, it was getting pretty close to the border line with them. To have two rival forces visit the quaint and peaceful place only a few hours apart brought the war home to those who dwelt in the little Belgian town.

Giraffe had been greatly impressed. He was by nature a pugnacious sort of a boy, and it had always been a hard thing for him to subdue his passion when he first subscribed to the twelve cardinal rules that govern the life of a scout. Now and then that old spirit would persist in cropping out again, in defiance to the law of the scouts.

“Tell you what,” he was saying this morning, when, after eating breakfast at the inn, the boys started out in a bunch with an empty five-gallon can, determined to pick up enough petrol in small lots to serve to carry them over a good many miles of Belgian territory; “tell you what, fellows, I’ll be pretty much disappointed and broken-hearted if after being so near the firing line I don’t get a chance to glimpse just one solitary battle between these Belgians and the Germans. Somehow I’ve got a hunch that King Albert and his boys can put up a good article of scrap; and from what we’ve heard they’re giving the Kaiser the surprise of his life over at Liège right now.”

Thad told him he was foolish to wish that, because a battle was a terrible thing, and apt to give him a fit of the horrors every time he remembered what he saw.

“General Sherman knew what war was when he called it a pretty hard name,” the scout master continued, “and it’s silly for a boy to want to see men shot down as if they were ripe grain. A scout should know better than that, Giraffe, you want to remember.”

Giraffe did not make any reply, but from his manner it was plain to be seen that he was far from being convinced by Thad’s logic. What was bred in the bone it was very hard to beat out of the flesh; and in other days Giraffe had even owned a game rooster which he had proudly boasted could whip any barnyard fowl in and around Cranford.

They first got a few hints from the landlord, and then started out to try and get enough petrol to give them a fair start. Sometimes they met with luck, and then again their mission proved just as fruitless as had Giraffe’s on the preceding evening when on the way to this same town.

Still, when half an hour passed and they had managed to buy four gallons they considered that they were doing very well indeed.

“If we can double that in the same length of time we’ll consider ourselves pretty lucky,” said Thad; “but no matter how we come out we’re going to start about that time. Every chance we get on the road we can stop and hold up the little sign our friend the landlord has made for us, and which reads: ‘We want to buy a gallon or more of petrol, and will pay twice the regular price for it. We are American Boy Scouts trying to reach Antwerp. Help us out.’”

They took turns in carrying the can which was by this time beginning to feel rather weighty. Even Bumpus insisted on taking his regular spell, for when they tried to spare him from doing his share of things he always grew indignant, and wanted to know why they tried to make him out to be a baby. Bumpus was getting to be exceedingly touchy on such matters, it seemed, for his pride received a severe jolt every time it happened.

When the next half hour had expired and Thad told them they must go back to the inn so as to make a start they had close on seven gallons of petrol. Apparently the fluid famine had already started in that part of little Belgium, and it was certain to get worse continually as the bitter war went on.

The scouts quitted their refuge of the night, feeling that they had passed through another novel experience in watching the coming and going of the raiding Uhlan troop.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MAN IN THE TREE TOP.

“To-day ought to tell the story whether we’re going to get through or not,” Giraffe was saying, after they had been making more or less progress.

“Put it a little stronger, Giraffe,” ventured Thad. “Say to-day and to-morrow will go pretty far toward settling it; because with such a knock-down machine we’re apt to meet up with all sorts of delays.”

Bumpus shook his head and sighed.

“I know I’ll be glad when the agony is over,” he remarked pensively; and there was not one of his companions but who felt he was thinking of his waiting mother rather than himself.

For a little while their progress was indeed very fair, and as Giraffe counted the number of miles they were putting behind him he kept smiling more broadly than ever.

“Bully for the busy little worker!” he exclaimed finally. “I sure believe it’s taken on new life, and is renewing its youth. And yet they say they can’t come back.”

Hardly had he spoken the last word when the engine gave a loud groan that sounded almost human, and quit working.

“There, that’s what you get for shouting before you’re out of the woods!” said Bumpus, in sheer disgust.

Giraffe looked blank.

“Say, do you really believe motors can understand the English language?” he demanded of the fat scout. “This one has been brought up on either German or

French, and how would it know I was boasting? Anyway next time I say a thing like that you'll see me knocking on wood right away."

Thad was already out and had the hood lifted so that he could look the disheartened engine over, and find just what the trouble might be.

"Mebbe it's that silly old gas tank again?" suggested Bumpus.

Allan made a hurried examination.

"Nothing wrong here," he announced; "no drip, and plenty of stuff inside. Looks as if the engine could only stand just so much, and then had a fainting fit. And no matter where we bring up in the end, mark my words, fellows, we've got to work our passage."

"Find out what bust, Thad?" asked Giraffe, as he jumped from the car.

"I don't seem to get it yet, and as there's no telling what may come along the road while we're loafing here, suppose we all get busy and push the car to one side, where it isn't apt to block the passage."

Thad's advice was immediately carried out, and when this had been done he applied himself industriously to the task of first ascertaining what had happened to the wretched engine, and then to repair the defect, if it were possible.

Giraffe, always nervous and hard to keep quiet, meanwhile walked over toward a mound that lay close by.

"Just to take a little observation, and see if there's any sign of those airmen we saw yesterday," he told the others.

"I heard something that sounded like firing early this morning," said Thad, "and it may be there has been more warm work going on. The breeze came from the wrong quarter to help me out, and so I couldn't be sure."

They saw Giraffe make his way up the little rise and reach the top, where he began to cup his hands about his eyes so as to see the better. Possibly three minutes passed when those at the car heard sharp barking as of a fox, and which of course was the call of the Silver Fox Patrol.

“He’s waving to us to come up there!” exclaimed Bumpus, scrambling out of the car, for he had felt so very comfortable that so far he had not thought fit to make any change.

“Yes, and he means the whole bunch of us in the bargain, if signals stand for anything, Thad,” added Allan.

“All right, let’s go,” the patrol leader replied, as he started toward the knoll, still gripping the monkey-wrench with which he had been working at the time.

With Bumpus puffing at their heels the two boys soon arrived at the base of the mound, and started up. It was a severe task for the fat scout, but Bumpus could do considerable, once he made up his mind, and he was with them when they reached the spot where the excited Giraffe stood.

“What ails you, Giraffe?” asked Allan.

For answer the elongated scout leveled his arm, and pointed in a certain direction.

“See that tall, bushy tree, Thad?” he exclaimed; “well, turn your eyes up toward the top of the same and you’ll see what gave me a body blow.”

“I see it!” called out Bumpus, “and say, it looks like a man fastened up there! Oh! as sure as anything it moved then! It must be alive, fellows!”

“It is a man,” said Thad, decisively.

“But what on earth could he be doing away up there?” asked Allan, still straining his eyes to look.

Giraffe had a remarkable vision. He could often discern things that were next to invisible to his chums.

“He’s caught fast there, I tell you,” he remarked, eagerly, “and it’s a good thing for him he is, because if he fell to the ground he’d be killed.”

“How queer!” cried Bumpus, his eyes almost starting out of their sockets with the intensity of the interest he took in the affair; “whoever could have hung the poor fellow away up there in that tree top?”

Giraffe snorted in disdain.

“Nobody hung him there, silly!” he exclaimed. “He fell there, that’s all!”

“Fell there!” repeated Bumpus, incredulously. “Oh! now you’re trying to kid me, Giraffe. I don’t take any stock in those big yarns about Mars being inhabited, and all that stuff. Speak plainer, can’t you?”

“If you look close, Thad,” Giraffe said, ignoring Bumpus completely now, “you’ll see something lying on the ground near the tree.”

“Yes, you’re right, Giraffe, I see it,” replied the other; “and it looks as if it might be some sort of wreck, too.”

“Just what she is!” cried Giraffe exultantly; “the wreck of an aeroplane. That man in the tree must have been one of the flying squad, German or Belgian, we don’t know which yet. He met with an accident while up aloft. Mebbe some of that shrapnel injured his machine, and he was making for the earth to land far away from the battle field when he struck that tree, and there he’s stuck ever since.”

“Oh! how hard it must have been for him, hanging up there all night, and p’raps badly hurt at that!” cried the tender-hearted Bumpus. “Thad, you wouldn’t think of going on and leaving him there, I hope?”

“Well, I should say not, Bumpus,” Giraffe told him. “We’d deserve to be kicked out of the organization if ever we did that. How could we look back without turning fiery red every time we remembered such a cowardly act? Leave it to us, and we’ll get him down out of that, eh, Thad?”

“Our duty compels us to do everything we can to alleviate distress,” the patrol leader said, soberly. “And it doesn’t matter the least bit to us whether that poor chap is a German, Belgian or Frenchman. He’s in a terrible position, and may lose his life unless we do something for him. So let’s head that way on the run!”

“What about the car, Thad?” asked Allan.

“Hang the car,” replied the other, impulsively. “It’s stalled right now, and the engine partly dismantled, so there’s no danger of its running away.”

“I hope not,” Bumpus was heard to mutter, dubiously, “but cars are mighty funny contraptions any way you put it, and nobody ever knows what they’re meaning to do. When you think they’re sleeping as sweet as anything they may kick you all of a sudden just like a mule.”

Bumpus did not say anything more. He needed all the breath he could gather in so as to keep within reasonable distance of his three chums, who were making pretty fast time toward the tall tree.

As they drew closer to the spot all doubt concerning the nature of the heap on the ground was dissipated. It was undoubtedly a wrecked aeroplane, and Thad, who had taken pains to look these things up, told the others it was without question a Taube model, small but swift.

“That means the man up yonder will turn out to be a German aviator, doesn’t it, Thad?” asked Allan, who was at his side, with Giraffe leading.

“No question about that,” was the reply, “because the Germans are the only ones who are using the Taube model exclusively. They seem to think it about fills the bill for safety and speed.”

They had seen the man who was held fast among the branches of the tree almost at the apex, in fact, wave his hand to them several times. This told the boys he was still alive, even though possibly suffering tortures. It also informed them that he had been watching their coming, and while restraining from shouting out, meant to implore their assistance.

“How are we going to get him down?” asked Giraffe, as they reached the foot of the tree, which looked as though it could be easily scaled, since the lower limbs came close to the ground.

“Three of us must climb up,” said Thad. “We can help each other, and it strikes me we ought to be able to make it.”

“One thing in our favor,” remarked Allan, who was famous for seeing things, “the aviator is a rather small man. That’s going to be lots of help.”

“What can I do, Thad?” asked Bumpus, willing to attempt anything going, though his bulk would hardly allow him to be useful up aloft; in fact he was apt to bother the others rather than prove of assistance.

“Stay down here, and take the man when we lower him from the limbs,” Thad told him.

It was not much, Bumpus thought, but then he could at least say that he had had a hand in the rescue of the unfortunate aeroplane pilot.

Giraffe climbed quickly, and reached the vicinity of the stranded aviator first. He was even talking in German with him when the other two arrived. They could see just how the garments of the man had become caught in the branches, so that he was held there as in a vise, utterly unable to help himself.

“He says he’s been here all night,” said Giraffe, eagerly, his face aglow with pride over the fact that once more his high school German was proving valuable. “He was swinging up pretty high, taking notes of the disposition of the Belgian forces, when he found himself a target for heavy firing. He thinks his machine must have been hit as well as himself, for it started to act queer. So he made off like the wind to get as far away from the firing line as he could, always falling, and in the end he struck this tree just before dark.”

“He’s been wounded in the left arm,” said Thad, “for you can see how it hangs helpless, and there’s dried blood on his sleeve too, caking it hard. He might have bled to death here if that arm didn’t happen to be above him, which has helped to stop the flow. I’m afraid it’ll start in again while we’re getting him down, but that can’t be helped.”

“We’ll fix that soon enough, Thad,” said Giraffe, eagerly, “once we get him on the ground. Scouts ought to know their business enough to fix up any ordinary hurt like that. But have you arranged your plan, Thad? Tell us what to do, and you’ll see us get busy.”

The patrol leader had taken a hasty survey of the situation. He saw there was only one way in which they could get the aviator free from the clinging branches, and swing him in to the body of the tree.

Accordingly he began to give his orders clearly.

“You reach him on that side, Giraffe, and I’ll take hold here. When we swing him in, Allan, you catch hold, and keep him steady. Then we’ll cut these twigs, and free his leather coat. But be careful, both of you, for a slip would mean broken bones, if not something worse. Now, ready, Giraffe? Then when I say

three, start swinging!”

CHAPTER XVIII.

GOOD SAMARITANS.

“Well done, Allan!” exclaimed Giraffe as the third boy successfully clutched the aviator, after they had managed between them to swing him in.

Thad now gave instructions just how to work the branches free, one by one.

“Keep a good hold on him everybody,” he said, and was also pleased to note that the aeroplane pilot had himself taken a desperate clutch upon a small limb, as though meaning to be of what little assistance he could.

Step by step they accomplished it, and before long were commencing to descend the tree. The man proved to be full of grit, as was to be expected of one who continually took his life in his hands in making those daring aerial flights, thousands of feet above the earth, and over hostile lines at that, where he would be a target for dozens of exploding shrapnel bombs.

Bumpus down below grew more and more excited the closer they came. He had braced himself like a gladiator, as though he meant to try and catch the man if by any mischance he slipped from their grasp and fell, and Bumpus would have been foolish enough to offer himself as a buffer, had any such accident happened.

But there was, fortunately, no slip, and presently they lowered the man into his waiting arms, so that after all Bumpus was able to do a small share in the rescue.

Apparently the poor fellow was greatly weakened by his recent terrible experience. To hang there the livelong night, swaying with the branches, and in constant danger of dropping to his death, must have been a severe shock to his nervous system. And then besides he had lost much blood, and that would weaken him in itself, even without the lingering peril.

He sank to the ground, but at the same time looked inquiringly at them, as though to question whether they were capable of helping him further.

“Tell him, Giraffe, if you can,” said Thad, “that as Boy Scouts, over in America, we have learned how to care for all ordinary wounds, and that we mean to do what is possible for his arm.”

“It’s lucky, Thad,” said Bumpus, “that you always insisted on carrying that little roll of linen along with you, and some healing salve. I own up there have been times when I thought you were foolish to load yourself down that way, but I see how valuable it can come in.”

“Some people think it folly to insure their houses,” said Thad, “but when the fire comes along they understand what a comfort it is to those who get the cash to rebuild. I carry this stuff because one of us might get hurt when away from a doctor or surgeon. And I’m willing to use it on the first fellow we’ve run across who needs it.”

Meanwhile Giraffe was again talking with the pilot. The man nodded his head eagerly when he heard what the tall boy said. Perhaps he knew what German Boy Scouts were always taught to do in emergencies, but was in doubt with regard to their American cousins, for Giraffe had of course informed him before then how they came from over the sea, and were only pilgrims in Belgium at the time.

It was deemed advisable to help the man down to the little stream that Thad had noticed close by. Here they commenced to get his leather coat off. It was no easy task, and Bumpus turned pale when he saw what a mess his arm was in, through lack of attention for so many hours.

Giraffe had been dispatched over to the car and returned with a little tin bucket they happened to possess. Allan meanwhile had started a small fire, and over this the tin utensil, after being filled with water, was placed.

When the liquid was heated enough Thad started to wash the man’s arm. Gradually the nature of the wound was disclosed. After all it was not so very serious, when that dried blood had been cleansed from his arm. Some missile from the bursting shrapnel bomb had cut through the muscles, but it would soon heal, if no serious consequences followed his long exposure.

Thad used his liniment and bound the arm up as carefully as any experienced Red Cross surgeon could have done under similar conditions. The man looked very grateful. That could be seen in his manner, and the pleased way in which he followed all of Thad's operations with his eyes.

Still, there was an expression of doubt on his face now and then, and Thad could give a pretty good guess what it meant. Undoubtedly the German air pilot had begun to wonder just what his status was going to be, now that he had been rescued from his perilous position in that high treetop, and his wound so splendidly dressed. Would he have to consider himself a prisoner of war? These boys in khaki who said they came from America,—were they so much in sympathy with the Allies that they would consider it their duty to hand him over to the Belgians?

He must have put the question to Giraffe when he talked so fast, for that worthy after having him repeat it more slowly shook his head, and turning to Thad remarked:

“What d’ye think, Thad, the poor chap is wondering whether he’s a prisoner of war or not?”

“Do you mean he thinks we want to consider him our prisoner?” asked the other. “Just let him know that we’re as neutral as we can be, Giraffe. While we don’t like this thing of the big German army invading the country of the poor Belgians, and think it all wrong, still we’re not taking any side. So far as we’re concerned he is as free as the air.”

When Giraffe told this to the eagerly listening air pilot he seemed to be very much gratified.

“He says he has good friends not a great ways off,” reported Giraffe, after some more talk with the wounded aviator, “and thinks he could manage to reach them, if only he can hide somewhere till dark settles down.”

“That’s all right!” Thad declared, “and so far as we’re concerned we hope he may sooner or later manage to get back inside the German lines. He’s a brave man, and we’re only too glad to have been of service to him.”

“Thad,” continues Giraffe, “he says he wants to write something down if you’ve got a pencil and paper handy. I think he means to fix it so that in case we run

across some of his people they'll be good to us. It's the only way he knows to show how grateful he feels."

"I don't know but what it might be a good idea, although we hope we won't come across any of those German raiders," Thad remarked, as he searched his pockets, and found the needed articles.

The man wrote with some difficulty, for his hand was stiff, but after he had completed his task Giraffe said he could read it all right.

"He's gone and told how he happened to land in a tree top, and would have died there only for us getting him down," explained Giraffe; "and then he goes on to tell how we bound up his wounds, and did everything for him we could; so that he asks any German officer who reads this to be kind to us for his sake. I reckon now that the name he's signed is well known among German airmen; seems to me I've heard it, or seen it in print."

The air pilot had gotten out his pipe, and was actually enjoying a smoke. Doubtless, being addicted to the weed he would have suffered less during the long night could he have had the satisfaction of an occasional puff.

Allan looked at him curiously, while Giraffe was filled with admiration.

"These air pilots have to be pretty cool customers, it strikes me," he remarked, as they prepared to say good-bye to the man, who evidently did not think it wise on his part to go near the road, lest he be seen and taken prisoner.

"They certainly do," said Thad, "because there isn't a second when they're up in the air that they're not in deadly danger. A man may stumble on land; he may have an accident when on the water, but he's got a fair chance to save himself. With them a collapse means being snuffed out of existence."

"Whew! excuse me from being an aviator!" declared Bumpus, so fervently that Giraffe turned and looked him over from head to foot, to remark caustically:

"No danger of that happening, Bumpus. They'd have to build a Zeppelin to accommodate you."

"Oh! I'm not thinking seriously of trying it, Giraffe," said the other, sweetly. "I guess I know my shortcomings as well as any one could. I don't expect to fly as

long as I stay in this world. There may be a time—but never mind about that. Our friend wants to shake hands with you, Thad. He knows what a heap you’ve done for him, and I guess he’ll have a right good opinion of American Boy Scouts after this.”

The rescued German aviator shook hands not only with Thad but each one of them in turn, and he said something in his own language which Giraffe later on told them was a warm expression of his heartfelt gratitude.

As the four lads started toward the road where they had left the stranded car he was standing there and waving his uninjured hand after them. When, however, they arrived at the mound and looked back once more he had disappeared.

Some people were coming along the road, and possibly the man may have discovered them before the boys did, seeking a place of refuge in order that they might not make out that he was a German, and so carry the news to some Belgian regiment quartered nearby.

Thad started in to work at the engine as though this thing of being called off to save the life of a birdman was a mere nothing at all, just coming along in the course of his ordinary business.

Bumpus installed himself in his seat and watched him work. That was a favorite occupation with Bumpus, for he did enjoy seeing some one else do things about as well as any boy that ever lived.

“Think he’ll get clear of his enemies, Thad?” he remarked, showing that all the while his thoughts were connected with the air pilot whom they had just rescued.

“He seemed to feel pretty sure of it,” the other replied, “though of course he’d have to avoid all the people living around this section, for they’d turn on him if they guessed he was a German. The Belgians are pretty furious over their country being overrun with the Kaiser’s troops. I’ve even seen old peasants handling guns as if they meant to fight for their homes, a very foolish thing for them to do, because it would only enrage the invaders, and end with a massacre.”

“You act as if you’d remedied the break in the engine, Thad, seeing that you’re putting up your tools, and wiping your hands off,” remarked Giraffe.

“I’ve got it fixed,” Thad informed him, without any great show of enthusiasm; “but remember I’m not promising how long it’s going to stand. There’s always a toss-up with a machine of this kind as to what part will break down next.”

“Tell me about that, will you?” growled Giraffe, in disgust. “I’d like to kick the old box into the river only that it does save us some walking. It’s a lottery any way you can fix it.”

“Get aboard everybody, and let’s see how she cranks,” suggested Thad.

As usual it took several urgent efforts before the engine decided to heed the call to duty.

“There, she sings like a bird!” cried Bumpus as the loud whirr announced that once again their motor was in working order.

So they started off.

“One thing sure,” remarked Giraffe, looking back toward the place where presently they could just glimpse the top of the tall tree where they had found such queer fruit growing, “that was a remarkable little adventure, and none of us are likely to forget it in a hurry either.”

“I know for one I won’t!” declared Bumpus; “and every time I look at this bolt that I took from the broken Taube aeroplane I’ll think of how you fellows climbed right up to the top of that tree and brought the birdman down safe to the ground, and how I stood there to receive him. Yes, it’s marked with a white stone in my memory, and I can just imagine how Smithy, Step Hen, Davy Jones and Bob White’ll stare when they hear the story of the wrecked aeroplane man!”

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BATTLE AT THE BRIDGE.

Once more the fugitives managed to go on for some little distance, with nothing out of the common run happening. Bumpus was thinking that the engine had commenced to act quite decently, but of course he did not dare mention this fact aloud. The recollection of what had followed when Giraffe boasted was still fresh in his memory.

“There’s a fork in the road ahead of us, Thad,” announced the keen-eyed Giraffe. “Do we take the right or the left branch?”

“I’m a little dubious about that,” said the pilot at the wheel.

“Why, what does your chart say?” asked Giraffe.

“As near as I can make out,” he was told, “the roads come together again some ways further on, perhaps as much as seven miles or so. The one that leads toward the left seems to be shorter than the other by considerable.”

“Then why should you hesitate about starting along that one?” asked Allan.

“Only because it heads so far toward the southwest, you see,” explained Thad.

“Oh! I’m on now,” exclaimed the tall scout. “You’re a bit worried for fear we’ll run smack into some of the fighting that seems to have been going on over that way—is that it, Thad?”

“Well, yes, Giraffe, but on the whole I think I’ll make the try. If we see things getting thick ahead of us we can turn around and come back again at the worst. And if we do manage to get along without being held up we’ll save quite some time.”

That was how they came to be moving along that road, and heading in a direction that opened up new hazards.

“We want to keep a good lookout whenever we strike a rise,” the pilot warned them. “Tell me if you happen to see anything that looks suspicious, for it may be a hard job to get turned around, you know.”

Each one of the others readily promised, though very likely the task would fall principally to Giraffe, as he had the best eyes for this purpose.

They may have covered as much as three miles after passing the fork when they saw a hill ahead of them. Bumpus looked and groaned. He knew what that meant.

“More push coming, fellows!” commented Giraffe. “As for me, I won’t be sorry to get out and stretch my legs a bit, because they’re feeling cramped.”

“Hit it up for all the old tub can carry, Thad,” begged Bumpus. “The further she carries us before giving up the ghost the less hard work we’ll have to do. Go it, you shirker, do your level best! If you could only drag us all the way up I’d beg your pardon for ever having even thought evil of you. Here we go!”

They started up the rise bravely enough, but speedily the engine began to make signs as of distress.

“Get ready to jump, everybody!” called out Giraffe.

“Yes, that’s easy for you to say,” complained poor Bumpus, “but think of me, won’t you? How can I spring like a frog when she starts to go backward down the hill again? I’ll do my best to roll out; only somebody grab hold, and don’t let me get started rolling like a barrel after the car!”

“Oh! no danger,” Thad told them. “Just as soon as she stops I’ll jam on the brake and let her back off the road.”

“We’re two-thirds of the way to the top anyhow!” cried Giraffe, triumphantly.

He had hardly spoken when the engine gave a last expiring puff, and Thad immediately turned the car into the little ditch alongside the road.

They had done this grand pushing act so often by this time that they had it all reduced to a system. Two took hold on either side, and in this way the car was urged up the balance of the rise. With but a couple of stops, so as to catch their breath, the boys managed to reach the crown of the low hill.

“Worth all it took to get here, just to enjoy that grand view!” gasped Allan.

Giraffe uttered a cry.

“Look down there to where the road crosses a river by a bridge!” he exclaimed.

“Why, there are lots of men in uniforms on the other side of the bridge, Belgian soldiers as sure as anything!” cried Allan.

“They’ve got cannon, too,” added Bumpus, staring with distended eyes, “because you c’n see the glint in the sunlight. What d’ye suppose it all means, Thad?”

As usual he had to appeal to the patrol leader for an opinion. Bumpus had never fully learned that a scout should try to figure out things for himself, and not be forever asking some one else for an explanation. But then it was so much easier doing things by proxy, and Bumpus, as every one knew, hated to exert himself more than was absolutely necessary.

“That bridge must be an important one, I should say,” Thad explained, “and the battery has had orders to guard it so that no German cavalrymen can cross.”

“And perhaps sooner or later there will be a fierce old fight take place right down there!” Giraffe was saying, half to himself, and with a touch of envy in his voice, as though he felt sorry that he could not be upon that same hill so as to watch the battle below.

“Ought we to keep on and try to get across that bridge, Thad?” asked Allan.

“It’s a question whether the Belgians would let us get close enough to tell who we are. They might open on us as soon as we came in sight,” Bumpus remarked, from which it might easily be seen what he hoped Thad would do.

“We’re not going to have the chance to try and cross the bridge,” remarked Giraffe, “and if you want to know the reason why just look along the river road

that joins this one down near the bridge.”

No sooner had the others done this than loud and excited exclamations told what a shock they had received.

“That’s what all the dust meant I noticed rising over those trees,” said Bumpus. “Why, there comes a whole army of soldiers, and say, they’ve got field guns along with them, too, because you can see the horses dragging the same.”

“And do you notice the gray uniforms they are wearing?” Giraffe demanded. “That shows who they are—the Kaiser’s men, as sure as anything. Now there’s going to be the dickens to pay. The river must be deep, and I reckon that same bridge is the only one around this section. The Germans are bent on crossing over, and the Belgians just as set that they shan’t do the same. Thad, you won’t think of quitting this splendid view-place and losing the one chance we may ever have to see a real up-to-date battle?”

Thad did not answer immediately. He had a boy’s curiosity as well as Giraffe, and felt that it would be something to say they had actually witnessed a fierce fight between the rivals for Belgian soil, the defenders and the invaders.

“Yes, we will stay a while,” he finally said; “but first let’s get the car turned around, and make sure it will work when called on. We may have to leave here in a big hurry, you understand.”

These little matters having been duly attended to they were in a position to observe all that was transpiring below. It was just like a grand panorama, or something that had been staged for a moving picture show.

The German battery was advancing on a gallop now, as though the fact had been discovered that the bridge was guarded by the Belgians. Men could be seen using the whip on the steaming horses, already galloping wildly. The rumble of the wheels on the road came distinctly to the ears of the interested boys standing on the rise, and really not more than a mile or so from the scene.

“There, the troops are coming on the double-quick, too!” announced Giraffe. “You can’t see the end of them yet, and I should think there must be thousands of soldiers in that bunch. It’s going to be a hot old affair, believe me. Mebbe the Germans may carry the bridge, and again they might get more than they bargained for right there.”

Evidences of considerable excitement could be seen among the defenders of the river bridge. Men ran this way and that; perhaps ammunition was being placed handy, so that the guns could be quickly served, because time was a factor that would undoubtedly enter into the result. A delay of a few seconds was apt to count heavily for either side when fighting it out at such close quarters.

Of course all of the scouts were keenly interested. While neither Thad nor Allan felt just the same eagerness that Giraffe displayed, at the same time they knew such an opportunity to see a wonderful and terrible spectacle would not be apt to come their way again in a hurry, and so they were satisfied to stay.

As for Bumpus, he was shivering, not with eagerness, but in anticipation of awful sights he expected to witness, once those guns started business. The florid look had left his round face, and it was now almost pallid, with his blue eyes round and expectant.

Amidst clouds of dust and more or less racket the German battery came dashing along. It broke through into a field as though all this had been figured out beforehand in the wonderful systematic way these Teuton fighters did nearly everything they undertook.

There the horses were detached from the guns and caissons and hurried away to a place of security. Already a loud crash announced that the Belgians were beginning hostilities, not meaning to wait until that host of grim gray-clad infantry reached the abutment of the bridge.

The four boys watched and saw a shell burst close to one of the German batteries. It did not seem to do any damage, nor did the gunners show the least sign of any flinching, but went steadily about their work of loading.

Other shots began to roar out until there was a constant crash in the air almost deafening, and white powder smoke rose in billows, through which the watchers on the hilltop could actually discover flashes of flame when another gun was discharged.

The battle for the bridge was now on in earnest. Hurrying figures could be seen in every direction. The Germans were evidently not fully satisfied with their first position for down came the horses again, and being attached to the guns the latter were whisked further up the rise where they could get a better chance to shell the chosen position of the Belgian battery.

It seemed to get more and more exciting every second. None of the boys said a single word; they were too intensely interested in looking; and besides, the riot of noise was now at its height, so that they would have had to shout in order to have made themselves heard, even close at hand.

Doubtless there had already been many casualties on both sides, with all that furious bombardment at close range; but the smoke hid much of this from the eyes of the spectators. Thad was of the opinion the Germans could not have known of the Belgian battery at the bridge; he believed that had they been aware of it in all probability their battery would have taken up its stand on the crown of the hill where the four scouts stood, from which point they could have made it too warm for the Belgians to remain there below.

All at once Thad realized that the infantry columns had been hurrying along the road and scattering through the fields near by. He caught glimpses of their number and was amazed when he saw they must be in the thousands. Other batteries also began to show up back along the road. This was not a sporadic dash on the part of a mere detachment of the German force, but an advance of the main army, bent on getting around the stumbling block at Liége.

And to himself Thad was saying:

“They mean to take that bridge, no matter how many lives it costs them, for it is an important link in their general plans.”

Giraffe was calling out something. It chanced that there was a little lull in the roar of guns, and they could hear what he was saying.

It seemed to give the finishing thrill to the situation, as though the grand climax had been reached.

“Look! Oh, see what they’re meaning to do, fellows!” was what Giraffe cried at the top of his shrill voice. “The order’s been given to charge the bridge, and as sure as you live there they go with a rush!”

And Bumpus hurriedly put his hands before his eyes, though possibly peeping through between his fingers, impelled by some dreadful fascination.

CHAPTER XX.

VICTORY IN DEFEAT.

Through the clouds of powder smoke they could see that the Germans were moving toward the bridge in solid ranks, shoulder to shoulder, in the favorite formation of the Kaiser's troops, and one which gives them confidence to march straight into the jaws of certain death.

Other detached groups were hastening down to the bank of the river, apparently with the idea of swimming across in some fashion, so as to gather on the opposite shore, and take the hostile battery in the rear.

It was all wonderfully exciting, and no boy could stand there gazing at such a stirring spectacle himself unmoved. So many things were happening all the time that as Giraffe afterwards said, it was like "trying to see a three-ringed circus, where amazing feats were being enacted in all three rings at the same time." A fellow would have need of several pairs of eyes if he expected to lose nothing of all that went on.

As the head of the attacking column drew nearer the bridge the Belgian gunners stopped firing at the battery above. They turned their guns directly at the close ranks of the oncoming host.

When Thad actually saw a shell explode in the midst of that pack of gray-garbed men, and noted the terrible gap that followed he felt sick for the moment. He was, however, unable to tear his eyes away from the sight; it was so novel, so fascinating, and so dreadful that it held his gaze as the pole does the needle of a compass.

There was not the slightest sign of a stop, even though other shells tore ugly gaps through the lines. To Thad it almost seemed as though those men were parts of a vast machine which, having been set in motion, could not be stayed.

One thing he noticed, and this was that the Belgian battery was entirely unsupported. If ever the Germans managed to push across the bridge they would easily smother the few gallant defenders of the highway to Brussels.

From this Thad judged that the few Belgians at the bridge must have their plans all arranged, and that when they found their cause hopeless there would be a sudden change of front. Perhaps they would bring the horses forward, and try to save their field-pieces from capture.

Now some of those who had hurried to the edge of the water were wading in, holding their guns high above their heads. Others ran up and down the bank looking for any kind of old boat that could be utilized in order to transport a few at a time across to the other side.

There were still a considerable number who hastened along the bank toward the abutment of the bridge. The intention of these latter could not well be mistaken, for they meant to gain access to the structure, regardless of the success or failure of the general assault.

Suddenly in the midst of all this clamor a shadow fell athwart the four scouts standing on that rise, and staring downward. Looking up they discovered an aeroplane, low down, and speeding swiftly toward the spot where that desperate fight for the possession of the bridge was taking place.

Thad instantly recognized another of those Taube machines, so different in construction from all others that, once noticed, they could never again be mistaken. Then it was a German aviator who served as pilot aboard that little buzzing craft. He should have covered the field before the soldiers came, and his report might have made a difference in the attack.

As it was now he headed straight for the half-concealed Belgian battery, as though it might be the intention of the man aloft to drop bombs on the gunners, and help to create a panic among them.

Somehow the boys found themselves compelled to follow the flight of the birdman as he swooped down and crossed the river. Whether there was a bridge or not made no difference to him. He was as free to come and go as the swallow that on swift wing flashes past the house chimney of a summer evening.

Looking intently Thad could even see when he raised his arm, and he knew the

precise instant the bomb had been thrown. Allowing his eyes to drop to the ground he saw a sudden burst of smoke and realized that that was where the deadly little missile had burst.

Still swinging around in a circle the birdman commenced hurling other menacing missiles. Each time the result could be seen in the puff of smoke close to the Belgian battery; but at that distance it was impossible for Thad to make sure that any casualty followed those repeated thrusts.

But now the head of the attacking German force had reached the bridge. Fearful had been the price they paid for this advantage; but fresh men had closed up the gaps, so that they were just as densely packed as ever when they came to the end of the structure.

A gun had been so placed that it commanded the length of the bridge. When it was fired there followed a shrinking of the whole front of the attacking force, as if it had been terribly smitten. That was just for a second, and then the red lane was closed by the gray flood, and the first hostile feet were set upon the bridge.

Undoubtedly the crisis was now at hand. Thad fairly held his breath with anticipation with what was to come though he could not even give so much as a guess as to its nature.

Surely those valiant Belgians must have prepared against such an eventuality as this, and would not be caught napping. There was no force in hiding that Thad was able to discover, ready to burst into view, and grapple with the oncoming Germans after they had gotten fully upon the bridge.

Ah! from above he saw the horses dashing madly to the spot! Then the Belgians meant to withdraw while there was still time. But it seemed incredible to Thad that they should leave the bridge intact in the hands of the invaders.

He quickly understood when, without the slightest warning, there came a mighty shock that made the very earth quiver, and the further end of the bridge was seen to vanish into space, accompanied with a rising cloud of smoke.

They had blown up the bridge when realizing the futility of further resistance against the superior numbers of the Germans.

When the great cloud of smoke had cleared away sufficiently for the scouts to

again see what was going on they found that the horses had been attached to such of the Belgian guns as were in condition, and already the foremost was moving along the road leading directly away from the ruined bridge.

A few of the soldiers who had crossed the river tried to take pot shots at the gunners who lay as flat as they possibly could while riding the horses, or holding on to the caissons.

The battle was over, and, looking down at the ruins of the bridge, Thad was of the opinion that it had ended in favor of the defenders. True they had been obliged to sacrifice the bridge in the end, but that mattered little since they had balked the design of the invaders to seize and use the crossing of the river. Now much time must be wasted in building another bridge, or else in seeking a new way for crossing the river with their guns.

As the smoke lifted further the boys could see what was going on. Many must have been injured when the bridge was blown up, for there was great scurrying to and fro, with men bearing stretchers in evidence.

Bumpus had allowed his hands to fall from his eyes now, though he could be seen shaking his head after a sad fashion. Plainly Bumpus was stirred to the depths of his heart by the conviction that there must be scores of those who were terribly wounded down there, and who needed attention the worst kind.

Had Thad only given the word that would have taken them to the aid of the suffering Germans Bumpus would have gladly responded, even though his knowledge of surgery was confined to the first elements of binding up a wound.

But Thad did not mean to attempt such a thing. He knew that soldiers would never permit inexperienced boys like they were to play the part of army hospital attendants. They were amply supplied with all the necessary means for saving life; and besides, soldiers are taught never to grumble no matter how long they have to wait after being shot down on the battlefield, before their chance comes for attention.

Those who had actually stemmed the current of the river only to find that their intended prey had escaped them were seen rushing about on the other bank. They may have been looking for wounded Belgians to make prisoners; Thad hoped it was not any desire to kill that animated them in the bitter hour of defeat.

“Gee! is there no end to the procession?” exclaimed Giraffe, as he could still see countless numbers of the same gray-coated soldiers swarming out of the woods to the west, and coming on in serried ranks.

“Just to think of the nerve of that one little battery trying to hold a whole army corps in check!” declared Allen. “It strikes me these Belgians are the bravest of the brave, and mean to fight for their country to the last gasp.”

“Do you know what I believe?” demanded Giraffe, as though a sudden thought had come into his head.

“Tell us, please, Giraffe,” asked Bumpus.

“I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if that battery we watched do all this fighting was the identical one I saw come into that town. You remember I told you about the chat I had with a young gunner who could talk United States? I hope now he isn’t one of those who are lying across the river, where the German shells and bullets caught them.”

He glanced almost pityingly toward the place where the battery had been stationed, as though he had a personal interest in the gallant Belgian gunner. Thad was meanwhile watching the movements of those on the near side of the river. He could see how machine-like everything was carried on, the men with the stretchers coming to get their burdens, and then carrying them to the rear, where a temporary field hospital would undoubtedly be started.

Already a corps of engineers had come up, and men were seen out on the broken bridge, measuring the gap as though figuring on what would be required to mend the causeway so that the heavy artillery could move across, converging toward Brussels.

“They’ll get across, all right, you can see,” asserted Allan, drawing a long breath, as though up to then he had been too fascinated to do more than gasp.

“Yes, but the Belgians detained them,” urged Giraffe, “and that’s their game, we understand. Every hour that the Kaiser can be held in Belgium is life for France, because it gives time to get her men together. Germany is the only country that has always been ready for such a thing as this. They expected to be in Paris before the French woke up, and only for this delay nothing could have prevented them.”

“Well, you wait till the Britishers get over, and going good,” said Bumpus, with a wise nod of his head, “then you’ll hear something drop.”

“Yes,” jeered Giraffe, who was anti-British when he chose, and this was whenever he thought he could get up an argument with Bumpus, “John Bull will make a pretty loud crack when he falls, I should imagine. He’ll find that these Germans are a whole lot different from the Boers or the Kaffirs, or the Arab slavers of Africa.”

“Oh, well!” said Bumpus, “I’m coming to the conclusion that bravery isn’t monopolized by any one nation on earth. Look at the Belgians for instance; could you beat the way they held that bridge till the last gasp and then blew the whole business sky-high with dynamite, and some Germans with it?”

Thad had listened to what they were saying. He knew that it was no time for argument, for how could they tell but what some of those Germans might come up the hill to see what sort of road it was, or else get a good view for miles around, and they would not want to be caught there. Explanations might prove awkward, if the invaders chose to believe they had been giving the range by signal to the defenders of the bridge.

“Come, let’s be getting away from here, boys,” said Thad.

There was not a single objection, and rather white of face, as well as awed, the four scouts moved over to where the car stood awaiting them.

A short time afterward they commenced to coast down the hill which only a little while back had been climbed with such painful penalties. And now that it was all over not one of them was sorry because of what he had witnessed that August morning.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CALL FOR HELP.

“Giraffe, would you mind bending over and pinching me?” asked Bumpus, sweetly, after they had been going on for a short time, leaving the watch-hill behind them, with all its dreadful memories.

“Sure I will, Bumpus, as many times as you want me to. I’m the most accommodating fellow you ever knew, and I can give a nip equal to one of those dobsons we use for catching black bass in the good old summer time.”

Giraffe evidently was as good as his word, for there was an immediate low screech from the fat chum.

“Hold on, Giraffe, that’s enough!” he hastened to exclaim. “You’ll have me all black and blue if you keep that going. I’m sure of it now.”

“Sure of what?” asked Allan, chuckling, for this was not the first time he had seen this interesting little circus play come off between the two chums.

“That I’m awake, and didn’t just dream about that awful battle!”

Bumpus shuddered as though he had suddenly been taken with a chill that foretold a visitation of the ague or malaria. They knew from this that the sights he had recently witnessed must have made a tremendous impression on his mind, and would probably haunt him for many a long day.

“I guess all of us feel pretty much the same way you do, Bumpus,” Thad informed him. “We’re sorry to have seen such sights, and yet glad at the same time. It was an opportunity that few American scouts could ever expect to have come their way. And if we could have done any good we’d have been only too glad of a chance to offer our services.”

“They’d have laughed at us if we’d risked it,” asserted Allan.

“And like as not bundled us all into a dungeon for suspects,” added Giraffe, although he immediately added, “but say, did you ever see such dauntless bravery as those same Germans showed when they marched straight up to that bridge, and every time a hole was torn in their ranks closed in as if on dress parade.”

“Oh! I don’t know,” spoke up Bumpus, “it struck me that handful of Belgians showed the real stuff in the way of bravery, holding out with ten or twenty times their number against them. The German brand of courage seems to be different from some others I know of. They are parts of a big machine, and have to touch elbows when they fight.”

Giraffe was up in arms at once, but Thad poured oil on the troubled waters.

“Listen, Giraffe,” he said, “this is what Bumpus means, and I’ve read the same thing more than once; even high German generals have admitted it. Germans soldiers are not trained to take the initiative like our men and the French are. They are educated to obey orders as a unit, and a company of them will walk directly into the jaws of death with a courage that couldn’t be beaten. But there’s little of that hurrah and dash and single-handed work we’re accustomed to associating with heroic actions.”

Perhaps there was food for thought in what the scout leader said. Giraffe may not have looked at matters in this light before. He became pensive as though revolving the theory over in his mind. Then he broke the short silence by saying:

“Here’s the fork of the road, Thad, and we can make a start in the other direction. After all the longest way around is sometimes the quickest way to the fire. But for one I’m glad we took the other. I’ve seen a real battle, and that’s talking some.”

There was good reason for Thad to be thoughtful. Troubles seemed to be multiplying as they proceeded. He was beginning to believe that young Belgian gunner with whom Giraffe had talked must have known what he was saying when he declared they had but one chance in three to get through the country that seemed to be a network of war trails, with hostile forces moving in every direction.

Secretly Thad was rapidly coming to the conclusion that they would show their wisdom by turning back and making for the Dutch border again. Once in Holland they could take a train for Rotterdam, and in some way secure a passage to Antwerp.

The more he considered this the better it looked to him. He was even sorry now he had not insisted on such a course at the time they were across the border. In fact he had given up mostly on account of the plea advanced by Bumpus, who after all was a poor one to make suggestions.

So Thad determined that should they meet with another backset, he was bound to put the matter before his chums in its true light. He knew he could count on the support of Allan, and also that Giraffe was open to conviction, even if a little set in his way.

For a few miles the car moved along the second road fairly well, though Thad was chagrined to find that he could not speed it up at all.

“What ails the old shebang, Thad?” demanded Giraffe, impatiently, when it crawled along with sundry groanings and complainings.

“It’s tired out, and creaks in the joints, don’t you know,” said Bumpus, with one of his old-time grins.

“But shucks! we’re on level ground right now, and she ought to spin along like fun!” mentioned Giraffe, with a snort of disgust. “Why, honest, I could keep out of your way walking, and never feel it. Talk to me about an ice-wagon, this goes it one better. It’s like those harvester engines we see creeping along the country roads up our way, slow but sure.”

“What do you figure can be the matter, Thad?” asked Allan.

“I’m in a fog,” came the reply. “The only thing I can think of is that some of that petrol we bought at double price is mighty poor stuff.”

“You mean it’s been weakened to make it seem more,” said Giraffe. “I didn’t know oil and water could be mixed, but mebbe these smart Belgians have found a way to do it. And Thad, now that you mention it I reckon you’ve about hit the right nail on the head.”

“Well, there’s nothing to be done,” ventured Allan; “so we’ll have to grin and bear it. But let’s hope we’ll strike a chance before long to buy a new lot of gas, and this time get a decent quality with push in it.”

“Yes,” added Giraffe, “just now it looks as if we had need of all the push going; in fact I was going to offer to step out and put my shoulder against the car to help along.”

“Oh, you’ll get all that pleasure right away,” Bumpus told him, “because I can glimpse another of those rises ahead there, and we’ll never make a third of it under this low pressure, worse luck.”

Just as he had prophesied they were compelled to work their passage to the top of the rise, though coasting down the other side with a fine burst of speed. About a mile beyond this point Thad was noticed to listen attentively, and immediately work the car over to one side of the road.

“Something coming!” announced Giraffe, “and listen to the row, will you? Makes me think of a fire engine going on the run. But it’s an automobile at that, believe me. Give ’em all the room you can, Thad, because, my word! they’re coming to beat the band.”

Already they could see the dust rising above the trees, and all sorts of vague speculations took form in the minds of the boys. Then suddenly there burst into view a strange contraption, the like of which none of them had ever seen before.

In one way it was a large car, but it had been boxed in with some sort of metal, so that it looked like a “battering ram,” as Giraffe declared afterwards.

Rushing at a rapid pace along the road it quickly reached the car and sped past. The staring scouts heard loud voices, and even saw waving hands over the top of the barricade. Then it was lost to view in the cloud of dust.

“Whew! That’s going some!” gasped Giraffe.

Bumpus was coughing from the dust he had inhaled, but he managed to give expression to his astonishment in a few jerky sentences:

“Oh! whatever was that! I thought a goods van had skipped off the railroad track and was raging along the road. Thad, can you guess it? Please enlighten me.

Schew!” and he ended up in a tremendous sneeze.

“Yes, I think I know, though I never saw anything like it before,” Thad obligingly told him. “I remember reading that some Belgian had been experimenting with what he called an armored motor-car, and which it was claimed would be a terror in war times. I think that must have been it.”

“Well,” admitted Giraffe, scratching his head, “it was all of that, let me tell you. And Thad, there was a hole in the armor plating on our side. That must be where they use the quick-firing gun that mows things down, just as the farmer cuts the wheat with his machine.”

“If that war engine struck a regiment of the enemy it would make holes in their ranks, all right,” Allan remarked, with a shake of his head.

“I’m glad I saw it,” ventured Bumpus, “but they’re sure a reckless lot aboard, from the way they rushed along this road.”

“It takes that sort of men to use an armored car, I should think,” said Thad. “They expect to drop down on the enemy wherever they can find him, and never stop to count heads, but just run the gantlet, firing as they go. If they’re lucky, and get through without an accident, they go back home laughing over a good day’s hunt.”

“This war is bound to show up some queer freaks,” remarked Allan. “Now, d’ye know that armored car makes me think of the war chariots the ancient Romans used, with sharp knives fastened to the wheels, and as they dashed through the crowded ranks of the Goths and Vandals these mowed them down. This scheme is only a little more up to date, that’s all.”

“Nothing new under the sun, when you come to look into things,” declared Bumpus.

“This mad pace gives me a shiver,” said Giraffe. “As I didn’t sleep good last night I think I’ll cuddle down right here, and take a few winks. If anything exciting comes along just give me a jolt, will you, Bumpus?”

“It’s more than likely to be a hill,” was the reassuring answer returned by the stout chum. “All I’m hoping for now is that we strike a village pretty soon, where we can find some decent petrol for sale, and load up.”

“Huh! one word for the petrol and two for your dinner,” chuckled Giraffe. “Now, don’t say anything more to me, Bumpus, because I’m booked for a nap. The warm sunshine, the drone of the bees, the grunting of our elegant car, and a lot of other things combined make me feel *aw-fully* drowsy.”

He was really meaning it, too, for he had closed his eyes, and seemed about ready to let his senses slip away. Bumpus looked down at him as though he might not object to a little of the same sweet slumber himself. With Thad and Allan on guard there could be no harm in giving way to this feeling. And should they come to one of those nuisances in the way of rises, which would stall the engine, of course all of them stood ready to drop out and do their duty.

But it was not to be.

They happened to be passing a small cottage just then. It sat back from the road, and there were flowers in the front yard, yes, and a well also. Thad was almost tempted to stop and ask for a drink, but he thought better of it. Further on, when they came to a town, and made an effort to secure a supply of petrol it would be time enough to think of quenching their thirst, aggravated by the dust they were forced to breathe most of the time.

And it was at that instant they heard wild shrieks ring out, in a woman’s voice. Looking toward the cottage and half expecting to see it in flames they discovered a woman at the well. She was wringing her hands frantically, now leaning over to peer into the depths, and then rocking to and fro as if in the very abandon of grief over something.

Thad stopped the car instantly. Both Giraffe and Bumpus were on their feet, and staring with might and main at the spot.

“Oh! whatever has happened?” the latter was exclaiming in horrified tones. “She acts like a child had fallen down the well!”

CHAPTER XXII.

UP FROM THE DEPTHS.

That must have been the thought flashing through the mind of each of the other three scouts. Indeed, what else could they believe, after seeing the woman carrying on in such a wild way?

Giraffe made a flying leap out of the car, nor were the others far behind him. They all ran toward the cottage, and the kneeling woman, deeply impressed with the seriousness of the incident. Their duty as scouts loomed up before them. Unless it was already too late they must find some way to save the poor woman's child from a watery grave.

Giraffe was trying to understand what she was crying as the others came up, although from the frown on his face it was evident that he could not be meeting with any great success.

"His name is Benjy, boys," the tall scout exclaimed, "and he's down there in the well!"

"Oh! the poor little chap!" whimpered Bumpus, as he watched the others throw themselves flat on their stomachs, and try to peer into the dark recesses of the gaping stone-bordered hole in the ground.

"Listen!" said Thad, in a thrilling voice. "I can hear splashing down there!"

"Sure thing!" added Giraffe, "which shows the child is alive still. That settles it with me. I'm the one to go down!"

Thad had already discovered that there was a windlass above the well. A stout rope was wound around the barrel of this, and the bucket could be seen standing on the other side on a stone shelf intended for the purpose.

He knew that whatever was done there should be no more delay than was absolutely necessary. His first act therefore was to step around and release the bucket, at the same time grasping hold of the handle of the windlass.

“Put your feet on the bucket and hold on, Giraffe,” he told the adventurous one. “When you get down close to the water give one call. To lower a little more give two; and when you’re ready to come up make it three. Understand that?”

“All right, Thad; lower away!”

Bumpus was also peering over the edge into those mysterious depths. The woman was beside him, still wringing her hands in nervous anguish, and repeating that word “Benjy” until it was so impressed on the memory of Bumpus that he could never forget it.

Immediately Giraffe disappeared from view, and all they could hear consisted of the creaking of the windlass, as Thad lowered away, and the hysterical wailing of the woman belonging at the cottage.

A dozen and more times had the handle gone around and Thad began to wonder how deep that well could be. Then suddenly he heard a cry. It welled up from the depths and sounded very weird, but Thad knew this must be the signal he had arranged with Giraffe, to indicate that the latter was close to the water.

Immediately there came two more calls, which meant that Giraffe wished to be lowered a little further; Thad accordingly allowed another turn of the handle, so as to release several more feet of the rope. A single cry announced that this was enough; and then a brief period of great suspense followed.

They heard the dripping of water, accompanied by more or less splashing.

“Oh! I hope he hasn’t fallen in himself!” Bumpus was heard to say, with a long breath, as his overwrought feelings almost overpowered him.

Then came three calls. That was the signal for those above to draw up. Allan was already at Thad’s side, and ready to bend the power of his young muscles to assist in the task, and together they made that windlass creak at a lively rate as they worked.

Bumpus was on his knees now. He acted as though a new fear oppressed his

heart. What if the strain proved too great, and the rope parted—Giraffe must be hurled back into the depths, and a tragedy would be presented to them.

It was with the liveliest possible feeling of gratitude that Bumpus finally saw the beloved face of his chum appear in view above the stone coping of the well. He was also struck with the fact that Giraffe seemed to be grinning instead of having a serious expression on his thin countenance.

Allan put out a hand and assisted him to effect a landing on solid ground. Meanwhile the woman had set up a renewal of her half shrieks Bumpus could easily guess why this should be, for look as he might he could see no sign of a child!

“Where’s poor little Benjy, Giraffe?” the fat scout demanded, half indignantly, for he could not understand what it all meant.

Then what did Giraffe do but thrust a hand into the bosom of his splashed khaki coat and draw out the queerest *puppy* Bumpus had ever seen. He stared at the water-soaked little beast as though he thought he might be looking at something unreal.

Allan burst out into a shout, while the woman with a shriek of delight snatched little Benjy from the hands of the one who had saved him, and kissed his doggy mouth again and again.

Giraffe stood there with that grin spreading across his face. He looked down at his wet feet and leggings.

“Think of me taking all that trouble for a fike not much bigger’n a postage stamp?” he presently exclaimed. “I guess the joke’s on me this time, boys, so laugh all you’re a mind to. I’m wet up to my knees, all right; but I got dear little Benjy, didn’t I?”

Thad clapped him on the shoulder.

“After all there’s not so much to laugh about, Giraffe,” he said, soberly. “We all thought Benjy was a child, and you risked your life to save him. The motive is what counts every time; and I’m sure you did what any scout would be proud to own to; but we’re glad it wasn’t a child after all, for it would have been drowned.”

“I guess you’re about right there, Thad,” the other admitted, “for you see the puppy could swim, which is what a child couldn’t do. Let’s be going on again, fellows.”

“I thought I was thirsty,” said Bumpus, “but I guess I can wait till we come to a well that isn’t used for a swimming tank by dogs.”

The woman seeing them moving off tried to thank them for having saved her little pet. Of course not being able to talk French the boys could not understand just what she said, though they caught the meaning, and nodded their heads accordingly.

Once they were going they found occasion to laugh again and again as different remarks were made concerning features connected with the adventure. Giraffe laughed louder than any one else. He said he no longer felt sleepy, and that he believed it would be better for him to sit with his feet in the sun so as to dry off.

Half an hour afterwards it was found that they were once more approaching what seemed to be a bridge. Remembering the tragic occurrences that had taken place at that other crossing of the river the boys naturally felt more or less anxiety as to what they might run across here.

“It’s guarded, as sure as anything,” said Giraffe, who had stretched his long neck in order to give those keen eyes of his a better chance to see. “Yes, and by Belgian soldiers in the bargain, sure pop. I can tell by their uniforms.”

“I hope they won’t think of stopping us from crossing,” said Bumpus.

As they drew nearer to the bridge they saw several men in blue uniforms, and wearing high-peaked hats, holding their guns in a significant manner as though giving plain warning that access to the bridge was forbidden. Thad felt from this that they were doomed to meet with a disappointment.

He stopped the car close to the guard. To the surprise of the boys one of the soldiers, evidently guessing their nationality from the little flags which they still wore fastened to their coats, addressed them in very good English.

“It is not possible for you to cross the bridge!” was what he said.

“We are hoping to reach Antwerp, where this boy has a sick mother who needs

him,” Thad explained, laying a hand on Bumpus’s shoulder as he spoke.

The soldier shook his head in the negative.

“No car can cross the bridge after this; it would not be safe, and would spoil all our plans for a trap,” he went on to say.

“But couldn’t you make an exception in our case?” asked Bumpus, trying to throw all the pathos possible into his voice.

Again the soldier shook his head.

“It is impossible,” he said, in a manner that would admit of no further argument. “You must turn and follow the river road to the west. There is another small bridge six miles that way, not strong enough for guns to be moved over, but you might get across. I hope you reach Antwerp safely.”

“We happened to see the fight at the other bridge, and watched when it was in the end blown up,” Giraffe ventured to say, at which the other’s face lighted up and just as Giraffe knew would be the case he cried out:

“Tell us what happened there, for we have been wondering what all the sounds of fighting in that direction meant. But we have had no word up to now.”

Accordingly Thad, assisted by the others at intervals, related some of the stirring sights they had seen while on the watch-hill a mile or more distant from the battlefield at the bridge. The three Belgians listened eagerly, and while two of the guard might not fully understand what was said, they caught enough to feel that their comrades had won new honor by their gallant defense of the bridge, and its ultimate destruction when defense was no longer possible.

“Thank you very much for giving us such splendid news,” said the soldier who spoke English, as he thrust out a hand to Thad; “and in return I may let you into a secret that will explain why you cannot cross here. This bridge had been weakened so that it is apt to fall when any weight is put on it. Even your car might be sufficient to bring about the catastrophe. We are hoping it will go down with the first detachment of raiding Uhlans that comes this way. Our duty is to fire on them and get them to charge. If twenty go down with the bridge so much the better.”

Of course Thad realized that all thought of crossing there must be abandoned. He saw that a road ran along the river, and by taking this they would after a bit come to the small bridge which was recommended for their notice.

So the boys started, making up their minds that, as Giraffe said, “You never know what’s best for you; and after all our going this way may turn out to be just splendid.”

“If it’d only throw us in the way of getting a new supply of petrol I’d ask nothing better,” remarked Allan.

“It’s getting pretty near high noon too, don’t forget,” said Bumpus, significantly; “and human beings have to be fed as well as cranky old engines. I ought to have asked that accommodating fellow whether there was any village on the bank of the river down this way. Seems to me there must be. Anyhow we could try every house we struck, and see if some lady wouldn’t get us up a dinner for ready cash.”

“One thing I think we might do,” suggested Thad; “that’s lay in something at the very next chance. I mean food to cook, together with several pans, and a pot to boil coffee in. Then we’d feel independent of any inn; and if overtaken by night could get on fairly well.”

Bumpus expressed delight at the idea.

“I think it’s a great scheme, Thad!” he declared, with beaming face; “and really I’m surprised that none of us have thought of that dodge before. We’ve got plenty of room aboard the old machine to stow things; and for my part it’s going to bring up heaps of happy memories of by-gone days and nights, when we’ve sat around a jolly camp fire with our mates.”

“Then that settles it,” decided the scout leader.

“And, Thad,” called out Giraffe, after one of his observations, “unless all signs are wrong we’re going to have a chance to get some dinner, and p’r’aps lay in all those stores, because there’s a village ahead of us.”

“That eagle eye of yours is correct as usual, Giraffe,” said Allan, after taking a look for himself.

CHAPTER XXIII.

“A TEMPEST IN A TEAPOT.”

Bumpus seemed to scent more trouble ahead.

“Now I certainly do hope we’ll be able to get what we want here at this place,” he went on to remark, dubiously. “So few of these Belgians in this section of the country understand plain United States as she is spoken. We’ll have to make use of signs to bargain with them for our grub.”

Thereupon Bumpus began to practice what he imagined was a good idea for showing he was hungry, and wanted to buy food. He rubbed his stomach, sighed heavily, then pointed to his open mouth and champed his jaws vigorously, after which he smiled sweetly, and, with a nod of his head, held up a franc.

“Oh! you’ll be able to satisfy anybody going that your proper place is in an asylum, Bumpus, if you carry on that way,” jeered Giraffe; “you leave it all to Thad and Allan and me. We have the goods, and can deliver them. They’re all wool and a yard wide, let me tell you, too.”

So the car entered the village, and pulled up in the most likely place the pilot could see. This was where there seemed to be some sort of open-air market, with all manner of things good to eat exposed for sale.

Their coming of course excited considerable interest. People began to cluster around the car as soon as it stopped. Curious eyes observed the inmates, with their natty khaki uniforms. Of course there were few among them but who realized that these lads must be Boy Scouts, but they seemed to understand immediately that they were not of the Belgian type.

The boys jumped out and started to try and find some one who could understand what they desired to do. Bumpus alone was left sitting there in the car, and he

amused himself looking around. When he thought his chums were well out of sight he concluded to try his little scheme; so taking a coin from his pocket he held it up and began his grotesque motions.

At first the crowd seemed to watch him in wonder. Then they began to say things among themselves, and smile. After that some of the half-grown boys laughed rudely, and began to mimic poor Bumpus.

This humiliated him so that he stopped his show, realizing that they were beginning to look on him as some sort of circus performer, perhaps a hokus-pokus medicine fakir on his travels, and trying to gather a crowd around before opening his box of goods for sale.

Meanwhile the other boys were trying to find some one who could talk English, in order to engage a midday meal, and later on purchase what supplies they needed.

Thad noticed almost immediately that there was a scarcity of able-bodied men in the river village. He knew the reason, because every one capable of bearing arms had been hurried to the front to try and resist the invaders.

Women, old men, cripples, and children of all sizes made up the population of the place, and Thad really believed the entire village must have come out of doors to size up the strangers within their gates.

Although at the time he did not imagine any harm could come of their separating, Thad afterwards wished he had insisted on the other two keeping with him. If that had been done possibly they would have been saved from more or less inconvenience, not to use a harsher term.

The patrol leader had just managed to locate what looked like a sort of tavern where possibly they could make arrangements for a dinner, if they waited until it could be prepared, when he saw part of the crowd heaving in a strange way. At the same time loud angry voices began to reach his ears.

Allan was hurrying towards him from another direction, as though he too had noticed the upheaval and considered it best that they consolidate their forces.

“It must be Giraffe who’s gone and gotten himself into trouble some way or other,” Allan was saying hurriedly as he joined Thad.

“We’ll soon know,” added the other, “because they’re pushing this way now. Yes, and there’s Giraffe in the lead too. See him brush off the hands of those women and boys. They look excited enough to tear him to pieces! This is a bad job, I’m afraid.”

“What can have happened to cause it?” said Allan, glancing back uneasily toward the car, and finding that it was near at hand, with the alarmed Bumpus already standing up to observe what was going on.

“I’m afraid,” said Thad, hurriedly, “Giraffe has been unwise enough in trying to make himself understood to air his German, and that’s made these people suspect we may be spies sent on ahead of the army to get the lay of the land, and learn where they’re hiding all their valuables and wine.”

In another minute Giraffe came hurrying up. He was looking disturbed, and a little white of face, though his teeth were clenched, and there was an ominous glitter in his eyes.

“What’s all the row about, Giraffe?” asked Thad, though he had to speak much louder than ordinary on account of the noise made by the increasing mob.

Boys were whooping, women shrieking and chattering as they shook their fists toward the four strangers, and taken in all the prospect was decidedly stormy. No wonder Bumpus was rubbing his chubby hands together, and staring with open mouth at the “tempest in a teapot.”

“I don’t know what ails the sillies!” cried Giraffe, indignantly. “I was trying my best to make them understand that we wanted a dinner and to buy some food. One fellow turned around and shouted something to the others. Then they began to flock about me like people at a county fair do when the snake-charmer comes out of the side-show to give an exhibition with her scaly pets. Say, they even tried to lay hands on me but I shook ’em off!”

“Look here,” said Thad, sternly, “did you try any of your German on them?” demanded Thad.

Giraffe wilted at once.

“Why, yes, I own up I did, Thad!” he confessed. “You see I thought some of them might be able to understand the language, and I bet you they do too; but

whee! they acted mad at me. I never thought my German was as rank as that.”

“Don’t you understand that German is in bad favor through Belgium just now? Those who do speak it are trying to forget all they know. When strangers drop into a Belgian village and talk it, with the Kaiser’s army only a few miles away, it’s only natural they suspect us. Now I’ve got to try like everything to set things right.”

So saying Thad turned to the shouting crowd, and held up his hand. Somehow there was something about the boy to inspire confidence. The yelling and jeering gradually died down. Several old men cowed the boys and the women. Possibly they told them to give the stranger a chance to explain.

“Is there any one here who talks English?” called out Thad.

At that an old man pushed his way forward through the crowd. Judging from the deference shown him by the others he must be a person of considerable importance in this humble little village on the river.

“I do, young m’sieu,” he said. “I lived in London some years, and learned the language. What is it you desire to say?”

Thad smiled. He knew now he would be able to convince these good people that far from being German spies or even sympathizers, he and his chums were deeply concerned over the threatened fate of poor little Belgium, in danger of being made the battleground for warring neighbors.

“We are American Boy Scouts,” he started to say. “We have been traveling through the country, and had just made a trip down the Rhine when we heard that war had broken out. One of my friends has a sick mother in Antwerp. We are trying our best to make our way to her. We bought this old car to help us along. When we get to our journey’s end we expect to turn it over to the authorities, if they can make any use of it.”

“But why does this young m’sieu speak the hated language?” asked the old man, looking straight at Giraffe.

“He learned it in school, and thought some one might be able to understand him,” continued the scout leader. “He was asking where we could buy some dinner, and then a few supplies afterwards. That is all. It was not wise for him to

expose his knowledge of German, but the very fact that he did so proves he meant no wrong. See, we have our passports to prove who we are.”

The old man came closer, to look the documents over. Thad just then felt glad to remember that he had concealed in the lining of his hat the paper given him by the German aviator whose life they had saved. It might have been very unpleasant for the boys had this been found on his person.

Besides the passports Thad exhibited several letters he had received from across the water since coming abroad. Allan and Giraffe also contributed their quota to this display. It really had more influence on the old villager than the official documents, which might be false after all, but he knew those stamps and post-marks must be the genuine thing.

The old man turned and talked to the crowd. Evidently what he said impressed the assemblage, for their angry looks gave way to others of a more genial nature, though some of the half-grown boys continued to get their heads together, and confer mysteriously, as they looked at the car with Bumpus in it.

“Here is the proprietor of the inn,” said their friend, the old villager, who had once worked at his trade in the great city across the Channel. “He has promised to supply you with dinner in half an hour. If you wish to buy anything you are at liberty to do so. But I would not leave the car alone, for something might happen to it.”

Thad told Giraffe to get in along with Bumpus while he and Allan made what purchases they had in mind. As fast as these were secured, which was only after more or less argument in the deaf and dumb alphabet, the boys carried the things to the car and stowed them away.

Bumpus saw that in the end they were well supplied with enough food to last several meals, as well as a tin pail in which they could boil coffee.

As the half hour was now about up they took the car into the inn-yard, and Thad meant to keep an eye on it if possible while they ate their dinner. This was rendered possible because he sat where he could look out of an open window; but after all nothing out of the way happened.

The boys noticed that there had been a bridge at this place, but it seemed to have been destroyed by some flood, for a new one was under construction, though

only partly built, and of no use at that time.

This of course necessitated their going further along the river road until they arrived at the small bridge of which they had been told by the Belgian soldiers some time before.

There was no fault to be found with their meal. Even Bumpus admitted that it tasted good, and was in abundance. So the four scouts arose with a feeling of satisfaction, and Thad settled the account. It is not a very hard matter to pay bills, even when two parties are unable to speak each other's language, for signs and the sight of money go a long way toward settlement.

As they passed out Thad saw their old friend beckoning to him.

"Get in the car, fellows, and I'll join you as soon as I've had a few words with the old chap, and thanked him heartily for his friendly act," said the leader.

A few minutes afterwards he came hurrying toward them, and when Giraffe saw the way Thad's brows were knitted he knew some new trouble was in store for them.

"What's coming next, Thad?" he asked, and if any one had taken the pains to look beneath the surface they might have found an undercurrent of satisfaction in the tones of the tall scout.

"Our good old friend has warned me that a parcel of the rougher boys of the village have started out, meaning to waylay us, and take our car away. He says they've got an idea we've no business riding around when their military authorities need every sort of motor car they can get. And that's how the land lies, boys!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE AMBUSCADE.

“Well, here’s a nice kettle of fish!” burst out Bumpus, fixing his eyes on the scout leader, as though mentally asking what Thad meant to do.

The actions of Giraffe spoke louder than words could have done. With a really wicked grin he reached down and took something in his hand which it seemed he had stowed away in the body of the car. It was a club almost the size of a baseball bat, one of those home-run kind boys talk about, and call “the old wagon-tongue.”

“Say, I had a sort of hunch this would come in handy sooner or later, and now I know it!” Giraffe muttered, with a shake of his head.

“But what do you suppose this means, Thad?” asked Allan, with a puzzled look on his face. “I always understood these Belgian boys were well-behaved chaps, and the last ones in the world to do a thing like this. If we were in some town across in our own country it wouldn’t seem so strange.”

“Stop and think for a minute what’s happening here in Belgium this very day,” said Thad. “A million Germans have overrun the country, and every Belgian capable of bearing arms is hurrying to the battle line. Of course the boys are worked up to fever heat. You all saw how they acted when that mob surrounded us. They’re not the same well-behaved boys they were two weeks ago. The excitement has settled in their brains.”

“But, Thad, that doesn’t mean we’ve got to hand them over the old car, does it?” asked Bumpus.

“Certainly not,” he was assured.

“Will we have to turn back again so as to keep from having a row?” continued

the fat scout, anxiously.

“Well, I should hope not,” burst out Giraffe, angrily. “I’d be willing to turn back before the majesty of the whole German army, but I’ll be hanged if I want to knuckle down to a pack of kids. If you ask my opinion there it is, straight goods!”

“There’s another thing,” said Thad, “that I think has had some influence on these boys, or given them the idea of holding us up.”

He pointed to a fence across from the inn-yard. It had some gaudy bills pasted on it, which apparently none of the others had noticed before, though taught to use their eyes as scouts on every occasion.

“Why, those look mighty familiar!” said Bumpus.

“What’s this?” cried Giraffe. “A regular American Wild West show over here in Belgium, raking in the coin this last summer? Thad, if that gave an exhibition here, or anywhere close by, I can understand what you mean. The kids must have been practicing throwing the rope, and holding up stages ever since. Yes, by George! that’s where they get this idea from, as sure as anything.”

“After all, the world is getting smaller all the time,” remarked Allan, “when you can find such pictures as those thousands of miles away from home. Before long it may be all Japan, China and India will be looking at our cowboys perform, and the Indians hold up stage coaches.”

“Oh! they do that already,” Thad told him; “for the moving pictures are being shown all around the world. But I’ve got an idea. Wait here for me, fellows.”

With that the scout leader hurried away, leaving the trio to talk matters over, and trying to guess what he had in view. A short time later Thad reappeared, with a little package in his hand.

“I just happened to notice some whips for sale at a store in the place,” he explained, “and I’ve bought several. If we’re forced to we’ll use them on those boys the best we know how. The old man told me they were the bad lot of the village, so you see they do have them even over in Belgium.”

“How that takes me back to dear old Cranford,” sighed Bumpus, “where we used

to have all manner of times with Brose Griffin and his cronies, Eli Bangs and Walt Hopkins. So they have a rowdy element here too, do they? Thad, I hope you didn't forget me when laying in that stock of cowhides?"

"Three covered the entire stock they had," the other told him; "and so Giraffe will have to depend on that club of his; only I hope he uses it carefully. It's big and heavy enough to floor anybody."

Giraffe nodded, and smiled.

"Oh! I'll be on the watch not to knock the poor chaps silly, if they take warning, and clear out," he remarked, as he hid the article in question away, but in a place where it could be quickly seized.

It was in anything but a pleasant humor that Thad prepared to leave the village where they had been hospitably entertained, after that first little misunderstanding. He did not like this idea of meeting the attack of the Belgian boys with violence, but there seemed to be no other way, for the old man had declined to ride out with them, saying that he did not wish to be connected at all with the matter, and considered his duty done in giving them due warning.

Thad was really under the impression that he would not be sorry if the boys received some sort of drubbing to pay them for their audacity in treating strangers in the way they intended.

There was no choice about the route; it was necessary that they go up or down the river, since no other road led away from the place. Of course across the river there was one they would have been glad to have taken, only with the bridge gone it was not possible to get the car over.

"Somebody waving his hand to us, Thad, over there at that cottage window," observed the watchful Giraffe.

"I think it must be our old friend," said Thad, as he made haste to answer the signal. "Yes, I can see his face now, and his gray beard."

They passed out of the village, with the people simply looking after them, for all signs of resentment had apparently died out. These good folks had too many serious troubles of their own to think of hunting up new ones.

“I wonder how far we’ll get before they jump out at us?”

That was Bumpus trying to secure an opinion. It was one of his ways of fishing for what he called “a rise.” And as usual Giraffe hastened to accommodate him.

“Oh! not far, you can depend on it, Bumpus,” he said, “because they haven’t been gone long, and would have to tramp it. I reckon now they’d just want to get say half a mile or so outside the place, so the racket they kick up won’t reach the ears of their folks here.”

“Undo the package, Allan,” said Thad, with a business-like air.

This being done disclosed three stout whips of the type often spoken of as “cowhides.” Bumpus immediately took possession of one, and seemed to be as tickled as a child with a new toy.

“They’re just prime stuff, Thad,” he asserted. “Course I’ve never dusted any fellow’s jacket with such a thing, and I don’t hanker after the job now; but what has to be can’t be helped. I’ll promise you to do my level best to sting their legs, for that’s the best way, I take it.”

Giraffe looked at the whips rather enviously. Possibly he almost felt sorry he had displayed that ferocious club so hastily; only for that he might have been given one of the cowhides to manipulate, instead of Bumpus.

They had by this time left the village behind them. The river lay on their left, and the further bank was not very far away. Thad was watching the road in advance, as though mentally figuring on where they would run across the ambushade planned by these bellicose Belgian boys.

“There’s some sort of a turn I can see up yonder, Thad,” ventured Giraffe, with his neck stretched in his favorite manner when sighting things, and which peculiarity had given him his queer nick-name.

“Yes, it’s a bend, all right,” added Allan.

“Just around a place like that would offer a fine chance to jump out on us, I’d think,” suggested Giraffe.

He was bending down while speaking, and taking hold of his cudgel as though

intending to be ready when the call to duty came.

“Listen,” said Thad, impressively. “I’ll stop the car the very second they come in sight. The chances are they’ll have the road blocked in some way, so as to prevent our getting past. Then when I give the word everybody get out in a hurry, and meet their rush with the liveliest business you know how.”

“He didn’t say how many there were in this bunch, did he, Thad?” asked Bumpus.

“No, and I forgot to ask him,” came the reply.

“That’s the way with scouts always,” said Giraffe, pompously. “When danger comes along a scout shouldn’t say, ‘How many are there of the enemy,’ but just shout out, ‘Where are they, so I can get busy?’”

“Half a dozen or ten, it doesn’t matter,” said Allan, “we’re primed to scatter them like chaff before the wind. Remember they are bringing all this trouble down on their own silly heads. It isn’t any of our choosing.”

It was in this resolute spirit then that they approached the bend in the river road, around which they fully expected to find trouble lurking. Bumpus was so tremendously excited that he actually seemed to be holding his breath. His blue eyes were round, and staring at that curve in the road now dreadfully near; and if the hand that gripped that tough cowhide trembled it was from nervous tension, not fear.

Apparently all was calm and peaceful about that spot. Not a single sign of anything unusual could the four scouts detect as they came close to the bend. Doubtless watchful eyes had noted their coming, and the news had been duly conveyed to those who were in hiding, so that they would know when to commence operations.

Now the car had reached the turn and was commencing to negotiate it. Whatever was in store for the chums it could not be longer delayed. Still, so far as they could see after swinging around the curve, the road was perfectly clear of all manner of obstacles, which fact rather surprised Giraffe, who had evidently anticipated discovering a log thrown in such a way as to completely barricade the thoroughfare.

“Why, they don’t seem to be here after all, Thad!” he exclaimed.

Giraffe spoke just a second too soon. In fact hardly had the last word left his lips when there was something doing just ahead of them.

A shrill whistle sounded, and at that the bushes on both sides of the road seemed to be alive with leaping figures. Some seven or eight boys had been concealed there, and now hurried out on the road. Some of them carried branches, others stones, and still more hastened to throw a half-rotten log across the road, effectually blocking it for the passage of a vehicle, especially a car.

Thad was ready for just this sort of thing. He instantly shut off the power and there was no trouble whatever in coaxing the car to come to a complete standstill—there never was any complaint along this score, all the anxiety being in the other direction.

Immediately the Belgian boys rushed to surround the car. Their actions were very threatening, for they shouted, and waved their arms, and several even had sticks with which they cut the air venomously. Perhaps they expected that the four boys in khaki would just naturally throw up their hands in the same way the actors in the American show had done when the road-agents were robbing the stage coach.

It was a mistake, and those Belgian lads discovered this for themselves before five more seconds had passed. Instead of displaying a willingness to yield without any struggle the strangers immediately started in to “rough house” it in the most approved fashion.

“Go for ’em!” shouted Giraffe, as he made a leap over the side of the car, just as furiously as he had many a time in the past accomplished a “flying tackle” in battling for his school colors on the gridiron.

The others were not far behind him, even clumsy Bumpus displaying unwonted agility in bouncing out of the car, rawhide in hand.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SCOUTS' CAMP FIRE.

It was certainly pretty lively while it lasted. Giraffe, who liked excitement must have felt quite in his element when turning the tables on those plotting Belgian boys who had figured in taking their car away from them, so as to offer it to the Government, just then so sadly in need of transportation facilities.

However laudable their ambition may have been Thad and his three friends were determined that they would block the game. With this purpose in view they commenced to spring a pretty surprise on their assailants.

The three who wielded the whips started to flay the legs of the ambushing force, and immediately the shouts that had been intended to intimidate the scouts began to change their tune and become yells.

Giraffe, too, was swinging that club with his old-time vigor. True, he had no particular animosity against these native boys who thought they were only doing a patriotic duty; but Giraffe believed he had a right to fight for his property, and he claimed a quarter interest in that car, miserable affair though it was.

Had the Belgian boys been equipped with the same type of weapons as Thad and his chums it might have been a longer battle, for they would probably given as good as they took. Since the advantage was all on one side, save in numbers, the end was a foregone conclusion.

Some of the astonished boys started to run, then came back and took a second generous dose, before concluding that the game was up.

A signal was finally given which must have been the recall, for immediately the wielders of the whips and the club found their occupation gone, since their adversaries had retreated in hot haste.

Thad saw that they darted into the brush, and suspected their main object was to secure some sort of fighting material for themselves, after which they would likely return to the attack.

He did not want any more of that rough and tumble sort of scramble if it could be avoided; and a quick “getaway” was the one thing needful in such a case.

“Clear the road!” he called out, suiting his actions to his words by jumping forward to seize hold of the log, which with a few adroit turns he sent spinning into the ditch.

The others hastened to do their share, and in less time than it takes to tell it a passage had been made through the barricade.

“That’s enough!” called Thad, giving his orders with the precision of a military commander; “now get aboard, for we’re going to start off!”

Bumpus had been expecting something like this. Knowing his faculty for lagging he was already “legging” it for the car when Thad spoke. Thus he managed to clamber aboard in good time, and fall on his knees inside the tonneau of the car.

Giraffe came flying after him, landing almost on his back; but a little thing like that was not to be noticed when the main object had been accomplished. They had managed to get rid of their tormentors for the time being, and this gave Thad a chance to start the engine.

There was fortunately no need of cranking, and hardly had Allan clutched hold of the car to swing himself aboard when it was moving off.

“Duck your heads, everybody; they’re going to bombard us with stones!” shouted Giraffe, as a missile struck the back of the car with a bang.

Several came aboard, and one by some freak of fortune took Bumpus square in the back, causing him to give a loud grunt, though he declared it was nothing to bother about.

The fusillade continued until the car, increasing its momentum, managed to draw so far away that the stones fell short. When this became a certainty Giraffe, looking back, told them the Belgian boys had given up the pursuit.

“Ha! guess that was a case of the biter bitten!” said Giraffe, assuming all the airs of a victor expecting to be crowned with the laurel wreath; although if the question had been actually put to him he must have admitted that three other fellows had also had a “finger in the pie.”

“We got out of the scrape better than I thought we would,” said Bumpus, “when I saw how many of them there were. Giraffe, you’re a good friend of mine, ain’t you? Would you mind rubbing me in the middle of the back? Please not *quite* so hard, for you see that rock gave me a bit of a clump there, and raised a knob, I guess.”

“I’m wondering what’s going to strike us next,” ventured Allan; “for when you come to look at it we’ve been having some of the queerest adventures on this trip that ever could have happened.”

Bumpus shook his head as though he might be ready to pass the puzzle along.

“It’s too deep for me, Allan,” he said. “I’d think we’d pretty nearly exhausted the whole list by now, but still there may be more coming. It’s making me believe we’re fated not to get through with this car, after all, and that we’ll soon run up against a snag so big that it’ll sink our craft.”

“So long as we don’t go down with it I won’t kick,” asserted Giraffe, who seemed to be feeling much more cheery since that last little exciting affair. “And Bumpus, after all what does it matter how you get to Antwerp so long as you pull up there sooner or later?”

“Oh! I’m getting reconciled to almost anything,” admitted Bumpus, showing that this constant series of happenings was beginning to have an effect on even his stubborn nature, just as water dripping constantly will wear away a stone in the course of time.

Thus talking they moved speedily along the river road until finally Giraffe announced he had sighted the bridge over which they hoped to be able to cross the stream, and head once more for the big city on the Schelde.

There were some Belgian soldiers on guard here also, possibly older men who had not expected to go to the front, yet had a certain line of duty to perform in this the latest crisis of their beloved country’s history.

Just as Thad expected they had to stop and give an account of themselves, as well as show their passports, and the letters with the American stamps. They were again lucky in having one of the Belgians able to talk with them, for it turned out that he had been in America, and even asked them how Hoboken was getting along.

Satisfied with being permitted to cross the bridge and pursue their journey the four scouts waved good-bye to the guards and started on.

“Well, that was a hard river to cross let me tell you,” said Giraffe after they reached the other side. “Just stop and think how many times we’ve been knocked out of our calculations. There was the battle we saw that blocked us; then the bridge that had been fixed to trap some of the raiding Uhlans when they came galloping along, and tried to rush things; after that there was the one that was being built in the village, and which of course we couldn’t use; and at last we struck oil up here, many miles out of our way.”

“Seems to me we’ve been pushing backwards part of the time, Thad, instead of advancing,” ventured Bumpus. “Makes me think of the boy who was late to school and told the teacher that every time he took a step forward he slipped back two; and when the teacher asked him how he ever managed to get there he said he just turned around and headed the other way; so mebbe that’s what we’re doing. Where do you figure we are now, Thad?”

“As near as I can find out,” replied the scout leader, “we’re not far from the town called Moll, which is on the railroad. There’s a canal somewhere nearby, that swings around to the city of Turnhout, and then still on to Antwerp. I should say that we’re not more than seven miles or so from the Dutch border.”

“And how far from Antwerp?” asked Bumpus, anxiously.

“As the crow flies not more than thirty miles, perhaps,” Thad explained; “but the way things are upset here in Belgium, that stands for hard sledding.”

“Here’s the canal right now, after we cross the railroad,” ventured Giraffe, to whom it was all getting very interesting.

“But the sun is going down before a great while, you notice,” said Bumpus, because they had been held up for nearly two hours while Thad tinkered with that horrible engine again, and deemed himself lucky to get it started even then.

“Yes, and as we’ve settled on staying outdoors to-night,” said Allan, “let’s be on the watch for a decent place to make camp.”

“Just think of our having a chance to do that over here in Belgium, with battles going on all around us,” Giraffe remarked. “We’ll make those other scouts turn green with envy when we relate all our adventures on this trip. It was fine enough coming down the Rhine, but then nothing queer happened to us like we’ve been up against the last few days.”

A short time later they struck what looked like an ideal place for stopping overnight. Just here there were no houses in sight, though of course the boys did not know what lay beyond, perhaps a village or a town. Belgium is so thickly populated that very little ground is allowed to remain idle, or be planted in trees, but just here there was a strip of woods that had a most inviting look.

So the car was run in and they started to make themselves comfortable, as scouts of long experience might be expected to do when surrounded by similar conditions.

“I hope that when we’re just sitting down to supper, after cooking the same,” Bumpus remarked, pensively, “some old gruff Belgian farmer doesn’t come hurrying up, complaining because we’ve trespassed on his property, and making us clear out bag and baggage.”

To Bumpus that represented the sum total of depravity; it meant a catastrophe without limit, and something to cause a shudder, even in the bare contemplation; for it meant hunger, and that was always a calamity in his eyes.

“Not much danger,” Allan told him, “because you may have noticed I’m making this fire small, and out of extra-dry stuff. Scouts know that if you take green wood you’ll always get a smoke that can be seen far off. That’s what we use it for when we want to communicate by smoke signals. But Bumpus, if you were fifty feet away I don’t think you could notice smoke from this wood.”

“But I warrant you he could sense cooking going on, all right,” Giraffe laughingly observed. “You never can fool Bumpus on that. He can scent an onion frying half a mile away, can’t you, Bumpus?”

“I couldn’t deny the soft impeachment, for I know I’ve got a splendid nose for grub,” admitted the good-natured scout.

Although the means for cooking supper were somewhat primitive because these boys had always been accustomed to having a full kit along with them, still they knew how to manage. Consequently in good time, just as it was getting dusk, the meal was pronounced ready, and all of them gathered around to share in its disposal, a duty that no one ever complained of.

They were hungry, and somehow the familiar odors seemed to give an edge to their appetites that nothing else had done.

For a little while talking ceased, because every one was too busily engaged to bother making any remark. Then as the edge was taken off their appetites they commenced to exchange comments on the doings of that particular day, which could always be marked with a white stone in their memories.

Suddenly and without the slightest warning there came a terrific sneeze that startled them all. It came from the bushes close at hand, that much even Bumpus knew. Of course every eye was turned in that direction, being focussed on a certain spot where the bushes seemed to be moving.

As they stared, hardly knowing what to expect, there arose the lanky form of a man. He made no hostile move, but stood there looking at them; and Bumpus even fancied he was sniffing the air, just as a half-starved dog might, when approaching the spot where a feast was being devoured.

“Don’t shoot, gents!” this singular being called out. “I’m not dangerous at all, only as hungry as a wolf. From what I’ve heard you saying I opine that you’re American the same as myself; and I’m sure hoping you’ll invite me up to join you in a snack.”

CHAPTER XXVI.

A TATTOOED FUGITIVE.

Thad did not wait to consult his chums on hearing what the forlorn figure standing amidst the bushes said; he knew they would back him up in his generous impulse.

“If you are an American you’ll be doubly welcome here,” he called out; “but no matter where you came from, if you’re hungry we’ve got plenty and to spare. Step this way and join us!”

The man did not hesitate after that warm invitation, but hustled forward. They looked curiously at him, and no wonder, for he was apparently no ordinary individual. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbow and it could be seen that his arms were fairly covered with the most wonderful colored tattoo marks imaginable. Really it looked like the work of an artist in this line; and Bumpus, who had never gazed upon such a sight stared as though the other were a curiosity.

It turned out that this was just what he was, and Thad suspected it the first thing he discovered those tell-tale marks.

“You see,” said the stranger, as he joined the scouts, “I’m the wonderful tattooed man of the great circus and Wild West Show that has been exhibiting in Belgium this summer. We got caught when the war broke out so suddenly. Our boss told every one to look out for himself or herself, and with that the whole show went to smash. The last I saw of our Injuns they were being herded up by the authorities of the town where we separated. They were afraid they’d start on the warpath, and scalp everybody, I guess.”

“Sit down here on this log,” said Allan, “and we’ll help you to some coffee and whatever we’ve got. It’s lucky we cooked much more than we needed. I think

Bumpus and Giraffe must have expected company, or else overrated their own appetites.”

“Bumpus and Giraffe sound good to me!” declared the tall stranger, as he looked with a smile at the two boys designated; “somehow hearing those names gives me a feeling that I’m still with the Big Show. But I want to tell you it’s a piece of great luck for me to meet up with you boys. To look for Americans over here is as bad as hunting a needle in a haystack.”

“Then you’ve been having a hard time, I take it?” remarked Thad, as he heaped a pan with food and turned it over to their unexpected guest.

“Hard!” echoed the other. “I’m thankful to be alive, and outside of a dungeon tonight. And what d’ye think it all comes from but my name.”

“What might that be?” asked Giraffe.

“The worst any poor man marooned in Belgium or France could own up to right now,” replied the other; “it’s Kaiser!”

“Oh! my stars!” ejaculated Bumpus. “I should say so; and you couldn’t change it, I suppose?”

“I’d been billed under my own name as the greatest freak alive, the man whose body was decorated with more dragons and flags and pretty girls than anything ever seen before. Yes, and until a week ago I was proud of that name of Kaiser. Now it threatens to be the death of me.”

He groaned a little, and then started to eating voraciously. After a while, when he had seemingly taken the sharp edge off his appetite, he condescended to explain further, knowing of course that his kind entertainers must be curious to hear his story.

“You see, they know me all over Belgium by now. Crowds would stand and stare at me, and try to ask questions. The boss had to keep an interpreter nearby to answer these. Some of them were terribly foolish. It even seemed to many of these simple people that I was in some way connected by blood with Kaiser Wilhelm; and fool that I was, I never bothered correcting that silly idea. Bitterly have I repented that mistake. It has cost me dearly.”

“After the circus disbanded and you had to shift for yourself,” remarked Thad, “I suppose you thought to get out of the country before the fighting began?”

“Well, at first I wasn’t in any hurry,” came the reply, with a shrug of the bony shoulders of the side-show freak. “When I did wake up and get busy it was just too late. You see the people remembered that I was a Kaiser, and they had it in for me. Oh! what I have suffered. Turned back one day, kicked out of a town the next, threatened with prison, and doors shut in my face when I tried to beg or buy something to eat, I’ve lived the life of a dog for days.”

“Well, that was too bad,” said the kind-hearted Bumpus; “here, let me fill your tin cup again with coffee, Mr. Kaiser.”

“Please don’t mention that name again above a whisper, while we’re in Belgium,” pleaded the other. “It’s just like showing a red flag to a mad bull. Call me Bob, if you feel like it, boys. I’ll come to any name these days, especially if there’s a feed like this goes with it.”

“What are you aiming to do next?” asked Thad.

“I’m heading north the best I can,” he explained. “When after being kicked and cuffed around I found that it was useless to hope to get to Antwerp where I might steam over to England, I knew that the next best thing for me to do was to cross into the Netherlands, where they wouldn’t abuse me on account of my name.”

“But are you a German?” asked Giraffe.

“I was born in the good old United States,” replied the freak. “I believe my ancestors did come from the Fatherland, but to tell you the truth I haven’t a bit of German feeling in me. I’m Yankee to the backbone. I ran away as a boy, and have knocked about the four corners of the world, principally in the Far East, where all this wonderful tattoo work was done for me, a little at a time. When I’m done eating I’ll let you see what my body looks like. I’m told that there’s nothing like it known.”

“Do you like being a freak?” asked Bumpus, innocently.

The man looked at him and smiled. Every one liked Bumpus from the first, because there was something so candid and sincere about him. You could look

straight into those blue eyes of his and believe that there was no hypocrisy or deceit lurking back of their depths.

“Well, son, I do and I don’t,” the other finally replied. “I know now I was a fool to get this done, but once it was started, there could be no rubbing it out, you understand, because it’s picked in with indelible colors. It gets me a living by exhibiting myself, and people do lots of mighty queer things for that, in their journey through this old world.”

“But if you had the chance again would you allow it to be done?” asked Giraffe, who himself had an anchor in blue upon his arm, of which he had been rather proud in the past.

“Not if I was in my right senses,” came the prompt reply. “To tell you the truth the first tattooing I had was given to me against my will when I was held a prisoner among some wild men in Borneo. They thought my white skin was a good background to display the art of their boss tattooer. Later on the crazy idea came to me to have it continued, and then join some show. I think with what little money I’ve got saved over in Philadelphia I’ll buy a farm and settle down, if only I’m lucky enough to get out of this war-cursed country alive.”

Later on the fugitive circus freak did let the boys look him over, and all of them united in declaring that he certainly was a wonderful exhibition of the art of tattooing in bright colors. Giraffe mentally decided, however, that he would never allow another anchor, or any other design for that matter, to be placed upon his arms. This awful example had effectually cured his leaning in that direction.

The man sat there for fully two hours and entertained his young hosts with amazing stories connected with his adventurous past. Whether they were all true or not might always be open to suspicion, but then none of the scouts doubted that he had been through a maze of exploits, equal to anything they had ever read in those books so dear to the heart of youth, “Robinson Crusoe,” “Swiss Family Robinson,” “Gulliver’s Travels,” “Sindbad the Sailor” and “The Arabian Nights’ Entertainment.”

Later on they disposed of themselves the best way they could, and managed to secure more or less sleep while the night lasted.

Nothing occurred to disturb them. If there were various sounds heard during the

time that the moon rode high in the heavens they were not of a character to cause any alarm.

So morning found them, and breakfast was prepared in much the same fashion as supper had been on the preceding evening. Bob Kaiser was loud in his protestations of gratitude as he shook the hand of each scout at parting. He told them he would never forget what they had done for him; and from that time forth he meant to say a good word for scouts wherever he went.

When the four lads saw him last, as they moved off along the road, he was waving farewell in answer to their salute, before turning his face toward the north.

Upon the whole they were very glad such an opportunity to extend a helping hand had come to them. It must always please a genuine scout to be of assistance to any one in distress; and the fact that the party had been a fellow American added to the satisfaction they felt.

The man had told them he had friends at Amsterdam who would look out for him if only he could get there; and with a reasonable amount of good luck he surely ought to be able to cover the seven miles, more or less, between their camping place and the border, during the day ahead of him.

In fact, Thad almost envied him his resolution to head that way. It seemed the shortest route to safety in those strenuous days when the whole of Belgium was ablaze with excitement, hostile armies battling for supremacy, and every one suspicious of all strangers.

“To-day will decide the question for us,” Allan was saying, an hour or so after they had started that morning; “if we manage to pull through up to night time without any more backsets, we can consider it settled that we’re going to make Antwerp by this route.”

No one disagreed with him. Even Bumpus was figuring what thirty miles “as the crow flies” might mean, when they had to follow varying trails and roads, subject to the whims of any military commands they chanced to meet.

“Something coming ahead there!” announced the ever-watchful Giraffe.

On looking the others could see that a cloud of dust was rising in the direction

they were heading. This of course indicated the passage of some considerable number of men or horses along the road.

“Another battery coming from Antwerp and hurrying to the front by this route,” speculated Allan, and indeed that seemed the most probable explanation of the disturbance.

“There, I heard what sounded like the clatter of horses’ hoofs then,” announced Giraffe, with his hand cupped at his ear to imitate the rabbit, which a kindly Nature has so constructed as to be able to throw its ears forward and catch the slightest sound that otherwise would be inaudible.

Thad listened, and as he did so his eyebrows went up as though a suspicion might be passing through his mind that Allan’s speculation was altogether wrong.

He too heard the clatter of hoofs now, for they were coming more heavily. To him it seemed as though there were many hundreds of them, and that they pounded the road more like a squadron of cavalry on the gallop.

Thad drew the car to one side of the road, and then stopped his engine. Until the mystery had been solved there was no use trying to proceed further. Perhaps this spot was to mark the high-water line of their advance on Antwerp.

“There, I can see them beginning to show up now!” cried Giraffe.

Moving figures came into view, constantly augmented until there must have been scores amidst the rising dust. No sooner had Thad noticed the fact that they were gray-coated, and that they carried what seemed to be lances, with small pennons fluttering at the ends, than he knew what it meant.

Giraffe voiced what all of them understood by that time when he ejaculated:

“Why, they’re German lancers, don’t you see, boys; the Uhlans we’ve heard so much about, the Rough Riders of the Kaiser, and raiding the country to cut off communications between the Belgian army and Brussels. Whew! now we’re in the soup!”

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE UHLAN HOLD-UP.

Bumpus was heard to give a big sigh.

“I can see our finish, boys,” he remarked, calmly, as though he had resigned himself to the inevitable. “I’m ready to cry quits, and hold up my hands. Holland looks pretty good to me just now.”

“Let’s wait and see what happens,” said Thad, though he secretly rejoiced to hear Bumpus admit this, for the fat scout had more at stake than the rest of them, in that his sick mother was waiting and watching in the city of the Schelde.

The Uhlans came swiftly along. If they noticed the old car drawn to one side of the road, out of the way, they gave no evidence of the fact until the leaders had arrived almost abreast of the spot.

Then a bugle sounded, and the whole squadron halted, causing the dust to mount up more furiously than ever.

A score of troopers gathered around the car, most of them officers, Thad could see, although the dust covered them so completely that it concealed the insignia of their rank to some extent.

“Giraffe, it’s your turn,” said Thad to the lanky scout; “air what German you know, and tell them we’re American Boy Scouts; also ask if one of them can converse with me in English.”

“There is no need to ask that, because most of us are familiar with your tongue,” said the stout officer who seemed to be in chief command, much to the satisfaction of the scouts. “But we must take that assertion of yours with a grain of allowance. We even suspect that you are English boys, bent on getting through our lines with valuable information for the enemy, which we cannot

allow, you understand.”

Thad was not surprised. He realized that at such a time every one who spoke the English language must come under the ban with the Teuton race. Already he had discovered that this stout man was inclined to be a martinet, and possibly ruthless in dealing with those whom he had reason to suspect.

“I assure you, sir,” he hastened to say, respectfully but firmly, “that we are every one of us native-born Americans. We were making a cruise down the Rhine and when we arrived at Cologne news that war had broken out gave us a shock. One of my comrades here has a sick mother in Antwerp, under the care of a specialist. That is why we are trying to make our way there.”

“Where did you get this car?” asked the officer, sternly.

“In Cologne, or rather near there, buying it from a man we met. I have the bill of sale here. It is a terrible car, and has broken down with us many times. That is why we were allowed to keep it.”

“But if, as you say, you were in Germany when the Kaiser’s troops crossed over into Belgium, how happens it you are here? They would not let you come by way of Aachen, where the glorious army crossed the border?”

Thad, of course, did not mean to tell how they had been hotly chased by German troopers, and just managed to elude them by reaching the Dutch guards in time. He fancied that such an account would hardly be likely to influence this stern looking Uhlan leader in their favor.

“We figured that there would be all sorts of difficulties in trying to cross at that point, sir,” the boy explained, simply; “and so we arranged to pass over into Holland where it is very narrow, and from there reach Belgium. That is what we have done.”

“Yet you have been allowed to proceed this far in peace, it seems?” observed the Prussian, as though he considered this a very significant fact.

“Oh! we have had all sorts of troubles besides our poor car breaking down,” Thad continued. “Yesterday from a hilltop we witnessed the fight for a bridge that was defended by a Belgian battery. The Germans charged bravely, and would have carried the bridge, but it had been mined, and was blown up just as

they reached it.”

The Uhlan officers exchanged glances. Thad was of the impression that possibly they may have been having a tragic little experience themselves in connection with the ingenuity shown by the Belgians in setting traps at bridge-heads. He remembered how he and his chums had been told by those Belgian soldiers that they had fixed it so the bridge they guarded would fall as soon as troopers started to swing across it, carrying some of them down in the ruins.

He heard them talking among themselves in German. Giraffe was listening eagerly to what he could catch, and when he found a chance he whispered to Thad what he was able to make of it.

“They say a breathing spell for the men will do no harm, and you can see their horses are sweating something fierce, Thad. But somehow all you’ve said doesn’t seem to have convinced that head officer. He must hate everything English like the mischief, for some reason or other. He’s telling them that perhaps we’re cunning spies after all, smart Britishers playing a game, and pretending to be neutral Americans. I’ll keep on listening and see what they mean to do, Thad.”

Meanwhile, now that most of the dust had settled, Thad found a chance to glance along the line, and notice what a sturdy, well-set lot those Uhlan raiders were. As a rule they seemed to be fair-haired young chaps, with clear eyes and ruddy cheeks. Thad was more than a little surprised. Like many others, he had imagined that all Uhlans, having such a reputation for daring and recklessness, must be grim-looking men, after the type of the Russian Cossacks. These fellows were not at all what he had pictured them.

They sat their saddles like men who were born to ride hard. And the horses were a picked lot, capable of standing great fatigue, Thad also noticed. After all he believed he would always be glad he had come in contact with these Uhlans; for he had wanted to see them at close quarters; and on that other occasion the moonlight did not allow of much scrutiny.

Presently the chief officer turned again to the boy in the car.

“Show me your passports!” he commanded, and if anything his voice and manner were sterner than before.

Thad was only too glad of the opportunity to do so. He also gave up the several letters so that the other could glance them over, which he proceeded to do. All that time the look of suspicion did not leave his set face. Every now and then he would eye the boys keenly.

“He just keeps on thinking we’re sailing under false colors, Thad,” muttered Giraffe, who had also observed the actions of the Uhlan commander.

“Take out what letters the rest of you have had from home since coming over,” said Thad, hoping that this would convince the other, and bring about their release; for should they be arrested as spies, and treated harshly, he considered that would be the hardest blow of all.

Even when he had carelessly glanced at these the face of the officer still wore that same frown, as though he could not get rid of his suspicion that they were really English boys, and all this might only be a cleverly arranged scheme to hide their identity.

Thad was almost ready to give up in despair. He felt that he had about reached the end of his rope, and could do nothing more. Just how these hard riders could hold them prisoners, and make them accompany them he could not guess, unless they happened to have four empty saddles among them. And it would be difficult to imagine Bumpus going at headlong speed across country, keeping pace with such mad riders as these Uhlans.

Then all at once Thad remembered something. It was not that a verbal plea would do any good, for he suspected the more he talked the stronger would this martinet be inclined to hold them under the ban of his displeasure.

The brief note written by the aviator whom they had aided—might not that be of benefit to their cause?

It will be remembered that Thad had taken pains to conceal this under the lining of his campaign hat, lest some Belgian eye read what the Taube birdman had written over his signature, and charge them with being German spies.

Taking off his hat he fumbled under the lining, and quickly produced the paper, a bit crumpled, and lacking freshness, but with the penciled writing plainly legible, which was all Thad cared about.

When he looked up he saw that many eyes had been following his motions, as if the Uhlans had had their curiosity aroused.

“There is one incident connected with our trip through this part of Belgium, sir, that I would like to speak of, hoping it will convince you we are what we claim to be, only that and nothing more. Have I your permission to tell you about this adventure, sir?”

“Proceed,” the officer told him; “we are giving the horses a little rest, which they sorely need, so a short delay will do no harm.”

“We were coming along when we had an accident to the engine. While I was making the necessary repairs one of my friends made an astonishing discovery. We saw the figure of a man caught in the top of a tall tree. He was moving his arm to us as if he hoped to attract our attention in that way. When we hurried up to the tree we found, just as we expected, the wreck of an aeroplane there!”

Thad purposely paused at that thrilling point so as to let them grasp the full force of his assertion. He was not much surprised when the officer demanded:

“Could you tell from the build of the aeroplane what sort of a machine it may have been, boy?”

“Yes, for I had noticed them while over in Germany, sir,” replied Thad. “It was a Taube model. We climbed the tree at once, three of us, and after some hard work managed to get the aviator safely down. He told us how he had been scouting over the Belgian lines when both his machine and himself were struck by shots. He tried to sail slowly to the ground miles away from the fighting line, but by hard luck struck that tree, and became caught there, his machine falling to the earth.”

Again Thad stopped as though to get his breath, but it was really done for effect and to give the officer a chance to ask a question, which he immediately did.

“Then you claim that this man whom you aided was a German aviator, do you?”

“He had a bad wound in his arm,” proceeded the boy, promptly, “which we had no trouble in binding up, because you may know, sir, that scouts are taught how to treat all manner of wounds. I am sure he felt very grateful on account of what little we were able to do for him. We were only carrying out the principles of our

scout organization. It did not matter to us whether he was German, Belgian or French, he was in need of assistance, and we gave it.”

The officer in command swept a look around at his comrades, and Thad saw that several of them nodded their heads as though they rather liked the way the boy in khaki had put forward his ideas concerning strict neutrality.

“Would you know the name of this German Taube operator if you heard it again, boy?” asked the commander.

“Oh! he left a note with us, which he signed with his name,” said Thad, smilingly; “you see he said it might be of assistance to us in case we came across any party of Uhlans on our travels. I supposed from that he must be pretty well known, although of course none of us had ever heard his name.”

“Was it that note you just took from under the lining of your hat?” asked the officer.

“Yes, sir, and here it is. You see, I felt that it might get us into trouble if Belgian eyes saw it, for they would not like to know we had saved the life of a German aviator who would have died in that tree, perhaps.”

The officer hastily took the piece of paper and read the few lines written thereon by the man of the wrecked Taube. Thad saw that it seemed to create something of a sensation among the Uhlans as it was passed from hand to hand, and from this he felt satisfied that the aviator must have been one of the leading airmen in the German flying corps.

Now the grim face of the Uhlan commander had relaxed. He even smiled on the Scouts.

“I am convinced that you are what you claim, my brave boys; so shake hands with me, one and all of you,” he said.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TURNED BACK.

“Bully,” Giraffe was heard to mutter half under his breath, at this sudden change in front on the part of the stern Uhlan officer, evidently a soldier of more or less reputation.

Even Bumpus wanted to be able to say he had grasped the fist of a German cavalry officer raiding through Belgium, for he crowded forward, and was the last to be greeted in that friendly way.

“Let me give you back this slip of paper, boy,” said the commander to Thad. “You should be very proud of having saved the life of that brave man, for he is called the foremost aviator in our entire corps. If our commander, the Kaiser, ever learns of what you have done be assured that he will send you a personal letter of thanks.”

All this was very pleasant for the boys to hear. Bumpus was evidently still hugging a faint hope to his faithful heart that they might be allowed to pass on. He even managed to find his voice, and put his anticipation into words.

“And could we be allowed to keep on to Antwerp, sir?” he asked.

At that the officer frowned again. He seemed to consider for a moment, then shook his head slowly in the negative.

“You must turn back, and proceed to the Dutch border,” he told them. “It would be much better for you to try and reach Antwerp by way of Rotterdam and the sea. There nothing will delay you, while on land a thousand obstacles may arise to prevent the accomplishment of your plans. Besides, you must give us your word of honor as scouts that you will not come back this way again.”

Thad felt as though a great load had been taken from his chest. Now that they

were to be forced to promise Bumpus could not complain; and they would be able to try the other plan. He was sorry now he had not insisted on doing that at the time they trod Dutch soil; before now they would have reached Rotterdam, and might even be sailing for the Schelde.

“We are ready to make you that promise, sir,” he told the commander of the Uhlans, “in fact, we should have decided on that course long ago. It would have saved us a heap of trouble. Once across the border and on Dutch soil we should not have crossed back again.”

“I differ with you there, boy,” said the other, smiling again; “for had you done so the German flying corps would perhaps have lost its most brilliant and daring exponent. Turn your car, therefore, and you can proceed ahead of us. First of all let me mark out the course I wish you to take.”

With that he drew out a map of Belgium and Holland. Thad was interested when he saw what a marvel of ingenuity that map was. It had evidently been carefully prepared for the army to be used in case of just such an invasion. Possibly there were other charts covering Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy, Switzerland and Denmark.

Thad saw that it was very minute. Not a railroad, station, crossing, canal, road, town, village, bridge, ford, fort or anything else of consequence but that it was plainly marked there. And the officer had other maps too, for Thad glimpsed them when he was selecting this one.

He traced the route back to the Dutch border, and Thad, taking out his own apology for a chart, made marks to indicate the course he was to take. Then after considerable work he managed to get the car turned, some of the troopers being ordered to dismount and lend a helping hand. After that they started, and before they had gone far the clatter of horses’ hoofs from the rear announced that the entire squadron of troopers must be coming after them.

“Gee! but I’m glad they’re not meaning us any harm,” remarked Giraffe, as he took one of his usual backward peeps by simply twisting that long neck of his around; “because they’d be able to overtake us in a jiffy, even if their nags are tired. It’s a heap nicer to have these hard-riding Uhlans for friends than enemies. And I also hope we don’t run afoul of that armored motor-car we saw, with those reckless Belgians in the same. I do believe they’d charge the whole Uhlan

squadron.”

Thad himself echoed that wish. He had seen sights during that terrible battle for the possession of the disputed bridge that would never fade from his memory; and he did not want to look on anything further that had to do with bloodshed and misery, under the thin veneering of glory.

“We’re coming to the side road he wants us to take, and which will lead to the Dutch border,” Thad announced after a time.

A few minutes later and the car turned to the left, after which Thad shut down. Standing up they watched the troop gallop past, and fortunately the dust was blowing toward the opposite quarter so their view was not hindered. The scouts had taken off their hats, and every time they saw any one in that long column give them a salute they answered in kind as they had been taught by the rules of the organization to which they belonged.

Finally the last Uhlan had ridden past, and only a slowly settling cloud of dust told where they had gone.

“We’ll always remember this last incident as one of the pleasant episodes of our dash through Belgium,” remarked Thad, as they settled down again in their places for another start.

“One thing sure, Thad,” observed Giraffe, “that commander must have placed a lot of confidence in your simple word, because he wouldn’t know now whether we meant to keep on into Holland, or try again to push on after he’d forbidden it.”

“I guess he knows whatever a scout says he’ll do he tries to perform,” ventured Bumpus, proudly.

“Seven miles isn’t far, and with any sort of luck we ought to be over the line by noon,” remarked Allan.

“What’s the plan of campaign, then, Thad?” inquired Bumpus.

“We’ll try for a station on a railway,” he was told. “Over in Holland they’re not so apt to be given over wholly to the military forces, so we stand a chance to get passage to Rotterdam. The very first time our car goes back on us with the

railroad close by it's good-bye to this machine."

"I really don't think any of us will mourn much for the dinky trap," Giraffe argued; "but then I suppose after a time when things get mellow in our minds well all take a lot of satisfaction in talking about this trip, and the old car will come in for its share of attention. Time heals many faults, you know."

Now that the change in plans had really come about, they could feel a sort of satisfaction in reflecting that they had kept on to the very last. In fact, they had refused to give up until actually in the hands of the Uhlans, and compelled to promise on their honor as scouts that they would do as ordered.

"Oh! did you see that?" exclaimed Bumpus, starting them all to staring around in various directions; and then he condescended to go on, thus centering their attention to the one point—"it was ahead of us I saw it, boys."

"Saw what, a boa constrictor from the menagerie?" demanded Giraffe, with the suspicion of a sneer in his voice.

"It was a *man*," said Bumpus, severely, "if you want to know, and he dodged into the bushes there as quick as a flash when we came around the bend."

"Oh! he did, eh?" continued Giraffe; "and now mebbe you could tell us what sort of a man it was, Bumpus, white or black, tall or short, soldier or just a plain ordinary citizen. Speak up, Bumpus, we're waiting."

"He looked to me about like our friend the Kaiser!" said the fat scout, with a trace of a smile on his rosy face; "and there's where he dodged into the brush, too!"

Thad stopped the car.

"Nothing more likely than that it was the very man," he remarked. "I should think he might have gotten this far along the way to the Dutch border by now," and then raising his voice the patrol leader called: "Hello! Kaiser, don't you want to buy a dog? Show yourself, Bob; you ought to know your friends!"

At that a lanky figure bobbed up and there was an inarticulate cry, after which the circus fugitive hurried to join them.

“Why, this is a surprise, I must say, and a pleasant one in the bargain,” he declared, fairly bubbling over with delight as he shook first Thad’s hand and then that of each scout in rotation; “I never dreamed I’d see you boys again on this side of the water. What made you change your minds?”

“A stout officer in the uniform of a Uhlan colonel,” laughed Thad. “The fact is we ran smack into a squadron of Uhlans, and they made us promise to cross over to Holland; so, as scouts always keep their solemn word we’re bound that way right now. And there’s room enough for you to crowd in, if you think we can make faster time than afoot.”

The tattooed man did not wait for a second invitation, and easily squeezed in with the two boys in the rear. There was not much room to spare, owing to the fact of Bumpus being so very corpulent; but then Kaiser was as thin as he was long, so that he occupied very little space. Giraffe said he “wedged” himself in, which was about the truth.

He was greatly interested in hearing of the adventure that had befallen Thad and his three chums since they separated from him that morning. For the first time he learned how they had saved that German Taube man from the treetop, afterwards binding up his wound.

“It does beat all creation,” declared the circus fugitive, “how you boys manage to go around doing good to others. I owe you a big debt just as that aviator does, and I warrant you there are many others, only you’re too modest to mention the fact.”

“Oh! that’s all in the game!” said Giraffe, making out to look upon such things with a feeling bordering on contempt, although being human he must have liked to hear his praises sung.

“To tell the truth,” ventured Thad, “we are the ones who feel under obligations, because we get much more benefit out of these happenings than the other fellow. Everybody does who believes in the old saying that it’s more blessed to give than to receive. Besides, we are only obeying the rules of the organization that we’re proud to say we belong to.”

As they went on their way the man who had traveled to the uttermost corners of the world entertained them with still further stories connected with his strange experiences. Thus they hardly noticed the lapse of time, and when Thad told

them they had passed the seventh mile the eagle eye of Giraffe began to get busy with the task of locating the guard station that would mark the border line.

A short time afterwards he pointed it out to them, and they discovered one of the same white posts that had marked the division of territory at the time they were chased by the German cavalrymen, and found refuge over the line with the soldiers of Queen Wilhelmina.

Of course they were stopped, but at this early stage in the war the Dutch guard along the border had no orders to keep any one out of Holland. Questions were put to them by an officer who was summoned by the privates. These of course Thad could answer truthfully, and besides, the manly bearing of the lads must have had an influence in determining the officer to admit the party.

He did look rather doubtfully at the circus freak, but having been told just who Kaiser was, and seen something of his wonderful adornment, he did not think himself justified in turning him back.

So it came the four scouts left Belgium territory again. They had been through some pretty warm experiences since first striking the soil of the buffer state, many of which would never be forgotten.

Somehow all of them seemed to breathe easily after they had started along the road that would take them to the nearest railroad town. Thad knew it had all been a mistake, their trying to break past the struggling armed hosts, and that they would have shown wisdom had they come this way in the beginning.

At the same time he did not feel very sorry. They had been given a wonderful experience, and would certainly never forget some of the things that had happened to them. Particularly would they have reason to remember that terrible battle for the bridge head, when the German hosts fought their way through a storm of shot, only to see the bridge blown up with dynamite before they could secure it.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A CHANGE OF PLANS—CONCLUSION.

“That finishes it with me,” remarked Thad, when the car came to a sudden stop, on account of the treacherous motor breaking down again. “Get ready to leave the old trap in the ditch, boys. We’ll give some other simpletons a chance to tinker with the machine. I’m done with it, once and for all.”

“Well, you gave us all plain warning in good time, Thad,” spoke up Giraffe, not in the least depressed with this change of plans, because his impatient spirit could not brook these irritating delays.

Even Bumpus did not show any considerable amount of chagrin, and the reason was quickly made manifest when he broke out with:

“I really believe we must be close on to that railroad town they called Valkenswaard; because as sure as anything I heard the sound of a train moving along just then. Yes, there it goes again, with the motor puffing like hot cakes. Thad, tell me if I’m right about that.”

“Just what you are, Bumpus,” replied the patrol leader. “I heard it myself, which was one reason I said what I did. We’ve been heading nearly due east for some little time now, and were due to strike the line of steel before long.”

“The plan then is to step out lively, and get to this Dutch town,” suggested Allan. “I suppose then we’ll take the very first chance we can strike to start for Rotterdam by way of—for goodness’ sake, let me see that chart of yours again, Thad; because these terrible Dutch names twist my tongue so—here it is, Hertogenbosch, which seems to be about the biggest railway center in all Holland.”

“How far away is Rotterdam, Thad?” asked Bumpus.

“I couldn’t tell you exactly, Bumpus,” answered the scout leader; “but on a guess I’d say not more than a hundred miles. The Netherlands isn’t a very big country, you remember, and yet one of the most wonderful places in the world. We’ll see some strange sights as we go along.”

“I hope we make the trip by daylight, then,” said Giraffe, who was more or less fond of seeing new scenes.

They made sure to leave nothing behind that they cared to keep.

“Good-bye, little old trap,” said Giraffe, making a mock bow toward the abandoned car; “you played your part all right in the circus, and we’ll often think of you, with tears in our eyes. All the same we’re glad to be able to say our necks haven’t been broken while we navigated the roads of Germany, Belgium and Holland in your care.”

Inside of half an hour they actually arrived at the town on the railway. Here they managed to get something to eat while waiting for a train to come along. It was by the greatest luck in the world that they found themselves on the road shortly after noon, because the service between Belgium and Holland was already sadly disorganized on account of what was going on across the border.

When they arrived at the town of Hertogenbosch they found that they would have to wait an hour before they could make a fresh start for Rotterdam. Here Kaiser the tattooed man said good-bye to his young friends, since he was headed for Amsterdam, and their routes ran in different directions.

“I’ve got your home address, boys,” he said after squeezing their hands for the third and last time, “and I’m going to drop in and see you some time or other, if I get out of this country alive. You’ve been good friends to me, and I’ll never forget it. I’m a firm admirer of Boy Scouts from this time on, and will preach the gospel of humanity wherever I go, just as you’ve paid it out to me. Good-bye, all!”

They were really sorry to part with Bob Kaiser, for if ever there lived an entertaining and good-hearted eccentric fellow he “filled the bill,” as Giraffe said.

During that long afternoon they continued to pass through a most interesting country, with many glimpses of watery sections, where the dikes kept the sea

from flooding the rich land which the industrious Dutch had wrested from the grip of Mother Ocean.

It seemed as though every rod of it must be under cultivation, and the boys understood after that journey what was really meant by “intensive farming.” Flowers without number were included in the various crops, for Holland is the home of the greatest nursery of bulbs in the whole world, her rich soil being just suited to their growth.

Evening was drawing on apace when they neared the great city of Rotterdam and sniffed the salty scent of the sea that lay beyond. It acted like a tonic upon the four lads. Even Bumpus was noticed to take numerous whiffs of the invigorating atmosphere, although he had been very seasick on the voyage across the Atlantic.

They managed to get located at a small but neatly kept hotel, where they could stay while looking about, and making inquiries concerning the possibilities of getting to Antwerp by water.

Never in all their lives had they seen such wonderful cleanliness. The women and children with their queer head-dresses, and snow-white garments were a never ceasing source of wonder to the boys, especially Bumpus, who often chuckled when he pointed out roly-poly boys who put even his own generous proportions into the shade, so to speak.

“This is the land where you really belong, Bumpus,” Giraffe told him; “here you could pass unnoticed, if only you dressed like these other boys do. Just imagine our Bumpus with a pair of those wide trousers on, and wooden shoes to finish him off, would you? I’ve got half a mind to buy an outfit for you, Bumpus, while we have the chance. You’d make a great hit with the pretty girls of Cranford when you came out and set the style for the rest of the fellows.”

“Squander your money if you feel like it, Giraffe,” Bumpus good-naturedly told him; “but getting me to wear such a clown outfit will be another thing. One boy c’n lead a horse to water, but the whole Cranford Troop can’t make him drink against his will, remember.”

They had a peaceful night of it, although at first they feared the many noises welling up from the water front where the shipping was so dense would annoy them. It must have been they were all pretty tired, and that of late they had failed

to enjoy their customary sound sleep, for to tell the truth none of them seemed to know a thing from the time they retired until Thad, arousing, found it was already broad daylight.

Immediately after breakfast they started out. Bumpus was becoming distressed once more on account of his not having heard from his mother for such a long time. He was exceedingly fond of her, and felt sure she must be enduring great mental agony on account of the uncertainty concerning her boy, marooned up in the Rhine country by this sudden breaking out of the great war.

At first they did not meet with any luck. Vessels were starting out that day, a number of them, but for America and England. Those destined to cross the Atlantic had every stateroom engaged, for thousands of sight-seers had already taken the alarm, and were flocking to the Dutch ports to get passage home.

It was about the middle of the morning when Thad struck a clue which seemed to give more or less hope. Eagerly following the trail they finally learned that a small steamer expected to leave Rotterdam for Antwerp an hour after noon that same day. There might not be another for forty-eight hours, and so it became necessary for the scouts to immediately engage passage, and then hurry back to settle their score at the hotel, as well as carry their personal belongings aboard.

Being something of hustlers they managed to accomplish all this in record time, having learned that they could get dinner on board the boat.

And once comfortably settled they could await the sailing of the boat with a conviction that their troubles were in all probability over.

“Just to think,” said Giraffe, after they had started down the river to the sea, lying some twenty miles or so away, “if we could have continued our voyage in that little boat of ours through the rest of Germany and then into Holland we’d have brought up here, sooner or later.”

“Why, is this really the mouth of the Rhine?” asked Bumpus, wonderingly; “I had an idea Rotterdam was situated on the Meuse River.”

“It’s all a regular mix-up, however you try to see it,” responded Giraffe, who had been studying the chart, and wished to exploit his knowledge; “there seem to be no end to the outlets of those two rivers when they get to the delta region of the Netherlands, and you can call them either the Rhine or the Meuse as you please.

It's all salt water down here, anyhow, and these are really arms of the North Sea reaching far up into the Low Countries."

It was a very interesting trip down the river, at any rate. They had glimpses of forts which Holland had erected in order to defend her cities against any foreign foe; though the boys considered that her greatest possible danger lay in the west, where Germany had an envious eye on this valuable territory that seemed to properly be a part of her expanding empire.

Finally about the middle of the afternoon they came in sight of the sea, though its heaving had been manifest for some time previously. All of the scouts viewed the apparently boundless expanse of salt water with delight; Bumpus however was heard to express a fervent hope that he would not have to pass through another attack of sea sickness. When about an hour before the setting of the sun they saw heavy smoke along the horizon, and presently could make out a long line of what appeared to be misty-colored battleships headed *north*, it gave them a decided thrill.

"They must be a part of the great British fleet, on the way to seek battle with the Kaiser's warships!" was the consensus of opinion; and having lately witnessed the ferocity that marks a battle the boys could easily picture the stirring scene if ever a decisive conflict did take place between the rival fleets of the North Sea.

With the good boat forging on toward the mouth of the Schelde River, up which it would pass to the docks at Antwerp, it seemed as though the troubles of Thad Brewster and his three fellow scouts might be over for the present. They fully anticipated being in the Belgian city by morning, and possibly taking passage for London before another night, with Mrs. Hawtree in their care.

Here we may well leave them, confident that no matter what may arise to throw obstacles in their way, these energetic and resourceful lads can be depended on to overcome all trials, and reach the haven for which they are heading. At some no far distant day we can hope to once more follow their fortunes in new fields of scout endeavor; but until that time comes we must ring down the curtain and say good-bye.

THE END

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