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The Khaki Boys over the Top

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The Khaki Boys over the Top

BLOWN BACK

"What's that, Schnitz?"

"What's what!"

"That noise. Sounds like a party coming along the communication trench!"

The talk was in tense whispers, and the listening was now of the same tenseness. Two khaki-clad Sammies stood on the alert in the muddy ditch, dignified by the title, "trench," and tried to pierce the darkness that was like a pall of black velvet over everything.

"Hear it?" inquired he who had first spoken.

"I somedings hears, too," spoke a guttural voice, with a foreign accent. "Might not it perhaps be---"

"Cut that talk, Iggy!" sharply commanded the first speaker. "Do you want the lieutenant dropping in on us!" And Corporal Robert Dalton cautiously moved nearer his fellow non-com., Sergeant Franz Schnitzel.

"Yes, not so loud," advised Schnitzel, who, in spite of his Teutonic name, was a thorough American, speaking with no trace of German accent. "Don't forget that the Boches may have listening parties out right in front of this trench, even though they may have information that we're going to rush 'em just before dawn."

"But what is that noise?" went on Bob. "It sounds like the relief coming, and yet we can't be going to be relieved so near the zero hour. It's impossible."

"Him one big word is," sighed Iggy, trying to adjust his Polish tongue to the strange language called English. "But thinks me nothing is like him in dis war!"

"Nothing is like what?" asked Schnitzel, the talk now being reduced to whispers on the part of all three.

"Him wot you said---repossible," said the Polish lad.

"Hush!" quickly exclaimed Bob, or Dal, as he was variously called by his comrades. "There *is* some one coming along the trench. If it's the Boches---"

This was enough to cause all three to grip their rifles more tightly. The sound of advancing footsteps, cautious as they were, was now more audible. Then came a whispered, but sharp:

"Halt! Who goes there!"

"Our lieut's on the job!" commented Bob.

Tensely the three who stood shoulder to shoulder in the darkness of the foremost trench, waiting, listened for the answer. It came, also in a whisper, but it carried to their ears.

"Sergeant Blaise and Sergeant Barlow, ordered to report here to you, sir."

"Oh golly! It's Blazes und Ruddy!" gasped Iggy.

"Cheese it!" cautioned Dal, for the Polish lad, in his enthusiasm, had spoken above a whisper, and even slight sounds carried far on this dark, still night.

"Advance, Sergeant Blaise to be recognized," came the order from the sentry, evidently acting on advice from the lieutenant in command of this part of the American trench.

There was a period of silent waiting on the part of the three who stood so close together, and then they heard their immediate commanding officer say:

"Pass on. You'll find your friends just beyond here."

A moment later the two newcomers were grasping hands in the dark with the three waiting ones.

"The five Brothers are united again," said Roger Barlow in a low voice.

"Sooner than I expected," commented Jimmy Blaise. "Now we can go over the top together."

"Over the top, may we all go together, in the wind and the rain or in damp, foggy weather," was Bob Dalton's contribution. He sometimes "perpetrated verse," as he dubbed it---a reminder of his cub reporter days.

"But say, Jimmy, how did you manage to get here?" asked Franz.

"Walked," was Jimmy Blaise's laconic answer. "They haven't had to carry me on a stretcher---at least not lately."

"Oh, you know what I mean," said Franz. "I mean, did you ask to be transferred from your station to this trench?"

"No, and that's the funny part of it," said Roger Barlow. "You know after we wrote our letters to-night---or, rather last night, for it's past twelve now---Blazes and I went back to our station."

"Yes, and we came here to wait for the zero signal," interpolated Dal.

"Well, we hadn't been out in our trench very long before we were relieved, and told to report to Lieutenant Dobson here," resumed Jimmy. "And when we remembered that this was where you three were stationed, say, maybe we weren't glad!"

"We are of a gladness also much!" whispered the Polish lad, and there was rather a pathetic note in his voice. "It is a goodness gracious to have you here!"

"Say, you can do more things to the English language than the Boches can on an air raid," chuckled Jimmy.

"Oh, well, it is of a much hardness to speak," sighed Iggy.

"Well, there's no fault to be found with your *fighting*, that's sure!" declared Roger. "Put her there, old pal!" and he clasped hands with his foreign "Brother."

"How's everything here?" asked Jimmy, when the five had taken such easy positions as were available in the narrow trench.

"We're all ready for the zero hour," replied Bob. "Everybody's on their tiptoes. I wish it was over---–I mean here. This waiting is worse than fighting."

"It sure is," commented Franz. "But it won't be long now."

"What time do you make it?" asked Bob.

"Must be quite some after three," said Jimmy in a low voice. "It was nearly three when we got our orders to come here."

Roger took out a tiny pocket flash lamp, and, placing one finger over the bulb so that no rays would escape, held the dim glow over his wrist-watch.

"Quarter to four," he announced.

"Fifteen minutes more," sighed Dal.

"They'll seem like fifteen years, though, Bob," commented Jimmy.

A reaction, in the shape of silence, came upon the Khaki Boys---–"five Brothers" as they called themselves, for they had become that since their participation in the World War. Tensely and quietly they waited in the trench for the hands of time to move to the hour of four. This was the "zero" period, when in a wave of men and steel, or lead and high explosives, the Americans would go over the top, in an endeavor to dislodge the Germans from a strong position.

Only a few hours before, after each had written a letter home, the missives having been sent back of the lines to be posted, the five lads had solemnly shaken hands at parting. The two sergeants---–James Blaise and Roger Barlow---–went to a distant part of the intricate trench system, while the two corporals, Robert Dalton and Ignace Pulinski and Sergeant Franz Schnitzel were together in a ditch near the middle of the barbed wire entanglements. And now, by a strange turn of fate, they were all together again, waiting for the final word that might send then all into eternity, or cause them to live horribly misshapen.

Something of this seemed to be felt by the five Khaki Boys as they stood in the mud and darkness waiting. For it had rained and the trench was slimy on the bottom in spite of the "duck boards."

"I wonder where we'll be this time to-morrow," mused Bob in a low voice.

"Oh, cut out the 'sob sister' stuff!" said Jimmy, a bit sharply. "Isn't it gloomy enough here without that?"

They talked in the lowest whispers, and there were the murmurs of whispers on either side of them, for their comrades up and down the trenches felt the same strain, and relieved it by talking cautiously.

"I think we'll all be together again," said Roger, trying to speak cheerfully. "Somehow I've got a feeling that we'll come out of this all right."

"Me, I hat a dream," slowly remarked Iggy. "Of my dream I now know only one cling---–und dot is my face was all bloody!"

"Oh, for the love of Mike! Don't croak!" exclaimed Jimmy.

"Silence down there!" came a sharp command. Jimmy had spoken too loudly, and the listening lieutenant had heard him.

Slowly the minutes dragged. Once again Roger carefully looked at his watch.

"What time is it?" whispered Franz.

"Five minutes of."

"Great Scott! Is it only ten minutes since you looked before! It seems like a lifetime. Whew! I'm all in a sweat!"

And yet the night was cool.

It was now as silent as death in the trench, and all about it. Earlier in the night there had been distant shelling, but this had ceased some time since.

Roger, unable to stand the strain longer, was about to flash his little pocket electric torch again when suddenly the stillness of the night was broken by a loud, shrill whistle.

"The signal!" cried Jimmy.

"The zero hour at last!" shrilled Roger in his tense excitement.

"Over the top!" yelled Bob. "Over the top!"

And just as the first streaks of the gray light of dawn began to pierce the blackness, the five Brothers, and their comrades up and down the trenches, leaped from their places of waiting with savage yells, and started for the German lines.

"I am glad! I am glad!" sang Iggy. "Now I can of the fight have a piece!"

He and Franz sprang out of the trench together. Side by side they raced over the rough ground, through the gaps cut in the barbed wire. A little in advance were Jimmy, Roger and Bob.

And now the big guns began their chorus. With boom and roar, roar and boom they sang their anthem of death. The rattle of rifles came in as a response, and all this was punctured by fiendish yells.

Then, too, from the German lines, came the answering song of the big guns. Though the attack had taken them by surprise, they were not slow in responding. With all that we think of the Boches we must give them credit for being savage, if unfair, fighters. They seldom declined a challenge, at least on the front lines.

"Come on! Come on!" yelled Jimmy.

"Up and at 'em! Up and at 'em!" snapped Roger.

"Wow! This is going to be some fight!" exulted Bob.

It was fast growing light, and the disappearing darkness was further illuminated by the flashes from hundreds of guns. Lines of khaki-clad Sammies were pouring from the American trenches now, in a mad rush for the Hun positions.

"Well, we're together yet, anyhow," mused Jimmy, as, looking back, he saw Bob, the Polish lad, and Franz coming on with a rush.

"Yes, we're together---yet," added Roger. They both had been firing madly at the distant gray lines of German soldiers in front of them. They had to yell into each other's ears to be heard above the din.

Suddenly the very earth seemed to drop away from under their feet. They felt the shock of rushing air. A big, high-explosive shell had dropped near them.

"That's bad!" shouted Jimmy, as the concussion died away. He looked behind him and saw, with horror, Iggy, the Polish Brother, literally being blown back through the air. Whether this was the effect of the big shell that had exploded, or whether it was caused by a smaller one going off a moment later, Jimmy could not tell. But he saw Iggy hurtling through the air, and the face of the Polish lad was covered with blood, as he himself had said it had been in his dream.

CHAPTER II

TO THE RESCUE

"Go on! Don't stop! Slam at 'em!"

It was the sharp command of the lieutenant in immediate charge of the detachment including Jimmy Blaise and his comrades.

"Forward! Forward!" was yelled on every side.

The din continued---increased. It seemed as though there could be nothing left whole on earth again; in all that riot of noise and blood---as though everything must be rent to pieces.

"Are you all right!" cried Jimmy in the ear of Roger.

"Yes. Not scratched yet. How about---"

A loud explosion to one side cut off his words in a blast, but Jimmy knew what his chum wanted to say. When there was a momentary lull he answered:

"Iggy's gone!"

"Gone?"

"Yes. I had a glimpse of him being blown back---his face was all red---bloody."

Roger could not repress a shudder. But there was no time for any thoughts like these. He had a glimpse of Bob Dalton and Franz Schnitzel stumbling toward him and Jimmy. Then came a sharp command:

"Down! Down on your faces! Everyone! They're turning loose the machine-guns!"

The four remaining Khaki Boys fell flat, and only just in time. Over them swept a veritable hail of machine gun bullets.

"Dig in! Dig in!" commanded the lieutenant.

Frantically with their picks and shovels the Sammies began to make shallow ditches in which to lie. The upraised earth would offer some protection against the forward sweeping lead, though not very much against shrapnel which explodes in the air above and is driven downward.

And as the four Brothers were making shallow trenches they wondered, with sorrow in their hearts, if there was a chance that Iggy had been left alive.

"If we stay here long enough, I'll see if I can't get permission to go back and find out," mused Jimmy, as he frantically scraped the earth into a sort of long mound in front of his head. They were under a hot fire now. The American advance had been momentarily checked.

And while there is this period in the fighting may I not take advantage of it to make my new readers acquainted with the main characters of this story, and also tell something of the previous books in this series?

The initial volume is called "The Khaki Boys at Camp Sterling," and in the pages of that you meet, for the first time, Jimmy, Roger, Bob and Iggy. To introduce them more formally I will say that Jimmy's correct name was James Sumner Blaise, and that he was the son of wealthy parents. He was about nineteen years old, and this was the average age of his comrades.

Roger Barlow was an orphan, and had been working in a munition factory when he decided to enlist. Robert Dalton had been a "cub" reporter on a newspaper, and, like Roger, was an orphan. Though Ignace was no orphan, possessing both father and mother and a number of sisters and brothers, his home life was not happy, and he was really glad to join the army.

These four lads soon became "bunkies" at Camp Sterling, where they had their training. Later they took into their friendship one Franz Schnitzel, who, though possessed of a German name, was, nevertheless, a loyal "United Stateser," as Iggy called it. Franz had a hard time, at first, convincing people of his loyalty, and once he was accused of a black crime, but later he was proved innocent.

After having been trained at the camp, and cementing their friendship in many ways, the "five Brothers" as they called themselves, were sent across. In the second book of the series, "The Khaki Boys On the Way," we find our youthful heroes sailing for France after a series of adventures, one a startling one, at Camp Marvin. This adventure had to do with the blowing up of a bridge, and Jimmy Blaise had a fight with a spy---a fight that came near being Jimmy's last.

In this second book will also be found an account of the trip of the Khaki Boys to the coast, where they boarded a transport for France. If they expected to get across safely, as many thousands did, they were disappointed, for they were attacked by a U-Boat. Many on board the transport *Columbia* perished, but the five Brothers were saved, and, after a time spent in a rest camp in England, they crossed the channel to France.

The third volume, called "The Khaki Boys at the Front," tells in detail some of their exciting experiences. The quintette were given leave to go from their camp to Paris, and in that beautiful city they met some other friends, the Twinkle Twins, otherwise John and Gerald Twinkleton, who had joined the aviation branch of the service. This was natural, since their cousin, Emile Voissard, was one of the most daring of the airmen, meriting the name "Flying Terror of France."

In that book, too, you may read of how Franz Schnitzel, by his knowledge of the German tongue, was able to give advance notice of a raid he overheard the Huns planning. The raid was a failure from the German standpoint, but during it some of our Khaki Boys were wounded.

Adventure followed adventure, but in one "grand" one, as a Frenchman would call it, Jimmy, on guard when Voissard's aeroplane was on the ground, temporarily disabled, stood off an attack of Germans and among others he killed Adolph von Kreitzen, known as the "tiger man." On his head the French government had set a price of five thousand francs, or about a thousand dollars, and of course Jimmy won this.

So now, in the opening of this present story, we find our five Khaki Boys still together after many strenuous happenings. They had been wounded but were now recovered and they had fought valiantly.

In the last chapter of the book immediately preceding this, if you recall, the lads had written letters home---–letters which might be their last, they thought, for they had orders to take their places in the front line trenches to await the zero hour. Two of the Brothers had been separated from their chums, but all were reunited as we have seen.

Then had come the command to go over the top, and there had followed the fierce rush in the gray dawn of the morning---–a rush punctuated by fire, smoke and death.

"Dig in! Dig in!" commanded the lieutenant in command of the particular squad of the 509th infantry to which our friends were attached. "This is only a temporary check. We're laying down a curtain of fire, and we'll go forward again in a moment!"

He had to yell to be heard above the din, but all near him understood what he meant. The American gunners were sending over a barrage fire---–a veritable rain of bullets that would keep the Germans from advancing, and which would also cause them to abandon their machine-guns. It was the machine-gun fire that was, temporarily, holding up the advance of Jimmy and his chums.

It did not take the Sammies long, working feverishly as they did, to raise a protecting mound of earth between them and the Huns. And then, for some reason or other, the savage fire of the Germans slacked at the particular section of the line where our heroes were stationed.

"Are you all right, Rodge?" called Jimmy to the chum on his left.

"So far, yes. How about you?"

"Oh, I was nicked in one ear---–just a scratch. It's hardly bleeding. Can you see Bob?"

"Yes, he's got a swell place---–in a shell hole, and Franz is with him. See anything of Iggy?"

"No," answered Jimmy. "I'm afraid he's done for. If I get a chance, I'm going back to see. Looks as if Fritz had had enough at this sector."

"Aren't we going forward?" some one called to the lieutenant in charge. "Come on! Lead us to the Boches!"

"Have to wait for orders," was the grim answer. "We were told to halt here. Can't go on without orders!"

There were murmurs of disapproval at this, but the discipline was strict.

"Anybody badly wounded?" asked the lieutenant. "If there is, now's your chance to get some first-aid treatment. Later you can't, perhaps."

There were one or two who were suffering badly, and these took advantage of the lull in the fighting to apply bandages to their hurts.

"Poor Iggy!" mused Jimmy, and then, as the lieutenant crawled near him---for no one was standing upright---the sergeant asked:

"May I crawl back, sir, and see what happened to Corporal Pulinski?"

"Did you see anything happen to him?"

"Yes, sir. I saw him blown backward when the big shell exploded, and he seemed to be falling toward some sort of shell crater. If we're going to be held here long, I'd like to go to his rescue---to see if he's still alive."

"Very well," assented the young commanding officer. "Ill take a chance and let you." He knew of the pact of friendship existing among the five Brothers. "Take some one with you. But crawl---don't try to walk."

"I won't, sir. May Sergeant Barlow come along?"

"Yes. But come back if we get the order to advance again."

"I will, yes, sir!"

Swinging around on his stomach, and calling to Roger, telling him of the permission received, Jimmy Blaise started toward the rear to rescue, if possible, the Polish lad.

"But I'm afraid we'll find him done for," confided Jimmy to Roger. "The shell must have landed right in front of him. It made a hole as big as a house."

"Poor Iggy!" murmured Roger.

CHAPTER III

SENT TO THE REAR

Roger Barlow, who was slightly behind his comrade in their queer progress back toward the shell hole near which the Polish lad had been seen to fall, observed his fellow sergeant come to a halt.

"What's the matter---hit?" cried Roger anxiously. And this well might have been the case, since, though there was a lull in the fighting immediately in front of Company E, there were plenty of stray bullets, not to mention pieces of shrapnel and bits of high explosive shells, that might have reached the crawling lad.

"Hit? No, not yet," answered Jimmy. "I'm going to try, if it's safe, to make a little better progress than this, though. This is too slow. Poor Iggy may be dead before we get to him."

"Probably is," commented Roger.

"Oh, can the gloomy stuff!" snapped Jimmy. Afterward he admitted that his nerves were pretty well strained. In fact that was the condition of all of them. "You're almost as bad as Franz," went on Jimmy.

"Well, I don't want to be too hopeful," returned Roger. "But what are you going to do, anyhow?"

"This," answered his chum. He drew his rifle up close beside him, took off his tin hat, stuck it on the end of his bayonet, and cautiously raised it well above the ground. It received no bullets, as might have been expected.

"Come on, we can run for it!" cried Jimmy.

"What makes you think so?" asked his chum. "Didn't the lieutenant tell us to lie on our faces?"

"Yes, but that was before the fighting ceased in front of us. Fritz is having all he can attend to on either wing of our advance, and, for the time being we're not being molested. If the Huns were in any strength directly ahead of us, or to our rear as we are now, that tin helmet would look like a sieve by this time. It's safe enough to get up and run for it. And we've got to hustle if we want to save Iggy."

"All right, just as you say!" murmured Roger, as he began to rise. It was not without a natural feeling of timidity that he cautiously elevated himself first to his knees and then to his feet. As for Jimmy, he had impulsively stood upright.

"Come on!" he yelled above the din of battle. "Come on!"

He started on a run over the shell-torn ground, with what remained of the barbed wire entanglements here and there.

"I'm coming!" answered Roger.

He expected any moment to receive a bullet, or to be utterly blasted from the earth by some terrible shell explosion. And Jimmy confessed, later, that he felt the same fear. But these fears did not hold back the Khaki Boys from continuing on to the rescue of their comrade---–if he was in a condition to be rescued.

"Where's the place?" cried Roger to his chum, when they had covered several yards in a hasty rush toward the rear.

"Must be somewhere around here," answered Jimmy, looking about him. That part of No Man's Land where they then were, seemingly was deserted by all save the dead. If there had been any injured they had been taken well back behind the lines by stretcher bearers.

For a time Roger and Jimmy feared they might be considered deserters, coming toward the rear as they were doing, and away from the fighting, and aside from mere scratches neither of them showing any wounds. Though if they had been hurt that would have been an excuse for making a retreat.

But no one observed the two---–there was no one to observe them, in fact. They were some distance from their own trenches, and immediately back of them---–toward the German lines---–there had been a division in the fighting, so that the battle waged on either wing, as it were.

"Look in all the shell holes!" directed Jimmy. "The shell burst right in front, or to one side of poor Iggy. He was blown into a shell hole, of that I'm pretty sure."

"There's a hole---a big one, too," said Roger. "But there's no one in it---only dead!" and he turned away, for some of those dead were comrades who, the night before, had been in the trenches with him and his chums.

But the Khaki Boys were hardened to scenes like this now. Too many times had they seen the dead and dying. There was no time to nurse one's feelings.

"Come on! Come on!" cried Jimmy feverishly. "We've got to be quick! Iggy may bleed to death if he's hurt anything like I think he is."

"Yes, and this place may be a regular lead hail storm, soon," added Roger. "I can't see why our company was held up! Why couldn't we keep on giving the Huns what they deserve?"

"Orders are orders, my boy, we learned that long ago. And when the lieut. wouldn't let us go on, there must be some reason for it. I'm just as anxious to give Fritz his medicine as anyone. Hello, there! Did you hear that queer noise!"

"Yes. Sounded like a groan. Listen!"

The tide of battle was away from them now, and they were able, above the distant roar, to hear ordinary sounds, which had not been the case when the attack started. The sun was well up now, and the day gave promise of being a fine one---hot, too. And on such a scene the sun shone! Death and devastation brought on by human beasts!

"There it is again!" cried Roger, "It sure was a groan."

"Somebody around here is alive, at any rate," said Jimmy.

There were a number of terribly mangled bodies near them, and it was hardly believable that the groan came from any of those poor forms of what had once been living men.

"Over here!" cried Roger suddenly. "The sound came from down in that shell hole!"

He pointed to one, on the sides of which was fresh earth, showing that the explosive had recently fallen.

"There's no one down in that hole," declared Roger, taking a look.

"Yes there is!" asserted Jimmy. "See that shoe sticking out!"

He pointed to what seemed but a mound of dirt and stones in the very bottom of the shell crater. And Roger observed that the dirt did not altogether cover a leg and foot. An army shoe was sticking out.

"Come on!" cried Jimmy, and the next moment he was sliding down the side of the shell hole. Roger followed, and the two began to roll aside the larger stones that had fallen on the body. The Khaki Boys leaned their rifles against the side of the crater, and took off their gas masks, from where they lining ready for use, in order to work more freely.

"The wind isn't right for a gas attack," murmured Roger, as he temporarily deprived himself of this necessary protection.

As the boys feverishly worked to uncover the form they heard another loud groan coming from beneath the dirt.

"It doesn't seem possible anyone can be alive---like this," panted Roger as he labored at a heavy stone.

"Don't talk---work!" snapped Jimmy. "If he's alive, whoever it is, he needs help quick."

"Wonder if it's Iggy?" went on Roger.

Jimmy's hands flew as do the legs of a dog when he is digging out a buried bone, nor was Roger behind his comrade. They labored at that part of the pile of earth and stones which covered the face and head of the unfortunate soldier.

"There---he can breathe if he's alive still!" gasped Jimmy as he straightened up after having lifted aside a board that had fallen over the face of the Sammie they were trying to rescue. And it was this board that undoubtedly saved the unfortunate from dying by suffocation.

For the piece of plank had fallen in such a way, being supported on either end by resting on two stones on either side of the man's head, that it kept the dirt and stones away from the face.

And that it was a face which they had uncovered, was not at all certain to Roger and Jimmy at first. For so covered with blood, streaks of dirt and powder stains was the countenance that it resembled nothing human.

"He's alive---whoever he is!" declared Jimmy, for the unfortunate was observed to breathe---and breathe deeply as the air came in more abundantly to the parted lips.

Roger began digging in the dirt again, working down to the man's hands. And when he had brushed aside the dirt and stones he lifted up a limp wrist. One look at the identification tag chained around it, and he cried:

"It's Iggy! We've found him all right!"

"Sure enough---it *is* Iggy!" cried Jimmy, as he, too, looked at the metal disk.

"Ach! Yes! Water!" faintly moaned the Polish lad. His voice was a moan, but it was his voice. He opened his eyes, looked almost uncomprehendingly at his two chums and smiled faintly.

"So, come you haf!" he murmured. "Think I did dat you would!"

His head, which he had raised, sank back limply.

"Here!" cried Jimmy, opening his canteen. "Drink this!"

Poor Iggy did, gratefully enough. Some of the water trickled over his face, and when Roger wiped it away some of the blood and dirt went with it.

"Why he isn't hurt much---not up here, anyhow!" cried Jimmy. "I thought sure his whole head was blown off the way he looked."

"Well, let's get him out of here and look at him afterward," counseled Roger, and they resumed their work until the Polish lad's body was all exposed. Then he was lifted out, and in a little while it was ascertained that he was not seriously injured---at least outwardly. His arms and legs were whole, and there was no big wound, though he was terribly scratched and bruised.

"But why stand up can not I!" asked Iggy, for Roger and Jimmy were supporting him with their arms around him down in the shell hole.

"I guess he means why can't he stand up," translated Roger, for sometimes their foreign Brother misplaced his English words considerably.

"Sure! Why can't not I stand?" went on Iggy. "My legs---they is got no business to 'em. Like paper legs they is!"

Roger and Jimmy looked apprehensively at one another. This loss of feeling and muscular power in Iggy's legs might indicate that his spine was injured---that his whole lower body was paralyzed!

"We've got to get him to the rear---to a hospital," said Roger in a low voice, as the Polish lad's head drooped weakly on his shoulder.

"Yes," assented Jimmy. "But can we carry him?"

"Got to!"

They looked about for some means of getting Iggy to the top of the shell hole. That would be the most difficult part of the rescue. Then, to their surprise, the two who had come back to seek their friend, heard a hail on the rim of the crater above them.

"What's the matter down there?" came the cry. "Do you want help!"

"You said it!" voiced Jimmy, vigorously.

"All right. Wait a minute. We'll be right down!"

It was two stretcher-bearers who had hailed, and, a little later, Ignace Pulinski was being carried to the rear. He had fainted when brought to the top of the shell hole.

CHAPTER IV

A DOUBLE LOSS

After waiting a moment on the ground at the top of the shell crater, to see their comrade being carried to a first-aid dressing station at the rear, Jimmy and Roger started back to join their two friends who were still, it was to be hoped, waiting for orders to advance.

"S'pose he's much hurt?" asked Roger, something like a dry sob choking him as he thought of poor Iggy.

"I'm afraid so---yes," answered Jimmy. "That business of his legs feeling numb is a bad sign. It's a wonder he lived as long as he did, after what happened to him."

"I'll say so!" agreed Roger. "Tough luck all right!"

"Why," went on his chum as they started back toward their former places, "it looked as if his whole face was blown in. I can't understand it"

"Well, they'll do the best they can for him back there," and Roger nodded toward the dressing stations. "Maybe we'll get a chance to go to see him after this battle."

His words were drowned in a new roar of artillery and machine-gun fire. The heavy booming and the short, sharp, rattling explosions of the smaller guns seemed very close at hand.

"Something's doing!" cried Jimmy.

"Come on!" shouted his chum, and, with their rifles and gas masks, which they had brought up out of the shell hole, they rushed forward. And as they advanced they became aware of shrill, whistling sounds in the air about them.

"Duck! Duck!" yelled Roger. "They're firing over our sector now! We've got to crawl back!"

Jimmy realized this as well as did his chum, and, in another moment, the two were making their way back to their line as they had left it, by alternately moving on their hands and knees and again by working themselves forward on their elbows and stomach. It was the only safe way. The horizontal storm of missiles was, fortunately, about three feet above them, but that distance precluded walking upright.

"Come on, boys! Fall in! Fall in!" cried their lieutenant as Roger and Jimmy got back "We're going to advance. You're just in time!"

"Did you find him?" asked Bob, as he leaped to his feet in readiness for a dash toward the German lines.

"Yes. In a shell hole!" yelled Jimmy, for the firing was heavy on both sides of them now, making a vicious din.

"Alive!" Franz wanted to know.

"Yes, alive, but how long he'll be that way it's hard to say," answered Roger. "He was under a pile of dirt and---"

"Come on! Come on!" cried the lieutenant. "We're going to finish the job!"

He was leading his men, not driving them on as do the Germans, and nobly the four Brothers and their fellows followed the gallant lieutenant.

On they rushed---ever onward. About them swept the leaden hail of death. Shoulder to shoulder, firing from the hip, rushed the four Khaki Boys. And even in that terrible din of battle they spared a thought for the gallant comrade who would have been with him if he could.

With wild yells the Sammies swept over the first line of German trenches. The Boches had deserted them in the face of a withering rifle and machine-gun fire.

"Come on! Come on!" yelled the lieutenant again and again. "They're laying down a perfect barrage for us! The Huns can't get through to attack us!"

This was true, to a certain extent. Supported by the big guns in the rear, the 509th Infantry was rushing onward. Before them, and ever moving forward, was a never-ending curtain of fire---a hail of lead and steel.

As this curtain advanced, caused by the continual but slow elevation of the muzzles of the big guns, the infantry followed. And this fire kept the German support from coming to save the lines that were under attack.

"Wipe 'em out! Wipe out the Hun nests!" cried the lieutenant.

"It's our turn now!" grimly shouted Roger in Jimmy's ear.

Forward swept the company to which our heroes were assigned. For a time, during which the two chums had had a chance to get Iggy from the shell hole, there had been no advance. Now it came with a vengeance.

But the Germans were not idle. If their infantry was held back from making a counter-attack, their heavy guns, and here and there, machine-guns, were not idle. And these weapons tore big holes in the ranks of the Sammies. But ever the holes were closed up---comparatively closed up, that is, for the fighting of the Americans was not in close order, such as that in which the Germans so often advanced to their deaths.

At times the four Brothers would be close to one another, converging to get out of the line of some trench or avoid a shell hole. Again they would be yards apart But they kept in "contact," as it is called.

And ever as they advanced they fired their rifles into the German lines. True they could only now and then catch a glimpse of the foe, but they made those chances tell.

"Come on now, boys---a little farther and we'll have our objective! Just a few yards more!" cried the lieutenant who was leading our heroes. "Once we're at that barn, we can rest. Only a few feet more---only a few---"

His yelling voice suddenly ceased, and Jimmy, who was nearest, saw the gallant soldier crumple up, with a bullet through his head. And as he fell his men behind him, leaped over his body with wild yells of rage.

"Come on! Come on!" screamed Jimmy, inflamed to the point of madness. He was in command at this point now, following the death of the lieutenant. "Come on! Make 'em pay for that!" He choked back his sobs, for the lieutenant was well beloved.

On they rushed, on and on. The man on Jimmy's left was killed, and the comrade on his right fell with a shattered leg.

"I'm out of it!" suddenly shouted Franz, and he tried to hop on one foot, falling, a moment later, in a shallow hole.

On the others rushed, and finally, with wild yells, they drove the Germans from their last stand. The stone barn held a machine gun nest, and many of the Sammies were killed or wounded before the crew of Huns were scattered or captured---and there were very few of this last class, so desperate was their resistance.

From somewhere came the signal to cease firing, and, a little later, a captain came along and took charge.

"Who's in command?" he asked, seeing no commissioned officer in the group which had for a nucleus Jimmy, Roger and Bob.

"I am, sir," answered the former, saluting. "The lieutenant was killed."

A twitch of the face, and a hardening of the muscles about the captain's mouth were the only signs of emotion he showed, but his heart was torn---the boys knew that. The lieutenant was his only brother.

"Hold this place at all costs!" was the grim order. "I'll send an officer to take charge shortly. But hold the place!"

"Yes, sir." and Jimmy saluted again.

Quickly they took measures to do this---to make the stone barn, once the part of a French farm homestead, a position of defense. The German machine-gun, for which there was considerable ammunition left, was turned to point at the Hun line. But the Boches had withdrawn some distance. The Sammies had gained their objective, and the battle, for the time being, was over. Now there might come a counter-attack, and for this Jimmy, temporarily in command, prepared with his chums.

"Bob," called Jimmy to the former reporter, "you and Roger go back and see if you can pick up Franz, or any other of our lads who are alive. See what they need, and, if it's possible, get first-aid to them."

This was a welcome order to these two Khaki Boys and they started back over the ground won at such terrible cost. Already, though, gallant stretcher-bearers were searching among the dead to succor the living. And then, to their unutterable delight, Roger and Bob saw Franz limping toward them, using his rifle as a crutch.

"Thought you were done for, like poor Iggy," cried Roger.

"I thought so, too," answered Schnitz. "I felt sure my foot was lopped off, but it was only bruised on the ankle by a stone that some piece of shell must have kicked up. It's only badly bruised. I don't have to go to the rear!" and he said this joyously.

But there were many poor lads who did have to go to the rear, for they were torn and mangled. And there were some who had made their last fight. But it was a good fight. Oh, it was a good and noble fight! Be sure of that!

Assisting Franz, Roger and Bob got back to the barn, and there they took off their comrade's shoe. As he had said, his ankle was only bruised. He was able to limp along.

The Hun fighters had received more than they wanted. They had not only withdrawn to a good distance, but they did not even have nerve enough to launch a counter-attack. The American advance had been so well prepared that it won the battle.

"Well, now we have time to breathe and eat," commented Jimmy, who had been relieved in command.

"Say, a lot of things have happened since the zero hour this morning," remarked Roger.

"You said it!" declared Bob fervently. "If I was only on the paper now I could write a front page story, instead of a miserable little 'stick' about a runaway horse. Oh, but this was some fight!"

It was toward evening, and the tired doughboys were wondering what the night would hold for them, when Jimmy remarked:

"I'm going to see if I can find Sergeant Maxwell."

"What's the matter with him?" asked Roger.

"Nothing, I hope. But I gave him those five thousand francs to keep for me---–you know, the reward money---–*our* money," explained Jimmy, for it was that, as you shall see. "I want to get it back, now that the battle is over. We won't go into action very soon again, I'm thinking. I just gave him the notes to keep for me until this scrap was over. Now I think I'll get 'em back again, and divide 'em up."

"Are you going to persist in your generous notion?" asked Bob.

"I sure am!" was the somewhat indignant answer. "What do you think I am, anyhow, an Injun giver? I said we five Brothers would share and share alike in that reward, and I'm going to insist on it. If Iggy---–if he's killed---–his share goes to his folks. Why, you fellows helped as much in putting that dog Von Kreitzen out of the way as I did."

"Nonsense!" declared Roger. "You did it all alone!"

"Well, I'm not going to spend the reward all alone, and that's settled!" snapped Jimmy. "It's going to be whacked up, just as I promised. Now I'm going to find Maxwell and get the dough. Why, of course, I'm going to divide it. And I'll be glad to get my share right now. We haven't had any pay in some time, and goodness knows when I'll hear from home."

"Or Buffalo," added Bob, with a laugh.

"Yes, or Buffalo," agreed Jimmy. He had admitted that his "girl" lived there---–a girl to whom he often referred as "Margaret," but beyond this he had said little of her. "So I'm going out to find Maxwell. I'll be back soon," he promised.

He received the necessary permission and was soon scouting about, back of the German trench lines, which had been taken over by the victorious Americans.

"Seen Maxwell?" asked Jimmy of a fellow non-commissioned officer who, he knew, was in Maxwell's mess.

"Maxwell? No, I haven't seen him lately. Didn't you hear about him?"

"Hear what about him? What do you mean?" asked Jimmy, and he was conscious of a strange foreboding.

"Why, Sergeant Maxwell has been missing since just about the time we got word to go over the top at the zero hour," stated Corporal Blake, to whom Jimmy had applied. "I thought you knew that."

"No, I didn't," said Jimmy quietly. Then he whistled.

"What's the matter?" asked Blake.

"If Maxwell is missing then it's a double loss," was the answer.

"A double loss? What do you mean?"

"I mean my five thousand francs are gone, too. Whew! Well, it can't be helped, I suppose. I'll go tell the boys!"

CHAPTER V

What's to be done?

"What's the matter. Blazes?" cried Bob, as he saw his friend coming back.

"You look as if we'd lost the war!"

"Well, I've lost part of something I won in it, anyhow," declared Jimmy.

"Is Iggy dead?" Franz wanted to know. "Did you hear any word from him?"

"No, but we must make some inquiries. This is about something else. Fellows, I guess I'll have to wait until I get a remittance from home before I give you your shares of the thousand dollars reward."

"Wait for a remittance!" exclaimed Roger. "Not that I'm altogether sure I'm going to take what you call my 'share' of that; but why do you have to wait?"

"Because the money's gone," said Jimmy, tragically. In France, three thousand miles away from home, with their army pay uncertain, ready cash meant much to our doughboys.

"Gone! Did you lose it?" asked Bob, with a reportorial instinct.

"No, but Maxwell is gone and the money's gone with him. He's missing," Jimmy hastened to explain. "Been missing since just before we went into action."

"Where was the sergeant stationed?" asked Roger.

"In that big concrete dugout we captured from the Germans in the scrap just before this," Jimmy explained. "He was in command of a hand grenade squad there, and just before the fight, or at least soon after the signal to advance was given, that was the last seen of Sergeant Maxwell and my money," added the owner of it ruefully.

His companions received the news in silence. Then Franz spoke up and asked:

"What's to be done? I don't so much mean about the money," he added quickly, as he saw the others look curiously at him. "That doesn't matter, though, of course, I'll be glad of my share, and it's mighty generous of you, Blazes, to offer to whack up. But I mean what's to be done about Sergeant Maxwell? Do you suppose he---"

He did not finish, but his meaning was obvious.

"If you mean, do I think he went away with it, I most certainly do *not*," declared Jimmy, positively. "A thousand dollars isn't enough to make a man skip out."

"A thousand dollars is a lot to some people---I know it is to *me*," said Bob. "I worked hard on the *Chronicle*, and it never brought me a thousand dollars---at least not all at once."

"Me either---when I was slaving in the munition plant, and running a chance of being blown up every minute," declared Roger. "But I think Schnitz is right---what's to be done! Maybe Maxwell was robbed, and he started after the thief and---"

"'Maybe' won't get us anywhere," said Jimmy. "Of course, I'd rather lose the five thousand francs ten times over than have anything happen to Maxwell. And I'd like to know where he is for his own sake. At the same time I'd like to get

that money back, as much for my own sake as for you fellows," he added. "I can very nicely use a bit of spare cash."

"So can I," chimed in Franz. "Maybe we'll have a chance to hunt for the serg. after this place quiets down a bit."

"I hope so," sighed Jimmy. Really he was more affected than he liked to admit, and it was not altogether over the loss of the money, either. He had been firm friends with the missing man---not as close a chum as with his four Brothers, but enough so that there was a genuine loss in his disappearance.

"Well, we'll see what we can do," decided Bob. "We've got to look after Iggy, too---that is, if he's alive. But we can't do anything along either line to-night."

"No, I guess not," agreed Jimmy. "Some of us'll have to do sentry go, I expect, or take a listening post."

And he was right in his surmise. He and Bob were detailed to take a trick at a listening post---to be on the alert for any possible advance of the temporarily defeated Germans. Franz, because of his bruised ankle, was not put on duty. Indeed, he came near being sent to the rear for treatment when an officer discovered his hurt.

"It'll be all right in the morning," declared the youth of German blood, who, nevertheless, was such an ardent hater of the Kaiser and his "Potsdam gang," as a certain preacher has called the Hun ruler's associates. "I'm simply not going to the hospital! Captain, there'll be fighting in the morning; won't there, sir?"

"Very likely," was the grim answer.

"Then I'm going to stay, sir!" declared Franz, forgetting that he was speaking to his superior officer. "I'll be able to walk in the morning, and I want to get some more of the beasts!" and he fairly snarled the word. No true-blooded American hated the Huns as did Franz Schnitzel, of German parentage.

"Very well," assented the captain. "You may stay until morning, at least."

"Thank you, sir," replied Franz, saluting. He knew in his heart that he would never give in, no matter how his ankle hurt, and the pain was not inconsiderable, either.

There came a reaction after the fierce fighting of the morning and early afternoon, and when night came, and the lads, with only a short period of rest, had to go out on sentry or other duty, there was a weariness of body, and a queer feeling of the mind, that did not make the occasion one of pleasure.

But duty was duty and it had to be done.

Jimmy and Bob had an advanced listening post, and they took their positions about ten o 'clock that night. It was dark and a drizzling rain was falling.

"I'd much rather go to bed in a dugout," declared Jimmy, stifling a yawn.

"Same here," agreed Bob. "Say, what do you s'pose happened to Maxwell, anyhow!"

"Can't imagine, unless he's been killed or captured. If he was within our lines some one would have heard of it. Or perhaps they wouldn't either, in all this excitement. It may take two or three days to locate him, if he's alive."

"And if he isn't---or is a prisoner?" suggested Bob.

"Then good-bye to our thousand dollars," sighed Jimmy.

"I'm thinking of poor Iggy, too," said Bob, after a pause. "Do you think he has any chance!"

"Well, he didn't appear to be badly wounded. But if his spine is broken he'll never fight again, and may not live very long. That's a fierce state of affairs. How he escaped being killed outright is a wonder to me. You ought to have seen him after Roger and I dug him out," and in a whisper, for loud talking was forbidden, he related the scene in the shell hole.

He had scarcely finished his narration when Bob peered out from their improvised shelter and seemed to be looking at something intently---that is, as intently as he could in the rainy darkness.

"What is it?" asked Jimmy cautiously.

"I don't know," was the answer. "But someone, or something, is crawling this way. Look right straight ahead. See it moving?"

CHAPTER VI

GOOD STEWS

For a moment Jimmy could see nothing. Possibly this was because he strained his eyes too much, but of course he was looking out into a darkness so black that it seemed to swallow up everything. And there was rain, too, a misty, drizzling rain, which alone would have hampered vision. Then Jimmy closed his strained orbs, and when he opened them again his vision was nearer normal.

"Do you see it yet?" whispered Bob. "Squint along my finger."

Jimmy did so.

"You have pretty good eyes to see anything in this blackness," he was saying when he suddenly became aware of something moving out there among the holes caused by the American shells.

It was more, he said afterward, as though part of the darkness itself moved rather than that he actually saw something. But it was enough to direct his attention to what Bob pointed out.

"It *is* something," was Jimmy's cautious declaration. "And coming this way!"

There was a movement on the part of Bob, and his chum knew he was getting his rifle in readiness. Jimmy followed this example. They were on the alert.

"Don't fire until you challenge," cautioned Jimmy. "It might be one of our fellows, you know."

"One of our fellows---out there? How could it be!"

"Might have advanced too far, been wounded and have waited for darkness to crawl back to our lines. Wait a second more until we see what he's up to."

"It's a man, sure!" Bob whispered, "and he's crawling toward us on his stomach."

"Let's do the same ourselves and crawl out to meet him," suggested Jimmy. "If he has a grenade, or a bomb, and tries to throw it, we may forestall him."

"Our orders were to stay here," decided Bob, and he was a great stickler for obeying orders to the letter. Perhaps even his small newspaper experience was responsible for this.

Suddenly the silence of the darkness was broken by an unmistakable sneeze. True, the sneezer, if I may use such a term, tried to stifle the explosion, but he was not altogether successful. It was a sneeze, and nothing could disguise it.

"Did you hear---" began Bob.

And then, to the greater surprise of the two listeners, there came a muttered exclamation in *German*.

"For the love of gas masks!" breathed Jimmy. "Take aim, Bob!"

And in another moment the fire of two rifles would have been concentrated on that moving splotch of blackness, whence had come the sneeze, except that the guttural German expletive was followed by a tense whisper. And the words came in good English.

"Don't shoot, boys! I'm Schnitz!"

Bob said, afterward, that the reaction was so great that he actually had a fit of nervous shivering, and Jimmy admitted the same. They fully expected a rush of the Huns, but they had made up their minds that first they would "get" the advance guard in the shape of the man who had sneezed. And then to hear the unmistakable voice of their comrade in arms!

It was almost unbelievable, and, for a moment, both listening lads had a doubt. This might be some trick of the Germans, and "Schnitz" was a sufficiently common Teutonic name, shortened as it was. But a moment later the voice from the darkness went on in the same cautious whisper:

"Don't fire, Bob---Jimmy! If you do, you'll spoil a little surprise-party."

"Say, what does this mean!" asked Jimmy, a bit sternly, for he was suffering from a reaction.

"You're supposed to be in the dugout, or somewhere back there," said Bob, when Franz had crawled to them and had arisen to stand beside them. "What brought you out? Were you sent?"

"I sent myself," was the laconic answer. "I couldn't stand it being cooped up back there. My ankle felt a lot better, and I took French leave, as it were. I sneaked out and I crawled over toward the Hun trenches. And say, I've got some information that the K.O. will give his eye teeth to have. They're raising a little party to come over and try to get back some of the land we took from 'em this morning. The Huns are going to raid our position in half an hour."

"Are you sure?" demanded Bob, and yet he knew that Franz would not say it if it were not so.

"Well, I'm as sure as one can be of anything in this war," was the answer in a whisper, all the talk being of that calibre. "I crawled over until I could hear the sentries talking. Then I located a dugout. The door was open and more talk floated out. I heard enough to tell me that the raid is going to be made just before daylight and on this position."

"You mean where we are?" asked Bob.

"As nearly as I can tell," answered Franz, whose knowledge of the German language had again done him and his friends such good service.

"Whew!" softly whistled Jimmy. "We'd better get word to the K.O. in a jiffy. You'll get blue streaks, though, Schnitz, for disobeying orders."

"Oh, I guess not," was the easy answer. "It'll all be forgotten in the excitement. I just had to go out. I heard where you fellows were stationed on listening post and I started out with the intention of crawling back to your position. Hit it, too; didn't I?"

"That sneeze came near causing you to be hit, and with something harder than a rubber ball," said Jimmy grimly. "Bob? you'd better go back with him and let him tell his yarn to the captain. He doesn't know the password, and I'll have to stay here on duty. But hurry back and let me know what the word is."

"Right-O!" assented Bob, and a moment later he and Franz were stumbling back over the rough ground, and through the rain and darkness, toward the dugout where the officer in charge of that particular sector was on duty. A captured German dugout had been taken over, and such comforts as it afforded were utilized.

Just as Franz had surmised, the import of the news he brought in wiped out his offense against orders. He told in detail what he had overheard, and quick, sharp commands were at once sent out over the telephone, for the engineers had hastily strung wires when the advanced posts had been taken by the onrushing American doughboys.

And the information Franz had secured by his bold act proved correct in every detail. The Germans, smarting under their defeat, were determined on revenge. The raiding party came over---–but they found the Americans ready.

It was not a large raid, not as large as Franz, in his enthusiasm, had intimated. And it was evidently undertaken to get back the commanding position occupied by that part of the 509th to which the five Brothers were assigned.

But with the advent of the foe the Americans opened such a fire from rifles, hand grenades and light artillery, while the scene was illuminated by flaring lights, that the Huns were almost completely wiped out. A number of prisoners were taken, for the Boches, once they found the tide of battle going against them, threw down their guns and cried: "*Kamerad*!"

Sharp as was the fighting, it was only a slight incident in the great war. Such skirmishes, or trench raids, were occurring all along the Western front every night. But slight as it was it took the lives of several gallant American lads, and a number were wounded. Roger Barlow received a slight flesh wound, but he refused to go back to the dressing station, insisting on getting back into the fight when his hurt had received first-aid treatment.

"The only trouble was, though," Roger said later, "that the scrap was all over when I got back from the first-aid post. Pity you fellows couldn't have kept it going until I could join you."

"Better to have it over with sharp and sudden than drag along," replied Jimmy. "They killed poor Baker right in front of me," he added, naming a "bunkie" of whom he and the five Brothers were very fond. "I might just as well have received that bullet."

"Yes. It's a queer world," mused Bob. "If it hadn't been that Franz went out against orders and got information, we might all be dead now."

And this was true.

Once more silence settled down over the trenches, but it was now almost morning, and with the breaking of dawn the rain that had been a drizzle all night settled into a steady downpour.

"Not much fighting to-day," decided Roger, when the four Brothers were at breakfast together---and a cold breakfast at that, for there was no fuel to heat the coffee, though word went around that the traveling kitchens were on their way toward the trenches.

Roger was right. Each side consolidated its positions, and each seemed waiting for what the other might do. This state of affairs continued for three days, during which the rain lasted. Save for an occasional artillery duel at night, precipitated often by some nervous sentry firing his rifle, there was no actual battle.

At the first chance, when he was off duty, Jimmy secured permission to go back to their former headquarters.

"I want to find out about Iggy if I can," he said, "and also make inquiries about Sergeant Maxwell and that money I owe you fellows."

"You don't owe it to us!" declared Roger.

"I sure do!" was the answer. "Just as much as if I'd borrowed it from you!" declared Jimmy. "And I'm going to pay up, too!"

He returned from his little trip much sooner than his comrades had expected. There was a joyous light in his face as he greeted them, and cried:

"Good news, fellows! Good news!"

CHAPTER VII

UNDER FIERCE FIRE

There were so many sorts of good news possible for Jimmy to have brought back from the former headquarters at the rear that, for a moment, his three chums did not know what question to put next.

The war might be over, though until the Germans were worse whipped than they then were there would be poor satisfaction in that, reflected Roger.

It was Bob, however, who blurted out:

"Is Iggy all right?"

"You said it!" cried Jimmy, dancing around "like a venerable ostrich," as Bob said afterward. "He isn't all right, exactly, for he's pretty badly mussed up. But he's not going West, and if that isn't good news I don't know what is!"

"That's the best news you've given us since you said the soup kitchens were on their way the day after the big fight," declared Schnitz. "How much is he hurt?"

"Well, really not any at all, except for some bad bruises, and he says they'll be better in a day or so. No internal injuries that the doctors can find, and outside of the bruises and scratches---and he has them in plenty---he's as good as any of us."

"But how in the world did it happen?" asked Bob. "Didn't you see him with his head all caved in and his spine broken?"

"Well, I thought I did," admitted Jimmy. "But the fact is that the blood on his face, as I guess I told you before, came from a man who was killed by a shell, right in front of Iggy. And that numb feeling of his legs was because they were both 'asleep'. You know, when you lie too long on your arm, or keep your leg in a cramped position. He got all over that after he'd been in bed a few hours.

"You see the stuff that caved in on him, after the shell exploded, formed a sort of arch over his head, and took the weight off his face. He'd have been dead except for that. But he's practically all right, and will be back with us soon. He's crazy to see you fellows. I thought he'd kiss me, the way some of the Frenchies do when they get excited."

"Well, we'll go to see him as soon as we get leave," decided Bob.

"Don't think I'm asking this because of the money involved," said Schnitz, a little later, "though we all agree that it's fine and generous of you to have offered to whack up. But did you hear anything of Sergeant Maxwell?"

"Not a word," declared Jimmy, "nor the missing five thousand francs, either. Both have mysteriously disappeared."

"What's the official report on the serg.?" asked Roger.

"Just missing---that's all," said Jimmy, simply. "I made inquiries about him as soon as I had located Iggy in a hospital. Sergeant Maxwell is down as missing. Of course, there's no report about my money. In fact, we five, and the serg. himself, are the only ones who know about it."

"Missing," mused Bob. "Does it say without official leave, or anything like that?"

"No, it doesn't," went on the owner of the five thousand francs. "He isn't classed as a deserter---yet."

"Do you think he will be?" Franz wanted to know, impressed by something in Jimmy's voice.

The latter did not reply for a moment. And then he felt that he must not only be generous but just. So he said:

"No, I don't! Sergeant Maxwell has proved himself too many times to be as straight as a die, to go wrong now. I don't really believe he went away purposely with my money. He may be wounded, and have wandered into the German lines. If he did, with that cash on him---good-night little old five thousand francs!" and Jimmy pretended to kiss them adieu. "And, fellows, we mustn't forget that he may be lying dead in some rain-filled shell hole," he went on softly. "We'll just suspend judgment, that's all. Forget the bad news about Maxwell and remember the good news about Iggy. And we'll all go to see Ig as soon as we can."

"You said it!" declared Bob. "I won't forget how it seemed like a bit of home and heaven to me, Jimmy, when you came to the hospital where I was. We sure will go cheer up Iggy!"

"He wants to write to his mother the worst way," went on Jimmy. "And he insists on writing in English. You know how his letters read, but he simply won't stick to Polish which he can handle all right. It's got to be English or nothing."

"Did he write?" asked Roger.

"Not while I was there. His wrist is still too sore. But he made me promise to bring paper, a pen, and everything, when I came again, and, if he can't write, one of us is to do it for him---but in English, mind!"

"Well do it!" declared Bob.

It was three days later when they all received permission to go to the rear and call on Iggy who was still in the hospital, though likely to be discharged as cured inside of a week. There was still a lull in the fighting about the sector where our five Brothers, or, rather, four, were stationed. But there was an indefinite something in the air that told of fierce battles to come. The Huns had too much at stake to wait long.

"Ach! So glad it is I am to see you!" voiced Iggy, when the four were admitted to him. "Dit you paper and pen pring!" he asked Jimmy, eagerly. "I myself can write to mother now. See, shmine wrist she is all so K.O. now."

"K.O.?" cried Roger. "What's the commanding officer got to do with your wrist, Iggy?" For, of course, you know that the commanding officer in an army is designated as "K.O."

"He means O.K." declared Jimmy. "Got his letters twisted; that's all. He means his wrist is all right."

"His wrist is all right and his letter will be all write," punned Roger.

"That will be about all from you!" commented Bob, sternly.

"Yes, Iggy, I've got all the makings for a first-class screed," went on Jimmy with a smile. "Do you want to write yourself, or shall I?"

"Myself will I do it," said Iggy, simply. And when, after considerable labor, mental and physical, he handed the scribbled paper to Jimmy, he said: "Read her and see much how better as I do him in English now. Read him," and he indicated the letter he had written to his mother. And, to please him, and because there was nothing very personal in the epistle, Jimmy read it. His chums, at Iggy's request, read it also. And this is what Iggy's four Brothers saw:

"Deer Mother. In bed am i and a pritty lady she bring to me all i can eats good, i was not shooted like is some of thee soljiers, but on me fell rocks and stoanes so i was moastly mushed but Roger and jimmee thay gat me oaut. i tell you of loav for yon i have mauch. soon i go fightting agen wich is batter than in hoarse-pottle bein. i got bumps an kuts but noat mooch alse. jimee he is to give me soam moaney what he gat for killing a bad germans and wen i gats my share to you i it sand will yet. good-bye deer Mother from your loafing soan Iggy."

"That's a dandy letter!" declared Jimmy when he had finished reading it. "I'll get it right off for you, Iggy."

"Better writing I am doing yes, is it not?" anxiously inquired the Polish lad.

"You bet!" declared Bob, and his eyes, as well as those of his chums, were moist, for there was a pathetic note in the missive, in spite of its queerness.

"He knew enough to use a capital now and then, which is more than he did at Camp Sterling," declared Bob, when they had left the hospital, to go back to their stations.

"You didn't tell him that his share of the five thousand francs, as well as yours and ours, was missing; did you?" inquired Franz.

"What was the use?" asked Jimmy. "Poor Iggy has troubles enough as it is. But he'll get his share all right to send home."

"Just like Jimmy Blazes," declared Roger to Bob, afterward.

It was three or four days after this that Iggy was able to leave the hospital, and take his place with his chums.

"The five Brothers are together again!" cried Jimmy, when the reunion took place. "Now let the Huns tremble!"

"By golly yes!" declared the Polish lad. "I fight can now like three soldiers, so much did they give me eats in the hoarspottle. A fine place she is---tha hoarspottle.

"But the longer we can keep out of such places as hospitals the better," remarked Jimmy. "Now then, Iggy, what is it you want most?"

"Well, Blazes, if you excuse me---but you did say you would the reward moany crack among us. No, it was not crack; he was a word---"

"Split!" suggested Bob.

"Yas. Him it was. You say you split him---that moany, Jimmy, and if I could to my mothar send what you say you give me---maybe she of need have for him now."

Jimmy looked queerly at his chums. Truth to tell he had scarcely any cash at present, and to give Iggy his share of the five thousand francs---about two hundred dollars---was out of the question.

Bob took the financial bull by the horns.

"Look here, Iggy," he said. "Jimmy has played hard luck. He had that money but---"

"Doan't tell me he is loss!" cried Iggy. "Oh, doan't tell me he is loss! I so much think of that two hundred dollars---mine fader or mine mothar never so much have at once see in all their lives. Two hundred dollar---Oh if he is loss---"

"It's only lost for a while---temporarily," said Jimmy. "I wasn't going to tell you, but Bob spilled the beans, I left the cash with Sergeant Maxwell to keep for me, and the sergeant is missing with the dough. But as soon as I get my money from home you'll get your share---the two hundred bucks, Iggy, and so will the others."

"Nonsense! Forget it!" cried Roger. "Do you think---"

But he had a chance for no more, for at that moment came the signal that the Huns had launched a gas attack. Instantly the five Brothers, and all up and down the line the other Americans, donned their gas masks. This was but the preliminary to what turned out to be some of the fiercest fighting of that particular series of battles. The Germans followed up the gas attack with a fierce deluge of shells and shrapnel, and half an hour later our heroes were under heavy fire.

"It's an attack in force!" cried a lieutenant as he hurried along the trench where the Khaki Boys were stationed. "And the word is, stand where you are! Don't give back an inch!"

His words were drowned in the roar of big guns.

CHAPTER VIII

THE OLD MILL

Silently the five Brothers, again united and ready to fight to the death, gazed at one another as they lined up in the trench. That is they were silent as regards conversation, for they could not talk with their gas masks on, and the warning given by the lieutenant---the warning and the admonition to stand fast---had been the last words he uttered before he, too, donned the protecting device. And no sooner had the five Brothers and those about them begun to breathe through the chemicals that destroyed the terrible chlorine, than over it came rolling in a deadly, yellowish cloud.

And yet it was far from silent in that hideous storm, for the very ground shook and trembled with the intensity of the gun-fire---the gun-fire not only of the Germans but the Allies as well.

It was an attack in force, and the fire was of the fiercest. Protected somewhat by the trench, in which they were, nevertheless the members of the company to which our heroes belonged sustained several casualties.

At one place a high explosive shell struck on the very edge of the trench, caving it in, and burying beneath tons of earth and stone the unfortunate Sammies stationed there. And the worst of it was that no adequate revenge could be taken just then---at least no revenge that was visible to the enraged comrades of the killed and wounded.

For the orders were to stay in the trenches and repel the attack at first. Later the counter-attack on the part of the Americans would take place, and then it might be that the Huns would be made to pay dearly for their work.

Jimmy looked through the grotesque goggles of his gas mask at his chums. If appearances went for anything they were on the alert and ready to jump over the top at the signal and fight to the death. But the word was delayed, for what, doubtless, were good military reasons. There was little that could be accomplished in firing one's rifle over the top of the trench. This was all right in the case of sniping, but for a general attack the work had to be done by the artillery, big and little. Later would come the rush in the open, or the standing fast to repel the attack of the gray hordes. And then the rifle fire of the infantry would tell.

It was hard waiting---to be stuck down in what was, literally, a "mud hole," and stay there while, over one's head, shrilled and screamed the big shells, that must create untold havoc, damage and death in the rear.

Fortunately, however, as was learned later, the Germans did not have the range accurately. They wasted much of their fire on unoccupied ground in the immediate rear of the American position, and it was only an occasional shell that landed near the trenches. So the position of our heroes was not as bad as at first they imagined.

But it seemed bad enough, and the firing from the Hun positions was intense, and as long as Jimmy, Bob and the others did not know that the Boches did not have them under accurate fire, they suffered nearly as much mentally, as though the knowledge had been positive.

For an hour or two the terrific artillery duel kept up, the Germans hoping to blast away all trenches, barbed wire entanglements and sweep away any opposing forces so that the ground wrested away might be gained back. And during this time the forces of the defenders of liberty were, in the main, inactive. There was little to be gained in rushing the enemy just yet. That time would come later.

And so under a deluge of high explosives, of shrapnel, of trench bombs and the deadly gas the five Khaki Boys and their comrades in arms suffered---physically and mentally. For a gas mask is both physical and mental torture. It is safe, and that is about the best that can be said for it. Merely to sit quietly with one on is a torture, and to work or fight in one is about the limit of human endurance.

Still the orders were to keep them on, and they were kept. But more than once Roger, Franz or Iggy would look around as though for a sight of some one in authority who would tell them to remove the hideous head-pieces.

But the Huns still kept sending over the poisonous gas from shells and from the big cylinders of it they had brought up to the front lines. And the wind was in their favor, blowing straight toward the American lines, so that the deadly yellow fumes came over in rolling clouds.

And then, somehow, word came back to the officers in charge of the big American guns that their shells were having an effect on the Hun artillery. Piece after piece of the Boche batteries were silenced, and at last the Sammies began to obtain mastery of the artillery situation.

And then it was that a barrage could be laid down, and an advance attack made. But it had to be made under somewhat adverse conditions, for gas masks must be worn. And to leap from the trench, and stumble over No Man's Land, under heavy fire, and discharge one's own rifle, all the while wearing one of the canvas and rubber contraptions, was not real fighting---at least so Jimmy said afterward.

But such it had to be, and at the signal the five Brothers leaped up with their comrades and went over the top again---over the top of the trenches that had either been dug when the new position was taken and held, or over the top of some of the trenches wrested previously from the Germans.

There was no shouting and yelling, such as often and ordinarily preceded an attack over the top. One can not shout in a gas mask. But there was shouting in the hearts of the Sammies as they rushed forward to do their share in destroying the beast from the earth.

Upward and onward they rushed and then they were in the midst of the battle. And yet not exactly in the midst, for the actual conflict was rather of longer distance than that. Hand-to-hand fighting had not yet occurred. But they advanced, firing as they rushed on, not in close formation, for that offered too good a target, but separated. They would fire, rush on, drop to earth, rise again, fire and rush on. And so it went.

And then, after an hour or two, there came a sudden shift in the wind. It was presaged by a calm, so that the deadly chlorine gas rose straight up instead of being blown over the American lines. And then, with a suddenness that must have been disconcerting to the Huns, the gas was blown back in their very faces.

Without doubt such fiends as devised that form of fighting were, in a way, prepared for this, and had their gas masks ready. There were times, in the early stages of the gas war, when often whole companies of Germans would be wiped out by a sudden change in the wind, when gas was being sent over. But the Boches learned from experience.

However, whether or not the return of their own gas worked any havoc among the Germans it did one good thing; it enabled Jimmy and his chums, as well as their comrades, to remove their own oppressive head-coverings, after a certain time had elapsed.

Once they took them off, they sniffed cautiously of the air. There was none of the choking taint of the chlorine---a gas which seems to dissolve the lung tissues---the air was sweet and pure---that is, comparatively so, though it was odorous with powder fumes. But these were a perfume compared to chlorine.

"Oh, this is better!" cried Jimmy, as he breathed deep and filled his lungs naturally, for though there is everything to be said in favor of the gas mask when an attack is on, one can not breathe naturally in it.

"I should say so!" agreed Bob.

"Well, where do we go from here?" chanted Roger.

Their particular fighting contingent had been halted in a grain field. All about them, that is up and down such a line as had been formed, the fighting was going on.

And on either side of them, and in front and behind, there was the rumble and roar and thunder of heavy guns. In the ranks of the comrades of the five Brothers there were bloody gaps. They had won their way thus far at no small sacrifice of life and limb. But, so far, our friends had escaped scatheless, though they all bore wounds, as you know.

It was a pleasant, sunny day---that is, it would have been pleasant had it not been for the war. That spoiled the pleasantness, but nothing could stop the sunshine. To the great orb that had seen the earth formed, this fighting, momentous as it was destined to be, was only an incident in the rolling on of the ages of time.

"Wonder why we're being held up?" ventured Franz. "I haven't had half enough of fighting yet."

"Nor of me, neither," declared Iggy, who seemed to have recovered all his spunk and spirit. "It is of a betterness to shoot lots when of a gas mast you are delivered, yes?"

"Right, old top!" shouted Jimmy. "Hello!" he went on, as he saw the major of the battalion approaching. "I guess here's where we get orders!"

And they got them---orders to advance. And this time they went forward with yells, for it was said that the gas attack was over---the kindly wind had done its work well.

"There they are! There are the Huns!" cried Roger.

His chums looked, and saw dimly through the smoke, a gray line, like some great worm, that would oppose their progress.

"Come on! Come on! Eat 'em up!" shouted Jimmy.

The others needed no urging. At the Huns they went---–firing and being fired at.

For a time it was a battle of rifles---–the artillery and machine-guns seemed to have been silenced temporarily. On rushed the Sammies, in their own peculiar but comparatively safe, open formation. Rushing, dropping, firing, up again, now down, but ever going onward, led by their officers.

The Huns received the fire, and that it was deadly was evidenced by the gaps torn in the gray ranks. Then they would close up, fire as though by platoons, and come on slowly.

Suddenly the comparative slowness of the rifle fire was broken by the staccato explosions of a machine-gun. It opened on the left of the position taken up by Jimmy and his chums, and in an instant had mowed down several doughboys.

"Take what cover you can!" shouted a lieutenant. "Where's that gun? Did any one notice?" "Over in that red mill!" some one shouted. Afterward it developed that this was Franz, who was an expert shot and quick in judgment.

Dropping flat in the low-growing grain, many eyes of the Sammies turned in the direction of the red mill. It was a French one, of picturesque construction. And as Jimmy and his chums looked they saw a little wisp of smoke come from one of the windows. Then came another staccato discharge, but this time with less deadly effect.

"We've got to get that gun!" cried the lieutenant. "Volunteers wanted to rush the red mill! Who'll come with me?"

CHAPTER IX

TRAPPED

Characteristic it was of the lieutenant to ask who would come with him. American officers do that. A German would have said "Go!" The American said "Come!"

And characteristic it was of the Sammies that everyone within the sound of the young officer's voice answered, as one:

"*I will*!"

"Keep your heads down! You may get them knocked off soon enough when the rush comes," went on the lieutenant, for in their eagerness to answer and be selected for the dangerous mission, some had partly raised themselves from their prone positions.

"There's no question but that's a German machine-gun in that old mill; is there?" asked the lieutenant.

"Here's one of the bullets, sir," replied Roger, tossing over one that had penetrated the earth near where he was lying, and come out after striking a stone. "That's a bit of Hun lead all right."

He tossed it over to the officer, who was stretched out in the young, green grain near by.

"Yes, that's German all right," was the answer. "It's larger than ours. I thought perhaps some of our men might have gone in there to pepper the Huns. Well, we've got to get it---–that's all."

"And soon, too," murmured Jimmy. "Whew! This is fierce!"

A hail of lead from the weapon in the old red mill drew this exclamation from him. Fortunately the men were low enough to escape the worst of the firing, but some were wounded and one killed.

"There's two guns in that mill, sir!" called Franz, who was lying near Bob. "They're both firing together."

"You're right," was the lieutenant's comment. "Well, so much the more work for us to do. How many of us are here?"

It developed, by an improvised roll call, that there were fifteen, including our five Brothers. With the lieutenant who was in immediate command, there were sixteen.

"We'll all go!" was the officer's decision. "Fill your magazines, get your hand grenades where you can reach 'em and be ready for the rush. It's got to be a rush, and I hope it lasts long enough for some of us to get there," he added soberly. "Boys, it's a desperate chance we're taking, but a machine-gun nest there may hold up the advance. Maybe it is holding it up. We've got to clean out the red mill!"

"We're with you!" cried Jimmy and the others.

And, as he spoke and the others cheered their assents, there came another burst of fierce fire from the machine-guns hidden in the old red mill. But there was too much elevation and the bullets, this time, flew harmlessly over the backs of the Yanks.

"Now for it!" cried the lieutenant. "They may have to put in a fresh belt of cartridges, or the guns may have heated or jammed. We'll take a chance. We'll make three lines of five each. I'll lead one, and there'll be six in that. Blaise, you take four men, and Simpson, you take four. We'll spread out---fan shape---and don't stand upright---run crouching. Now, Blaise and Simpson, pick your men, and give me the word when you're ready."

Of course Jimmy picked his four Brothers, and they crawled up behind him, ready for the word. Sergeant Simpson, a brave but somewhat reckless lad, had four of his own choosing, and there were five who crawled over to line up behind the lieutenant.

"All ready?" asked the officer. "Ready," answered Jimmy, and the other leader gave a like reply.

"Then come on, and may we all live to get there!" cried the gallant officer.

He arose to a crouching position and started to run toward the red mill, followed by Jimmy and his four, and Simpson and his quartette. And, as they rushed on, the automatic guns cut loose again.

The dust in the grain field rose in little spurts as the bullets struck, and the rattle of the spiteful machine-gun made a chorus with the snapping and popping of the American rifles. For Jimmy and the others fired from the hip as they ran.

They could not hope to do much execution on the German gunners, protected as the latter were by the old mill. But some chance bullet, entering through crack or crevice, might end the activity of one or more of the Hun crews. It was the only thing to do, however, until they could come to hand grips---to cold steel---with the hidden Boches.

"Come on! Come on!" cried the lieutenant.

"Come on! Come on!" echoed Jimmy and Simpson.

They were nearing the red mill now. They could see no one in it, but the sight of two windows, on either side of the big, open door, seemed to give evidence of the location of the machine-guns. Smokeless powder was being used, but there was a thin film of smoke, for all of that, and this smoke floated from the two windows.

"There they are!" cried the lieutenant. "Come on, boys, we have 'em now!"

But the glory of it was not to be---for him. Hardly had the words left his mouth than he crumpled up, rolled completely over and lay still. Afterward a dozen bullets were found in his body.

But the others halted not. The man immediately behind the fallen lieutenant leaped over his lifeless body and led the advance, as Jimmy and Simpson were doing.

They were close to the mill now. They could see the flashes of fire coming from the guns which were shooting through the windows. And the fire was deadly. Jimmy heard a yell from Franz, who was directly in his rear. He did not dare stop or turn around but he shouted:

"Done for, Schnitz?"

"Only one finger nipped," was the grim answer. "Go on! We're with you!"

One machine-gun concentrated on Simpson and his four gallant lads, and, in less time than it takes for you to read these words, the five lives were snuffed out.

"Come on! Come on!" yelled Jimmy. He was so mad with rage he hardly knew what he was saying or doing. He saw a German face at one of the windows. Quickly he fired. The face turned crimson with blood and disappeared.

Mason, who was leading the other four, since the death of the lieutenant, stumbled and fell twenty feet away from the red mill. One of his companions assumed the lead of the three who were left, and Jimmy and his four chums now converged with these four in a rush toward the open portal.

They were now out of range of the guns, which could not be turned at such an angle as to rake them. But hard fighting was yet to come.

"Wait!" shouted Jimmy, as he reached the threshold of the door, and saw, to his left, a group of Huns about a gun that seemed to have jammed. And not all the Huns were alive, either, showing that the fire of the attacking party had done part of its work.

With a quick motion Jimmy threw a hand grenade into the midst of the German crew, at the same time falling back himself behind the door post, and pushing Bob, who was now next him, into the same safe position.

There was a roar as the grenade burst, and smoke, for the moment, obscured the scene. When it was blown away, drifting through the doors and windows, there was no longer a German machine-gun crew, and all that remained of the gun was torn and twisted metal.

Jimmy's quick action with the hand grenade had saved fierce fighting for possession of the weapon. But the other remained---the second on the other side of the main door of the mill. To this some of the gallant lads gave their attention. With wild yells they rushed at the German crew, and to their credit---if credit it be---let it be said that these Huns did not cry "*Kamerad*!" They were ready for a fight and they got it. It was a case of cold steel, and there were no

better exponents of that mode of fighting than the American lads.

There was a short and bloody conflict and then it was over. But at sad cost to the attacking party. Of the sixteen that had started to wipe out the machine-gun nest in the old red mill, the five Brothers alone were left alive, and, save for slight flesh wounds, which all of them had, they were not seriously injured. No, I am not quite correct in saying that only these five were left alive. There was one other, a lad named Blakeley from New Jersey. But he was so badly wounded, by a bayonet thrust from a German, that his death was only a question of minutes.

He managed, before he passed away, to whisper a message to his loved ones at home, and this Jimmy Blaise undertook to send by letter.

"And now, let's see what's next to do," murmured Roger, when the dead lad had been reverently laid with the other Americans killed in the mill.

"I don't believe we're going to have much choice," said Jimmy, grimly, as he pointed through the window.

"Why?" asked Roger.

"The Germans have surrounded the place," was the answer. "We're trapped---that's why!"

CHAPTER X

FALLING WALLS

For a moment Jimmy's companions did not quite understand him. Was he perpetrating some grim joke, or had he received an injury on the head that made him irresponsible?

Suddenly the concussion of a heavy gun shook the mill, making the old walls rattle and sending up little clouds of grain dust from nooks and crannies where it had gathered for many peaceful years.

"The Germans have surrounded us?" cried Roger. "Do you mean that?"

"Look for yourself," said Jimmy, and his very calmness as he pointed from the window seemed to indicate that he was master of himself.

His four companions looked as he indicated. Rolling down from the hills, which surrounded the little valley in which the mill was located, were ranks of gray-clad men; Huns beyond a doubt. And they were coming in force.

"Do you suppose they are after us?" asked Bob, and he was quite surprised when his four chums burst into laughter. No, I am wrong. Only three of them laughed---Roger, Jimmy and Franz. Iggy looked on almost as uncomprehendingly as did Bob, but Iggy was staring at a dead German on the floor of the mill---a German he had killed by a bayonet thrust from behind, when that same German was about to fire his revolver, pointblank, at Roger. Iggy was filled with many emotions as he looked at his work---work undertaken and carried out for Liberty.

"What's the matter?" asked Bob, a bit nettled. "Doesn't it look as though they were after us?"

"I don't know why I laughed," confessed Jimmy. "Sort of nervous, I guess. But the idea of a German army, or at least several divisions, coming to capture us five struck me as funny."

"Well, you said we were being surrounded!" protested Bob.

"Well, I meant it, too. But in a general way," went on Jimmy. "I don't suppose the Huns know we are here. Of course they may realize it after they find out we've silenced the machine guns. But for the present this seems to be a big advance. I guess there's going to be some fierce fighting. They've brought up some of their reserves to stop our progress, and by the fortunes of war, we're caught in a back current."

"You mean none of our fellows are here?" asked Roger.

"None that you can see," went on Jimmy. "I guess we sort of over-ran our objective. There must have been a withdrawal and we didn't know it.

"We were too intent on capturing this mill. And we did, though it wasn't easy. And now the Germans are coming on, and---well, if we can stay here long enough, and keep hidden, we may get out of it yet. But---"

He shrugged his shoulders. It was too much of a question for him to solve.

"But I don't see that we are completely surrounded," declared Franz, hopefully, as he gazed from the window.

"Sure not!" broke in Iggy, who now began to comprehend, in a measure, what was in the wind. "We may out run by der back door yet."

"Not a chance," declared Jimmy. "Look over there!"

He pointed in the direction where their own lines were supposed to be located---where they probably were, for it was from there that the lads had come in the rush during the gas attack. But now the way over which they had hastened, amid fire and smoke and death and wounds, was occupied by a line of gray. The Germans had slipped down from the left flank and had cut off the retreat of the five Brothers in the mill. And as the advancing army was coming on in the shape of a huge semi-circle toward the mill it can easily be seen that if the boys were not exactly surrounded it was so near that perilous situation as to be what is called a distinction without a difference.

For a moment, after they had comprehended the situation to which Jimmy had called their attention, they were all silent. Then Iggy caused another laugh by remarking.

"Well, I eat me now. I haf some of my rations and I hear where is water running yet. Always in our countries where is a mill is water. Of a dryness I am, and water is good for of a dryness."

"That's the truest thing you've said in a long while!" cried Jimmy, clapping his chum on the back. "Fellows, we'd better eat and drink while we can. We have our emergency rations, and, as Iggy says, there must be water where there's a mill. It isn't a wind one and there's no steam or electricity here yet. Let's get ready for a siege."

"Do you really think they know we're here?" asked Bob, and he pointed out toward the advancing German army.

"To be perfectly frank, I don't," said Jimmy. "I think the situation is just this---but let's go get washed up a bit, and then we can eat and talk. I'm as dry as a bone, and this---well this place isn't just the most inviting," and he could not repress a shudder as he looked at the death and devastation all about them. The bodies of the killed Germans were sprawled in all positions, some even resting on the guns. Then, too, there were bodies of the companions of the five Brothers. As Jimmy said, it was no place to eat and talk.

They found where the mill stream came down the flume to turn the wheel, and there they washed and drank, and then, finding a room where the miller had evidently lived, they sat down to make what meal they could. And as they ate the Germans advanced down the hills to occupy the valley in which was located the old red mill.

"Now let's hear your opinion, Blazes," called Bob.

They all seemed instinctively to turn to Jimmy as a leader now. Nor was this the first time.

"Well, I think we've seen the last of some Germans and the first of others," he began.

"Sounds like a puzzle," commented Bob.

"It may turn out to be before we get through with it," was Jimmy's grim reply. "But here's the situation as I see it. You know we started, some days ago, to drive back the Huns. To a certain extent we succeeded. Then came a lull, and that ended when they launched an attack to-day---an attack with the gas as a preface.

"We did our best then, and I guess we must have rolled back part of a wing of one of the German divisions. But our particular sector was halted, and we seem to have gone on too far, or else the others got orders to retreat, and we didn't, and here we are.

"Now I think the two German machine-gun crews that were in this mill were probably what was left of the force our boys succeeded in wiping out. They had orders to stay as long as possible to delay our advance, and they stayed---got to give 'em that credit.

"But we just had to wipe 'em out, and we did. That's to our credit. This seems to be the last of some not very large German force that started the game this morning. And now comes a much larger force," and he indicated the Hun hordes rolling down the slopes. "It was probably the knowledge of the advance of this big body of troops that caused the retreat, or halt, of our main force. We're probably waiting for reserves, or we may be playing a deeper game---to get the Huns in this valley and clean 'em up.

"That, of course, is up to the General Staff. But that doesn't change our position. We're here, but I don't believe those Huns know it. The army, or division, or whatever it is, that's coming on now may not even know that this mill, for a time, was held by some of their own men. Though, of course, later, when orders and instructions are interchanged, this fact will come out.

"But before then I hope we'll either be out of here, or in a position to give a better account of ourselves," went on Jimmy, who was sitting on a box, munching part of his rations, and drinking from an old tin cup he had found.

"What's that mean?" asked Franz.

"Well, either we can escape, or our boys will drive these Huns back, and in that case we'll be all right. I admit it's going to be a ticklish proposition to escape from here though," and Jimmy went to an upper window and took another observation.

"Are they closing in?" asked Bob.

"They seem to have halted," replied Jimmy. "At least the center has. The two wings are coming on like a pair of pliers getting ready to nip us between the jaws."

"Ach! Den will dey squeeze us?" asked Iggy.

"If they know we are here I suppose they'll try it," declared Jimmy. "But maybe we can inflict a few bites before they crush us! Fellows, we'd better look to the defense. How much ammunition have we?"

"Mighty little!" declared Roger, gloomily. "I fired about all I had coming on in the rush."

"Same here," admitted Bob.

"Maybe a machine-gun yet we could shoot," suggested Iggy. "One only was bust by your grenade, Jimmy. Maybe one iss--–"

"By Jove! He's right!" cried Jimmy. "I never thought of that. If worst comes to worst we may, for a short time, turn the German's own gun on 'em. Come on and we'll take a look."

To the delight of the Khaki Boys the second machine-gun was in good order, and there was considerable ammunition left.

"But can we work it?" asked Bob.

"Let me take a look," suggested Franz. "I saw something of 'em when they had me a prisoner."

"Something good may come of that, after all," cried Jimmy. "Here you go, Schnitz, take a look."

This Franz did, and presently reported that there was no reason why they should not work the German gun. Accordingly it was freed from the dead Huns about it, and the ammunition was overhauled. There was also some ammunition for the German rifles that had fallen from the dead hands of their owners, and this, together with the guns, was collected.

In addition to this the lads had a few rounds left for their own rifles, though, as Roger had said there was very little available. They had fired fast and fiercely in the rush on the old mill.

"Let's look around and see if the Huns had any food they didn't gobble," suggested Roger. "That ration of mine was only a sample."

A look from the mill windows showed that the advancing German army had no present intentions, as far as could be judged, of attacking the red mill. They did not seem to be paying any attention to it.

So far there had been a total absence of either artillery or rifle fire. The advance had been made silently and comparatively quietly. On either side of the mill, in the far distance, and to the rear, however, were dull rumblings and booms that told of war's activities.

Greatly to their relief, the lads found quite a store of food the Germans had put away, evidently in preparation for a long stay in the mill. It was not food of the best quality, but it was better than nothing, they all agreed. And there was water in plenty.

"If they come at us we'll fight as long as we can," decided Jimmy, which was the sentiment of all, "and we'll live to the best of our ability meanwhile."

"But they don't seem to be going to attack," ventured Roger. "They look to me as though they were settling down for a long stay. I can't see 'em digging trenches yet, but maybe there are some already dug."

While getting the food and ammunition in readiness, and dragging back the dead bodies out of the way, the boys occasionally looked from the mill windows. As Roger had said, the army appeared to have come to a halt, both the center and the wings.

The Khaki Boys had just finished binding up their minor hurts, and were talking of their chances for escape, when there suddenly sounded outside a whine, a scream and a mingled roar.

The next instant there was an explosion that threw them all flat from the force of the concussion, and a terrific noise deafened them. They seemed to be at the ending of the career of this part of the old earth as they saw the whole front wall of the red mill collapse, falling as though sliced off by a gigantic cleaver.

CHAPTER XI

A STRANGE RESCUE

Stunned by the concussion, half choked by the clouds of dust and smoke, terribly jarred when they had been felled by the force of the explosion just outside the mill, our five heroes lay, for several seconds, totally unable to stir. Had there been a rush of Huns on them at that moment, or had some following explosion endangered the mill, they would not have been able to move to save themselves.

But, for a time, there was no further explosion, so that the Khaki Boys had a chance to recover their breath, and, what was more important in their perilous situation, gather their no less scattered wits.

"What---what in the name of the great Attila himself was that?" gasped Roger.

"I think it was yet a gun what went off," mildly said Iggy.

"A gun? Say, it must have been the grandfather of all the cannon the Huns ever made," declared Jimmy. "Are any of you alive?"

"Guess we're all alive," answered Bob, as he slowly arose and shook some of the dust from him. For the dust was thick all over, in clouds and scattered about. Some of it was flour dust and other was the lime and mortar that had held together the front wall which had collapsed and slid outward. The whole front of the mill was open.

There was no doubt about their all being alive, but, for a time, even this had been in doubt. They were still stunned, but they managed to gather in a knot about Jimmy. They were hardly able to breathe, partly because of the shock and partly because of the choking dust.

"There goes our defense," said Bob, gloomily, pointing to where the machine-gun stood---the one they had decided to use against their enemies. It had been crushed by the falling wall.

"Lucky we had the rations in the back room," commented Roger, "Else we'd go hungry."

"We may yet," returned Jimmy, grimly.

"What do you mean!" asked Bob, anxiously.

"Well, I don't believe that was a chance shot," went on the young sergeant. "If they see the mill still standing they may try another, and that may take off the roof. And then-----–"

"Whoa! Hold on a minute! A little at a time!" protested Bob. "This is enough. Don't give us any more."

"We've got to know where we're at!" declared Jimmy, and there was a new quality to his voice. "If this mill is within range of the German guns, and, unquestionably, it is, we've got to get out."

"Or go down cellar," added Roger.

"I don't believe any cellar, unless it was double bomb proof, would be safe if another shell like that came over," said Franz.

"Was it a German shell or one of ours?" asked Bob. "That would be interesting to know. I don't suppose, though," he went on, "that it really makes much difference, after you're dead, whether you're killed by an enemy shell, or by one fired in mistake by one of your friends. At the same time if the American guns have come up it may mean that the Germans will have to retreat and we'll be safe."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that," declared Jimmy. "It will mean a big battle, anyhow, if the Americans and some of the French and British have come up. And that may mean we'll have a chance to join our friends. But, in the meantime, maybe we can tell whether that was a Hun shell, sent to blow this mill off the earth, or whether it was from the good old United States."

Cautiously they advanced across the floor, toward what had been the front of the mill. Caution was necessary, for with the collapse of the front wall and part of the sides, the floor supports were weakened.

"No telling where that shell landed," declared Bob. "It's buried deep, and about ten tons of mortar and bricks are on top of it. If we had seen it coming-----–"

"Look out---duck!" suddenly yelled Franz, as he grabbed Jimmy, who was nearest him and darted toward the rear of the structure.

"What's the matter?" cried Bob.

"Another shell coming!" shouted Franz, and, even as he spoke there was that horrid screeching sound. "Duck!"

Together they ran to the farthest corner of the old mill. Whether it would have been better to have tried to get out none of them stopped to think. They were in a panic.

And then came the explosion, but so distant that it caused no more than a mere rumble of the ground, and a faintly-felt concussion of the now tottery building.

"Missed us that time," declared Roger. "But they're getting our range."

"No, they didn't fire at us," declared Franz. "If they had they would have hit us, for undoubtedly the gunners know the effect of that first shot. The Huns aren't shooting at us purposely."

"Do you mean that shell came from a German battery?" asked Bob.

"It did," affirmed Franz. "I saw the puff of smoke from a battery on the hill where the Germans are grouped. Then I knew they were firing in our direction. But of course I couldn't see the shell, and I didn't know where it would land. But I didn't want to take a chance. That either went over or fell short. But there's no question, now, as to where the firing is coming from---it's from the German lines."

"Then there's no chance for us," said Roger, gloomily.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," declared Franz. "They don't know we're here, and they evidently aren't firing directly at this mill. They may be using it to get the range, and that's why they dropped the first shell here. But we still have a chance."

"I don't see it!" declared Bob. "We can't get out---surrounded as we are by the enemy, and if we stay here another chance shell may wreck the place."

"Better as we noathing do, maybe; eh?" suggested the Polish lad.

"I guess you've struck it," assented Jimmy. "There isn't very much we can do. We might take a chance and sneak out, but I think very likely, the Germans are well supplied with glasses. They are, most certainly, watching this mill, if for no other reason than that it's so conspicuous. If we run out they'll be sure to spot us, and it would mean capture sure."

"Then what do you, advise, Blazes!" asked Roger.

"That we see if there's a chance of getting down in the cellar and staying there. Some of these old mills had very thick foundation walls. I don't know just how long this one will stand up if many more such shells as the first one came over, but we can try it. In fact, it seems to be our only chance."

"All right---to the cellar!" cried Bob. "And don't forget to take with us what food and water we can. Maybe we'll be held there some time. If there's a big battle it may last several days, though if our boys drive back the Huns we'll take the opportunity to slip out and join our friends."

"That's right," agreed Jimmy. "Just think, fellows, what's happening to us now may have happened to poor Maxwell. Maybe that's why he hasn't been heard from. If we don't come back they'll list us as missing, and no one will know whether we've run away, been killed or captured. So we'll have to suspend judgment on the man that's got our thousand dollars."

"That's so," agreed Franz. "I never looked at it in just that way. We never thought this would happen to us, any more than I thought I'd be captured."

They were gathering up such food as remained to them, and Bob was looking for something in which to carry some water to the cellar, when there came again that nerve-racking screech, followed by a roar and bang that seemed to knock the very bottom out of the world itself.

And this time the boys were conscious, for a brief instant at least, that the old mill was gone. It seemed to fall apart, to disintegrate, to crumble like some time-worn structure. And then all five of the lads lost consciousness and seemed to be slipping down into everlasting blackness, while all about them fell and rattled and banged stones, bricks, mortar-dust and dirt, mingled with cracked and splintered wood.

It was Iggy who first recovered his senses. Whether he was less shocked, or whether his nerves were in such a state from his recent experience as to make his unconsciousness of shorter duration, does not matter. The fact is he opened his eyes. And he was at once conscious that he was held down by the weight of much debris. It was on his legs and on his body, but his arms and head were free.

"Ach! Back again am I in de shell hole! It was a dream, yes, that I was taken out!" exclaimed the poor Polish lad. "It a dream must of been! I shall sleep again!"

But as he was closing his eyes, for he really, as he said later, thought that he was back in the shell hole, he saw Jimmy, who was half buried near him, moving slightly.

"Oh, Jimmy Blazes! And dey kill you, too!" sighed Iggy. "How sorry I am we both deat are alretty!"

"Who's dead?" asked Jimmy, in a faint voice. "I'm not, anyhow, but blamed near it. Is that you, Iggy?"

"Yes, I it is. But I know not if I am deader or aliver."

"Take my word for it---you're alive so far, though how long you'll be that way---or me, either---I can't say," said Jimmy. "What happened, anyhow?"

To Iggy's relief Jimmy managed to scramble out of the pile of dirt and stones that half buried him. And then, from another corner of what seemed to be the cellar, a third voice said:

"They sent over a proper shell, that time." It was Franz.

"A *proper* shell? Most *improper*, I call it!" came from Roger. "It blew the mill to pieces!"

"And us along with it," added Bob. "Are we in the cellar?"

"Sub-cellar, basement---anything you like to call it!" put in Jimmy. "But is it possible that none of us is seriously hurt?"

He walked over a pile of masonry and beams. He saw Bob crawling out of a hole and Franz swinging himself down from what appeared to be a ledge. Roger picked himself up from a corner. Only Iggy seemed to be seriously hurt, but it was demonstrated, a few moments later, that he was not. For he scrambled out, scattering the dust in a cloud, and stood with his chums.

They were a sorry sight---covered with dust and streaks of blood, for the wounds they had bound up had opened again, and they had many fresh scratches and cuts.

"It's very evident what happened," declared Jimmy. "They must have dropped a shell on the roof, and it blew the mill right down into the ground, and us with it. We're in the cellar---or what was once the cellar."

"And the next question is, how to get out," added Bob.

"Hark!" exclaimed Jimmy, holding up a warning hand.

There was silence, broken by a faint, crackling noise.

"Do you think you hear the German guns, or ours!" cried Bob.

"Neither one," said Jimmy, and there was a curious note in his voice. "What I hear---and what you'll all hear, soon---is the crackling of flames. The old mill---or what's left of it, boys---is on fire!"

"Then let's get out!" yelled Roger.

Jimmy looked about him, without moving. Above them there seemed to be a solid mass of torn beams and jumbled masonry. On either side there were stone walls---cracked walls, it is true, but, nevertheless, too solid to admit the passage of the Khaki Boys. And only on one side was there an opening, but this was so choked with debris as to make it seemingly impossible to make egress that way. And, as the young soldiers stood there, trapped under the collapsed mill, the sound of the crackling flames became more plain. They could smell, now, the smoke of burning wood.

"We've got to get out! We've got to get out!" yelled Bob.

He rushed to a place where, through a crisscross of beams and planks, he could see daylight. Yet, though there were openings, none of them was large enough to permit the passage of the smallest of the five Brothers. And the wooden beams and planks were all of extraordinary thickness.

"We're trapped! Trapped! And the fire coming nearer!" half sobbed Bob.

And then he saw through the crisscross of beams, coming toward the burning mill, a man who seemed to be an American officer. And yet he wore no such uniform as Bob had ever seen before.

"Steady, boys!" cried this strange rescuer, as he glimpsed them. "I'll soon have you out! Wait! Don't bring the ruins down on top of you!"

CHAPTER XII

MUCH WONDERING

Through the splintered and tangled crisscross of beams, planks and boards which barred their way to freedom, as some iron grill or lattice work might have kept in some ancient prisoner, the Khaki Boys looked at the man who had shouted to them; the man who had said he would rescue them. And he spoke with a calmness and confidence that was in strange contrast to the scene of terror, noise and confusion which was behind the boys---a danger that was ever coming nearer as the fire, started by the exploding shell, ate its way into the dry timber of the old mill, and menaced the five imprisoned Brothers.

"Who is he?" murmured Bob.

"And where did he come from!" inquired Roger.

"Is he an American or German?" was the question Jimmy asked, and he peered out through a space between two big beams that had fallen and crossed when the mill collapsed.

"He isn't a German---that's sure," declared Franz. "No German would be so decent as to rescue five imprisoned Americans. He'd let us roast to death first."

"Maybe he knows not dat we American be," suggested the Polish lad.

"Well, he wouldn't have to be much of a guesser to tell that we weren't Germans, after he heard us talk," said Jimmy. "We might be of either nationality, as far as our being here is concerned. But no matter what he thinks we are, he seems to be willing to help. What's he looking for, I wonder?"

The strange rescuer appeared to be looking about in front of the mill for some object. His eyes eagerly sought the ground, and he hurried to and fro, seeming to realize the need of haste.

"I'll be there in just a moment, boys!" he called. "I'm looking for something to use in prying apart those beams. They're pretty heavy, and I've got to work all alone. I'll get you out in time!"

"Wonder how he knows we're boys!" asked Bob.

"Oh, that's a general term---–he'd call us that if we were forty years old," declared Jimmy. "And no matter how old a man is, if he's in the army, he's a boy. But I wish he'd hurry. It's getting hot here!"

It certainly was! The fire was gaining rapidly, and, every now and then, with a shift in the wind, the hot, choking gases from the flames, together with rolling clouds of smoke, would be blown into the rude chamber where the boys were imprisoned.

When the smoke-clouds blew away the Khaki Boys could look out and see their rescuer, still hunting frantically about for some object to use as a lever. In spite of the danger of their situation they could not help observing the man. He was tall, and well formed, and unmistakably a military character. He appeared to be above the general type of captain or lieutenant.

"If he's any less than a general I'll eat my gas mask!" Roger declared afterward.

Clearly the man was born to command, or he had acquired that right in some manner. There was an indefinable air of authority about him, even though now he was hurrying about almost frantically, looking for some weapon with which to attack the barrier that held the boys prisoners.

"That sure is a queer uniform he has on," remarked Jimmy, as he tried in vain to move some of the beams from his side of the mass of timber that had fallen when the mill was blown up. "It's mostly American, but it has a British air about it."

"And his leather puttees look like some the Germans wear," added Bob. "Maybe he's a war correspondent, and had to pick up bits of uniform from all over."

"He isn't a war correspondent," declared Jimmy.

"What makes you so sure?" Roger wanted to know.

"Because, if he was, he'd have a brassard with a large letter 'C' on it, around his arm," went on Jimmy. "And he wouldn't have a big automatic revolver strapped to his hip, either. The correspondents are classed as non-combatants, and aren't allowed to go armed."

"That's right," chimed in Franz. "But who is he!"

It seemed useless to speculate then, and, indeed, the boys were in little mood for it. The precariousness of their position was alarming. And while I have detailed the conversation among them, you are to understand that it all took place very quickly. In fact from the time they first observed the strange rescuer, until they had talked about his odd uniform, was only about half a minute.

Suddenly the man---officer let us call him---who was scurrying about just beyond the jagged barrier, uttered a cry of satisfaction. He hurried out of the boys' vision for a moment, but lest they have any fear that he had deserted them and left them to their fates, he called:

"I've found what I've been looking for---an axe! I'll soon have you out now!"

He came running back, carrying an axe of curious make. It was a large, keen one, however, and later it developed that it was one the French miller had used to chop his firewood. Throwing off his coat, and revealing beneath it a dark blue shirt, the officer began fiercely to chop at the beams.

And the boys remembered afterward, though at the time they were too excited to mark it, that the officer picked out what might be called the "key" beam. That is one which held all the other pieces of jigged and splintered timber in place, making a prison of that part of the cellar.

With vigorous blows of the keen implement, the unknown chopped away at a great hand-hewn beam. And he swung the axe as though he knew how to use it, and not as a tyro.

"He's been in a lumber camp at one time of his life," decided Jimmy, and the others were inclined to agree with him.

The fire was now gaining so rapidly that the heat of it, penetrating to the prison of the boys, was almost unbearable. The smoke, too, made their eyes smart and burn, and it choked them, causing them to gasp and cough.

"Steady, boys! Steady!" panted the officer, between his vigorous blows. "A few more strokes and I'll have this beam cut. Then I think you can get out."

Again and again he swung the keen axe. Between the blows the boys could hear the sounds of distant firing, and the reverberation told them that heavy guns were being used.

"Hope they don't send any more shells over this way," murmured Bob.

"They seem satisfied, now that they have brought down the old mill on top of us," commented Franz. "Can any of you see the German lines!"

None of them could, it developed. In fact, their vision was obstructed by a small hill directly in front of the grill work of their prison, and, even if this had been removed, the smoke was now swirling around them so thickly that, at times, even the officer chopping them out was obscured.

Once or twice the chopper had to stoop down, in order to breathe the purer and cooler air near the ground, and the boys were put to the same expedient.

And then, suddenly, there came a crashing, splintering sound. There was an exclamation from the officer, and, as he leaped back he cried:

"There she goes, boys! The way is as clear as I can make it! Come on out, and lively, too!"

The Khaki Boys lost no time in obeying. Leaping and scrambling as best they could over the heaps of brick, stone and splintered wood, they emerged through the hole cut for them by the officer. He had chopped through the one beam that held all the others, or most of the others in place, and the crisscross structure had collapsed, allowing the boys to escape.

"Come on! Come on!" cried Jimmy. "Everybody out!"

And they leaped out only just in time, for as Bob, the last to make his way to safety, cleared the jagged barrier, a burst of flames and smoke swept into what had been the boys' prison.

Now they stood on the green grass, in the open, with the burning ruins of the mill at their backs. And confronting them, still holding the axe, and panting from his terrific exertions, was the strange officer.

And as the young soldiers looked at him they wondered, more than ever, who he was.

CHAPTER XIII

A PERILOUS JOURNEY

Almost at once there set in a reaction, as was natural under the circumstances. The Khaki Boys had been keyed up to such a high pitch through the battle, the attack on the hill, the subsequent shelling of it, and their own dangerous position after the collapse of the building, that now their rescue hardly seemed real.

"Say, I'm about all in!" exclaimed Bob, as he sank down on the grass.

"Same here," agreed Jimmy, staggering to a seat.

"Take it easy, boys, take it easy," counseled their rescuer. "And better come a bit farther away from the fire. The whole place is going, and the wind's blowing strongly this way. We're too much in line with it."

He spoke the truth. The boys were enveloped, part of the time, in a haze of smoke and a swirl of burning brands. Tired, and physically and mentally exhausted as they were, they scrambled to their feet---for they had all stretched out on the grass---and made their way to a spot where they could breathe with freedom. The mill ruins were now burning fiercely.

"Any more left in there!" asked the officer, pointing with his axe towards the fiery structure.

"None alive," answered Jimmy, as he thought of their brave comrades in arms who had perished in wiping out the German machine-gun nest. It was, perhaps, a fitting funeral pyre for them.

"Stay here and I'll get you some water," offered the blue-shirted officer. "That will fetch you around quicker than anything else. I can get you a little food, too, I think---emergency rations, if you need them."

"We aren't exactly hungry, sir," said Jimmy, tacking on the "sir" in an almost certain opinion that the man was an officer. "We had some of our own rations, and we were eating when the Huns sent a big shell over that spilled the beans."

"I see. Well, then, rest here until I can get you some water. Fortunately the Boches can't blow up a stream. The water is sure to remain somewhere. It won't take long to get it, I'll be back in a moment."

He hurried off between two little hillocks, away from the burning mill and in the direction of the stream.

"Who in the world is he?" asked Bob.

"It's a puzzle," said Jimmy. "We'll ask when we thank him for saving our lives."

"Here you are, boys," said the officer, as he came up the slope with a canteen which gurgled most musically with water. "Drink this and then we'll discuss what's best to be done."

"Are we safe here?" asked Jimmy. "Safe from the Germans, I mean? They're all about here, you know."

"Yes, I know," said the officer, and there seemed to be more in his remark than the mere words indicated. "But you're safe for the time being. They have destroyed the mill, so it is no longer a menace, they fancy. Their guns are directed elsewhere now."

The sound of distant firing could be plainly heard, but the boys could no longer observe the gray ranks of the Huns on the distant hill. One reason for this was because of the smoke from the burning mill, which swirled about in all directions, and the other reason was that there was a lot of smoke caused by the guns of the Germans, and this, or perhaps a smoke screen which they started, concealed them.

"Feel better?" asked the officer, when the lads had emptied the canteen.

"Much," answered Jimmy. "And now, sir, may we have the pleasure of knowing to whom we owe our escape? We're from the 509th Infantry," he went on. "We were in the battle, and got cut off. Our lieutenant had ordered us to take the mill where some Germans had two machine-guns. We five are all that are left of the sixteen that started. And we wouldn't be alive but for you. So if we could know whom to thank---"

The officer stopped him with an imperious gesture. He looked rather stern, and then, as though conscious that this was not the attitude to take, he smiled.

"I'm glad I was able to serve you," he said. "I happened to be in the neighborhood. I heard your cries after the mill collapsed and began to burn, and I hastened up. I had no time to summon help---in fact, your friends are rather distant from here now. The Germans are all about."

"We know it---to our sorrow," replied Bob. "How we are going to get back to our company is what's worrying me."

"It *is* going to be a problem," assented the officer.

"Are you coming with us?" asked Jimmy. It was a perfectly natural question. Here was one---by most appearances an American officer---marooned with some American doughboys in the midst of the Germans. Why should he not cast his lot with them, and lead them to the best of his ability to the safest place? He was an officer---there was no question of that---and it was his right to lead. But he seemed disturbed at Jimmy's question. He looked searchingly at the boys, and then toward the distant hills where the Germans were massed, though not then in sight.

"No, I---I can't come with you," the unknown said. "I'm sorry, but you will have to shift for yourselves. I'll give you the best directions I can to enable you to reach your own lines, but you'll have to go alone."

"We'll try," said Bob. "But we wish to thank you, and we don't know---"

"Oh, it was all in the day's work," interrupted the officer, "Any one who came along would have done just as I did to help you."

"Not anyone, sir," asserted Franz, in a low voice. "A German wouldn't have chopped us out."

"Well---er---perhaps not," said the officer. "But it was in my line of duty and I did it. I don't want to be thanked for doing my duty."

"But we insist on thanking you, sir!" exclaimed Jimmy with a smile. "If it hadn't been for you we'd be dead in there now---it was impossible for us to free ourselves!"

"Well, you may call me Captain Frank Dickerson," said the officer slowly. And he appeared to hesitate over the words.

"Then allow me, in the names of my companions, to thank you from the bottoms of our hearts!" exclaimed Jimmy, rising and saluting. The captain returned the salute. He stood for a minute looking Jimmy straight in the eyes, and the lad said afterward that the officer seemed to be searching out the sergeant's very soul. Then Captain Dickerson said:

"I must leave you now. You will find a little package of food at the end of the mill flume. I'll leave you this canteen so you may carry water with you on your journey toward your own lines. Your way lies there," and he pointed to the south. "Good-bye---and good luck! I hope you may get through, but---"

Then, turning abruptly he strode off between two high grassy hummocks, and was soon lost to sight in the smoke and haze.

For a moment the khaki boys stood, motionless, and then Jimmy, looking around on the circle of his companions, exclaimed:

"Well, if that isn't mysterious!"

"I should say so!" agreed Bob. "Talk about the man in the iron mask---this beats it!"

"Why doesn't he come with us, toward the American lines?" asked Roger. "Why does he want to go over where the Huns are? This gets me. It looks as if he was-----"

He did not finish the sentence. But his chums knew what he had started to say. Only it seemed a terrible suspicion to which to give voice, against the man who had saved their lives. Still, with all that, the khaki boys could not help thinking in their hearts that there was something wrong.

"Maybe he's going over there to scout around and see if that's a better way for us to get back to our quarters," suggested Bob.

Jimmy shook his head. Then he remarked slowly:

"Come on! Let's see about food and water and then well hike. All our stuff---guns, rations and everything---has gone up in the fire."

"I haf yet two off dem handle chranades," spoke up Iggy, meaning, thereby the serrated Mills bombs which were used in the trench raids.

"Hold on to them!" advised Jimmy. "We'll need them if the Huns see us, and they're very likely to."

They crawled to the end of the mill flume. The fire was now some distance from this wooden water carrier. There, in a canvas bag which the boys recognized as one of the variety carried by the Americans, they found a goodly stock of provisions.

"They'll last us a day, anyhow," said Jimmy, making an inspection. "And by that time we may be back in our lines."

"Or in the Germans'," voiced Bob.

"There's a big battle going on all around us, but we seem to be in the center of a calm area," said Roger. "The question is how to find our way out."

"Well, let's go!" suddenly exclaimed Jimmy. "Well only get lame and stiff staying here, I feel as if I'd been rolled down hill in a spiked barrel."

Not one of the five Brothers but what had several wounds. But, fortunately, they were superficial ones. They were sore and bruised from being knocked down by the concussion, and by being precipitated into the cellar by the collapse of the mill. But they were still able to travel; though, as Jimmy said, if they remained inactive their muscles and joints would stiffen.

"Hike!" cried Bob, and they set off in the direction indicated by Captain Dickerson---that strange man who had seemed so cold and reserved, and who had made so light of what he had done in saving the lives of the Khaki Boys.

"I wonder if we'll ever see him again," mused Franz, as they marched away from the burning mill.

"Somehow I have a feeling that we will," said Jimmy. And afterward he was to recall those words under strange circumstances.

And so they began what was destined to be a most perilous journey to get back to their own lines.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SENTRY

"Now, boys," said Sergeant Jimmy, when they had dipped down into a hollow among the many hills in the big valley, "we've got to have some plan of action, and some system to this. We've got to have a leader, too. Military rule must prevail, even among friends."

"You act as leader!" suggested Bob Dalton.

"That's right!" chimed in all the others.

"We'll make you captain, for the time being," added Roger.

"Thank you for the honor," said Jimmy with a smile. "I'll wait, I guess, until my promotion comes regularly. But if you really want me to take the lead and---"

"Of course we want you!" exclaimed Franz, while Iggy added:

"Besser as we should have him for to leader us dan a Germans."

"Well, I'm glad you think that much of me!" laughed Jimmy. "Now then, if I'm to lead I'll have to give orders. And do you all agree to obey them---at least if they don't seem against your better judgment?"

"We'll obey 'em anyhow," said Roger, and the others nodded assent.

"All right," went on Jimmy. "The first thing to do is to calculate how long our rations will last. There's enough for one day if we each took about all we wanted. Or there's enough for two days, or more, if we stint ourselves."

"Then we'll go on a diet!" declared Bob. "There's no telling how long we may be in getting back to our lines, and while we might be able to find something to eat along the way, it won't do to take chances."

"I thought you'd look at it that way," said Jimmy. "As for water, it rains so infernally often in this country that I imagine we shan't be thirsty. But we'll always carry the canteen full. Now, then, I'll appoint Roger as Secretary of the Interior---that is, I'll make him the cook and give him charge of the rations," and Jimmy handed the canvas bag of food over to his chum.

"There isn't anything to cook," said Roger, as he looked in the bag. "It's all emergency ration stuff."

"So much the easier for you," declared Jimmy. "Now that's settled, the next thing to decide is how to get to our lines."

"Keep right on going the way Captain Dickerson told us," suggested Bob.

"That's what I want to consider," Jimmy went on. "Do you all think that is the wisest course to follow?"

"Why in the world not?" asked Franz, in some amazement. "Didn't he tell us to go south, and don't we pretty well know that in that direction would be the most logical place for our troops to be?"

"I grant that," replied Jimmy. "But if our lines are to the south, why did Captain Dickerson, who appears to be an American officer, go to the north! Why didn't he come with us?"

"That's starting the whole question over again," declared Bob. "I say let's take a chance and go south. The captain wouldn't send us wrong after he went to all that trouble to save us alive."

"Perhaps you're right," admitted Jimmy. "Well, though I'm leader I'm willing to abide by the majority rule. Since you all want to go to the south, the south it shall be."

"Don't you think that's the best way?" asked Roger.

"Well, it's as good, perhaps, as any other," was the reply. "I think we're pretty well surrounded by Germans, and it doesn't really make much difference which way we go. So the south is as good as any."

"Then lead on!" exclaimed Bob.

"Yes---hike!" added Roger.

And once more they started off.

Their way lay through what had once been a beautiful farming country. In places, still, there were fields under cultivation---that is, they had been cultivated up to within a few weeks. But the tide of battle had swept over the region and the French farmers had either been killed or had left their homesteads. Still, where the fields had not been torn up by shell fire, grains were growing, and there were even orchards here and there.

But, as far as the soldier boys could see, there was no sign of life. Even the birds seemed to have flown away. There were no chickens, no dogs, no cattle nor horses---in fact none of the usual farm scenes. Here and there were farmhouses, some in ruins, others scarcely touched by the devastating wave of war. But in these latter, which were still habitable, there were no men or women, and no laughing children. In fact, throughout France it is probable that there were no laughing children at this stage of the war. Or if they laughed, it was because they were too young to appreciate the menace of the Boche invasion.

"We may not be so badly off for food, even if we eat up all our Secretary of the Interior has," remarked Bob, as they trudged along a deserted road. They had, some time since, left behind them the burning mill. It was out of sight, though they could catch occasional glimpses of the smoke from it.

"What do you mean!" asked Jimmy.

"Well, there may be a lot of good things to eat in some of these farmhouses," suggested the young corporal. "I vote we take a look."

"It can't do any harm," decided Jimmy. "But I doubt if we find anything worth taking."

And he was right---at least in the first few houses the boys entered. The cupboards had been cleaned out, if not by the unfortunate owners, then by the Germans who had devastated the region.

"We'll have to live on what we have," said Jimmy. "And we may not be so badly off for all that Lots of the boys have been without food for three days. If they stood it we can. And we may get to our lines sooner than we expect."

"I don't see why we shouldn't get there by night," observed Roger. "We didn't hike very far when we were fighting, and our boys can't have retreated far enough in the time that has elapsed since the fighting changed, to get entirely beyond our reach. I believe we'll be with our own division by night."

"Well, it doesn't do any harm to hope," said Jimmy. "But we've got to be cautious just the same."

They kept on, ever on the alert for a sight of the Germans, ever hoping for a sight of their own khaki-clad comrades. They appeared to be marching away from the scene of the battle, or battles. The firing became fainter. The country was now quite open, consisting of little hills and valleys. Each time they came to a height which afforded a place for observation, they looked all around. But all they saw, besides an occasional deserted farmhouse, or patch of woods, were rolling clouds of mist or smoke.

There had been considerable rain, and the ground was damp. The sun, shining on this, caused the moisture to condense into fog that swirled about here and there. The day had begun wonderfully clear, but now it looked like rain again.

They halted in a little grove of trees and ate some of their none-too-plentiful rations. Then, after a rest, they started on again. It was late afternoon when, as they were hiking down a lonely road, the rain suddenly began to fall.

"Whew! Now we're in for it!" exclaimed Roger, as he did his best to protect the bag of food. "We might better have stayed back in the woods."

"Let's double-quick it!" suggested Bob. "Maybe there's a house around the bend in the road."

They hastened on, and the surmise of Bob proved correct. There was a lonely little house---more of a cabin, or shack---set in the midst of what had been a garden, but now overgrown with weeds.

"Shelter, at any rate!" cried Jimmy. "Come on, fellows!"

Roger was the first to enter the humble little cottage. But he had no sooner crossed the threshold than he started back.

"What's the matter?" asked Bob, who was directly behind his chum. "Any Germans here?"

"No, but I fancy the owner is," said Roger. "Look!"

He pointed to the figure of an old man, with white hair, seated at a table in what was evidently the kitchen. The man's head was bowed on his arms which were resting on the table.

"Oh!" exclaimed Jimmy, as he looked in.

"Beg your pardon, sir," said Bob, "but we're Americans. May we stay here out of the rain, and perhaps for the night?"

There was no answer. The figure did not move.

"He doesn't understand anything but French, very likely," said Franz. "Can't you take a hand, Blazes?"

"Yes," assented Jimmy. "But it's funny he didn't wake up when Bob spoke, even if he didn't understand. I'll go ahead. But let's get in out of the wet."

They entered the room. The white-haired occupant of it did not stir from his position of bowed-down grief.

"He sleeps very soundly," remarked Jimmy in a low voice.

Stepping forward he touched the old man on the shoulder, and then Jimmy knew what had happened.

"He's dead!" he whispered.

"Dead?" echoed the others.

"Come on---let's go into the other room," suggested Jimmy.

There was another room opening out from the kitchen. Into this the Khaki Boys filed silently.

"Do you suppose the Germans killed him?" asked Roger.

"Very likely. Or he may have died from old age, fright or shock. We'll leave him where he is."

"And stay here?" asked Bob.

"Sure! Why not? We're out of the rain. The poor dead man can not harm us, and we have seen enough of death, in worse forms than this, to be afraid now."

"Oh, it isn't that I'm afraid!" exclaimed Bob. "But if the Germans did that to---him---they may come back and---"

"I fancy not," said Jimmy. "I believe they think they have cleaned out this place. It's the safest spot for us with the old man as a silent sentry. Come, fellows, well spend the night here with the dead to guard us."

It was said reverently---piously---and there was a strange feeling in the hearts of all the boys as they closed the door on the silent, pathetic figure and stood together in the other room, while the rain beat down on the roof, and dashed against the windows.

And so they began their bivouac of the with death as a sentry on guard.

CHAPTER XV

IN THE BATTLE AGAIN

"Well, we've got to be thankful that we had a place to stay all night where we were out of the wet," remarked Jimmy, as he and his chums awoke the next morning in the lonely cottage of the dead Frenchman.

"Yes, and we're going to have a good day to travel, too," said Bob. "There's the sun up good and proper, as Tommy Atkins would say."

"No telling how long it'll stay up," came from Roger. "Yesterday started in fine, but look what happened before night."

"Look what happened!" echoed Jimmy. "I don't believe since we joined the service any more things have happened in any one day. We ought to be thankful we're alive."

"Sure we are," said Iggy. "But I thinks me dat he is going to rain!"

"Who's he?" asked Franz.

"Him!" and Iggy pointed to the sun. "Der wedder I mean. Him will rain before night I feel, for of my foot there is such a pains. Always when it rain going to be is, of my foots there is a pain."

"You mean your corn hurts!" asked Bob, with a laugh. He had been rather gloomy the day before, but now he seemed to have recovered his usual good spirits. "Imagine having a corn in these days of battle!" he went on.

"He is not what you say---imagitive!" declared the Polish lad earnestly. "He is real, dat pain in mine foots! But I can away from here march quick. It gives me bad dreams," and he looked toward the kitchen where the silent occupant had acted as sentry for them.

There had been no disturbance during the night, and if any parties of Germans had passed the lonely farmhouse this was unknown to the boys. Occasionally they heard the sound of distant firing, but now, as the sun rose higher in the heavens, the noises became louder, and, seemingly, nearer.

"Must be a big battle going on not far from here," remarked Bob.

"I don't believe there's been any let-up in the big battle," came from Jimmy.

"The only trouble is that we're being left out!" exclaimed Franz. "I want to get back in the fighting again."

"Same here!" murmured Roger. "Let's eat and then well hike. We ought to get back to our lines to-day, sure."

"If we have luck," remarked Jimmy. "Well, let's go!"

It was not much of a breakfast that the Khaki Boys had, but it was better than nothing. They managed to make a fire in the stove and boiled some coffee they found in a cupboard.

"Best meal I've had in a week!" exclaimed Bob with a grateful sigh, as he finished his cup of hot liquid. "Now I'm ready to meet Kaiser Bill himself!"

They packed up what food remained, filled their canteen from a little stream not far from the cottage, and then, bidding a silent farewell to the dead Frenchman, they started off once more.

The country through which the five Brothers traveled seemed as deserted as that over which they had journeyed the previous day after their rescue from the old mill. But the evidences of war were more frequent in destroyed orchards, ruined farmhouses and, here and there, immense holes in the ground where great shells had struck and exploded.

"What's your trouble, Jimmy!" asked Bob, clapping his chum on the shoulder, as they trudged down a road. "You look as though you hadn't heard from your girl in Buffalo in a month of Sundays."

"Neither I have," said Jimmy. "But I wasn't exactly thinking of Margaret then, though I have given her a lot of thought at different times. I'm just wondering---"

"'Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag, and smile, smile, smile!'" sang Bob.

"Good advice," commented Jimmy. "My troubles aren't any more serious than those of anyone else in this war. But I was just wondering if that officer told us the truth"

"What officer?" asked Roger.

"The one who called himself Captain Dickerson, and who saved our lives at the red mill?" answered Jimmy. "I can't get over his not coming with us to show us the way to the American lines. I believe he ought to have done it!" and Jimmy spoke very determinedly.

"He certainly would have if he had had any consideration for Iggy's pet corn!" laughed Bob. "We don't seem to be having any luck ourselves. It wouldn't have hurt him to have taken command of this squad of rookies and led us back to civilization."

"Civilization! I hope you don't call the trenches with their big rats and cooties and---er---other things---civilization!" cried Jimmy. "If it is---give me barbarism."

"Well, I didn't just mean that," went on Bob. "But I wish Captain Dickerson had come back with us."

"Maybe he had orders to proceed elsewhere," suggested Franz.

"If he had he was on a dangerous mission," said Jimmy simply. "He went straight toward the German lines. I can't understand it at all. He certainly was a strange man."

"But he did us the greatest service one man can do for another," remarked Roger. "He saved our lives, fellows! Don't forget that!"

"No," agreed Jimmy in a low voice. "Whatever happens we must never forget that."

They trudged on in silence a little longer, and then Franz broke out with:

"And speaking of wondering, Jimmy, what do you suppose has become of Sergeant Maxwell?"

"And your money, Blazes," added Bob.

"Our money," corrected his chum. "Haven't I told you that the five thousand francs is the joint property of the five Brothers."

"All right---–have it your own way---–anything if or a quiet life!" said Bob, quickly. "I was just wondering, that's all."

"I have been wondering, too," admitted Jimmy. "The disappearance of Maxwell and the cash is almost as much of a mystery as is Captain Frank Dickerson."

Twice that day, as they tramped along, seeking in vain for the American lines, they saw small parties of German soldiers. And on both occasions the Khaki Boys were fortunate enough to sight the enemy first, so they could conceal themselves in patches of woods.

They were now in a country where there were larger tracts of forest, and after coming out of one of these thickets Bob remarked.

"Fellows, do you know what I think?"

"Do you, really?" chafed Roger.

"Do I really what?" asked Bob, a bit disconcerted.

"Think!" exclaimed his chum. "I thought you'd given that up."

"This war is enough to make a chap give it up," Bob agreed. "But seriously, fellows, I think we're lost---–that we've been going around in a circle, and we aren't any nearer our lines than when we were at the red mill. Not so near, in fact, for there we knew that some of the doughboys were not more than a mile away. But here---–"

"Bob, I shouldn't be surprised but what you are right!" exclaimed Jimmy. "It does seem funny that, with all our traveling, we haven't come to the American lines. They can't be so far away as all this. I guess we must have traveled in a circle. Pity we haven't a compass."

"Can't you steer by the sun?" asked Franz. "We started south, and if we keep the rising sun on our left and the setting sun on our right, we're bound to go south."

"The trouble was yesterday that we didn't see the sun after we started hiking," declared Jimmy. "It's all right now---we're surely going south. But how long we can keep it up there's no telling."

"Well, then, as long as we know we're going in the right direction now, let's double quick and cover as much ground as we can straight away, before we get turned around again," suggested Roger.

His plan was voted a good one, and the tired young soldiers hurried on. But to their chagrin it soon became cloudy, and then a mist settled down obscuring every gleam of sunshine, and they had to depend on their sense of direction, which, truth to tell, was not very accurate.

When night came, it found the boys on a lonely stretch of land, partly bogs, with, here and there, patches of woods. The prospect was most gloomy, for their food was getting scarce, and they were tired and. sore. Their wounds, slight as they were, bothered them, and though none complained, each one would have been glad to be able to slip into some dugout, no matter how rough, and there rest.

"What shall we do!" asked Jimmy, as it became almost too dark to proceed along an uncertain path. "Shall we hole in or keep on?"

"It's going to be cold, holing in this night," replied Roger, with a shiver. "Look at that fog!" he went on, as the mists rolled up from a swamp. "It goes right through you!"

"Well, then let's keep on walking," said Jimmy, trying to speak cheerily.

They walked on in silence. Bob did not get off any of his queer, improvised rhymes, and as for Iggy he turned up the collar of his coat, hunched his shoulders; and seemed like some old man tramping along.

"Hark!" suddenly called Jimmy, and the words came in a tense whisper. It was as if he had said "Halt!" for his chums came to a stop on the instant.

"What is it?" asked Bob.

"Don't you hear some one walking toward us?" went on Jimmy, his voice still low and tense.

They all listened. The fog swirled around them in cold, white clouds. And then, through the darkness, they all heard, and distinctly, this time, the measured beat of marching feet.

"Soldiers all right!" commented Roger in a whisper.

"Yes, but what kind?" was Jimmy's question. "Are they our boys, some of the Allies or---Germans?"

"What shall we do?" asked Franz, and, in the misty darkness he turned toward Jimmy, as seemed natural.

"Keep still," was the advice given. "And crouch down. If they are Boches well let 'em pass---if they'll be so obliging as to go on. If they're some of our boys---"

"Oh, boy! If they only are!" sighed Bob.

The tramping feet came nearer.

"They're headed right this way!" declared Franz, who was crouching down next to Jimmy.

"Yes. But keep still! Don't even whisper. Sounds carry very far on a misty night---almost as they do over water."

The thud of heavily shod feet sounded plainly now, and then, suddenly, so suddenly that it made the hearts of the Khaki Boys thump fiercely, there came a voice out of the darkness saying:

"I don't believe we'd better go any farther, boys. We've come quite a way from our lines, and we haven't seen a sign of even a Hun sentry. We can go back and report the coast clear!"

And the voice was that of an American! Hearing it Jimmy and his chums leaped to their feet.

"Americans there"! sung out Bob.

Instantly came the sharp challenge:

"Who's there!"

"Some of the 509th Infantry," answered Jimmy, giving the names of his companions and himself.

"Advance, Sergeant Blaise! The others stay where they are. And remember our rifles have you covered, so don't try any funny work."

It was a grim warning, but the five Brothers appreciated its need. Jimmy stepped forward, and the light from a pocket electric torch flashed in his face.

"Don't know you, but you look all right," said a tall, young lieutenant who was in charge of the party, the tramping feet of which had so alarmed our heroes. "What are you doing here?"

"It's a long story, but I'll cut it short," said Jimmy, and he did. The lieutenant listened with interest, and then, satisfied that the truth was being told, he remarked.

"You'd better come back with us. We'll take care of you for to-night, and to-morrow you can send word to your command. I don't know this Captain Dickerson you speak of."

"Are we near the American lines?" asked Bob.

"Within half a mile," was the answer.

They were led back, and soon were comfortably housed in a dugout, partaking of hot rations, and telling their story to wondering comrades. They had come upon a sector of the line held by a division made up of New York and New Jersey troops, and, though our heroes knew none of them personally, they fraternized all right.

The next day the commanding officer, having heard their story, sent them back to their own company, which had moved considerably farther toward the front since the battle of the mill, as the boys called it.

They learned that the big body of German troops which they had seen from their hiding place had not yet come into an engagement to any great extent with the Allies.

"A big battle is pending though," said their captain, when our heroes were back in their own command, where they were made royally welcome. "There have been skirmishes and some long-distance artillery work. But the big fight is yet to come. You'll have a chance to rest up and get in trim for it."

Jimmy and his chums were glad of this. They were allowed leaves of absence, and went back of the lines to a pleasant little village, where rest and good food soon made them "fit" again. All efforts to learn something more of Captain Dickerson, and the whereabouts of Sergeant Maxwell, were, however, without avail.

One evening, after the five Brothers had reported back to their billet for duty, and while they were in the dugout, detailing over again some of their experiences at the mill, the sergeant-major entered.

"Get set, boys!" he exclaimed. "The orders are coming in. We go over the top again in the morning, and it's going to be some fight!"

And when the zero hour was signaled again the five Brothers were in battle once more.

CHAPTER XVI

HELD UP

Equipped with gas masks, their packs filled with first-aid outfits, carrying emergency rations, with the "tin hats" on their heads and with rifles firmly grasped, over the top went the Khaki Boys, and thousands like them, in another attempt to subdue the Boche enemy.

Behind the boys roared out the big guns that were laying down a protecting barrage---a veritable curtain of fire behind which they might advance and without which they would have been swept back into their trenches broken and bruised and killed. The artillery duel had been under way some little time now, and it had evidently taken the Germans by surprise, for they were longer than usual in replying.

"Smash 'em up! Smash 'em up!" yelled the lieutenant in charge of that particular part of the advance in which Jimmy Blaise and his chums were included. "Smash 'em up, boys!"

"Wow! We're with you!" howled Franz. "Smash 'em up!"

Forward they surged, the gallant American lads, who a short time before were peaceful clerks, factory and farm hands and happy college lads, and some boys who instinctively shrank from the mere thought of killing. But now their spirits were on fire with the sacred wine of liberty, and they were daring as they had never dared before. Their daring was imbued with right, and other than this nothing will stand.

The gray mists of morning swirled this way and that, blown not so much by nature's wind as by the bursts from the flaming mouths of great guns. And through this mist rushed the Americans, some to horrible death or agony, and some to escape scatheless---to inflict just punishment on a mass of men who had lost all sense of right and wrong---men who

had reverted to beasts.

"Are we all here?" yelled Jimmy, above the horrid din of battle, as he tried to see if Bob, Roger and the others were near him.

"I guess we're here---yet," snapped back Franz, grimly. "No telling how long we shall be, though!"

"Come on now---sharp's the word!" yelled the commanding officer. "Separate there, you!" he cried to Jimmy and the other four, for they were too close together. "Spread out! You're too good a target for a machine-gun as you stand!"

They knew the advice was good, and they took it. But they did not separate too far, for they wanted to be together as they went into this fight. It might be the last for all or any one of them.

The din was terrific. It seemed as if all the guns of the world were letting go together, and as Jimmy rushed forward, firing at a foe he could not see, he reflected that this same terrific havoc and riot of sound was taking place for miles along the front held by the Americans, and also along the sectors where the gallant French and British were disputing with the Huns the right to rule the world.

"Forward! Forward! No lagging!" cried the young lieutenant, leading his men. It was getting lighter now, as the sun arose, but the orb itself could not be seen because of the smoke and mist.

But he need not have concerned himself about the laggards. There were none in the 509th Infantry. Too often had they had their mettle proved.

A shell rushed screechingly over Jimmy's head seemingly within a few feet of him, and instinctively he ducked. Then he almost laughed at himself, for he realized that if he heard the noise he was safe.

"We're getting closer," mused Jimmy as he leaped forward, firing as he went, now crouching down, and again standing partly upright, as he hurried on. He and his chums were passing through an orchard, now, on their way to come to grips with the Germans. That is, it had been an orchard, but all that was left of it now were a few broken stumps of trees. The firing of heavy guns, and the bursting of big shells had wiped out the work of nature.

There came an explosion on Jimmy's left---an explosion from a small German shell that blew up a section of the orchard, tossing the blackened and gnarled stumps high in the air. And with the stumps were mingled poor, twisted human bodies.

For one terrible moment Jimmy feared for Franz and Iggy, whom he had last noted almost at the very spot where the shell exploded. His heart turned faint within him. But it was no time to falter. One must not halt nor turn back even though one's own brother were torn to pieces. Forward was the word in that grim and terrible fighting. Forward to your own death, perhaps, to the death of those you held most dear! Forward to insure life and happiness for those who would come after! Such was the sacred duty!

And then, to his great relief, Jimmy heard a voice he knew well exclaim:

"Ach! Him was one big whizz-bang, yes!"

"You said it, Iggy!" shouted Franz, and Jimmy saw his two comrades emerge from the smoke and dust cloud, and rush forward. They had just escaped death by the shell, which sent into eternity six beloved bunkies of the 509th.

"Well, they're alive yet!" grimly mused Jimmy, as he fired and crouched down. A look to the right showed him Roger and Bob doing the same thing. So far the five Brothers had suffered no harm.

But the battle was only beginning. The German big guns had not yet opened in force to reply to the challenge of the American heavy artillery. So far the barrage had, in a great measure, protected our lads. Now they were to move forward again. The guns at the rear were elevated, to send the bursting shrapnel further into the German ranks---to prevent them from rushing at the advancing American troops.

And now was a critical time, for even in spite of the barrage some parties of Huns, in bomb-proofs, might suddenly arise and confront the Americans. There was a chance for close fighting.

But it did not come. That part of No Man's Land over which Jimmy and his chums were advancing, leaping from shell crater to mud hole, and from one slimy pool to another, seemed to have been cleared of Huns.

Once again came the explosion of a comparatively large shell, and again, hurled aloft in a shower of stones and dirt, went the bodies of a half score of Americans. The Germans were taking frightful toll.

"This way! This way!" suddenly ordered the lieutenant. "Into the woods!"

Jimmy saw a large grove of trees on his left. He turned toward them, and he noted that Franz and Iggy were ahead of him, while Bob and Roger came in the rear.

And, just as they reached the somewhat sheltering woods, there sounded from the air above them several explosions, and with them was an undercurrent of humming and droning as if from a million swarms of bees.

"The Boche aeroplanes! They're right over us---a whole flock of 'em!" cried Roger. "And they're dropping bombs on us!"

CHAPTER XVII

A BATTLE OF THE AIR

What Roger had said was only too true. The advance of the American army had been halted, at least temporarily, by a sudden attack from a large number of German aeroplanes. The Fokkers had arisen from far enough back of the place where the American shells were falling to escape them. And then they had sailed directly over the advancing Americans, the center formation of the Huns' ships of the air being almost directly over where our five heroes were now stationed in the woods.

"Bombs! I should say so!" cried Jimmy, as one landed on the other edge of the woods, and blew a great hole in the ground. "This is getting too close for comfort!"

The German machines, having flown from the direction of their own lines across the American front, dropping bombs that did great execution, were now coming back again, to repeat the performance, it was very evident.

"Why didn't we bring up some anti-aircraft guns?" demanded Bob, as though some officer, immediately over him, had neglected this precaution.

"Guess no one expected the Huns would try this trick," said Roger. "It's a daring move, all right."

"And it's a dangerous one for us, too!" added Jimmy, grimly. "These woods are a pretty good protection against shrapnel and machine-gun fire, but they're absolutely useless when it comes to screening us from aeroplane bombs. Of course we can hide from the sight of the flying Huns, but they must know this wood is full of Americans, and a bomb dropped anywhere among the trees will get some of us. It's fierce!"

"You said it!" cried Franz. "Wow! That was a bad one!"

A bomb---one of the winged affairs that wrought such deadly havoc in Paris and London---had fallen not one hundred feet from where the five Brothers were crouching in the underbrush. The concussion jarred them, and the force of the explosion uprooted several large trees that injured a number of the command, while the bomb itself killed three in dreadful fashion.

"Why don't our flying lads get after 'em?" demanded Franz. "Surely we have some planes over here now---in fact, I know we have; though not nearly enough. Where are they?"

Well might he ask that, for the Germans were circling around, now over the woods and again over the open country, dropping their bombs, which exploded, doing terrible damage, killing and wounding many.

Suddenly Bob, who was gazing skyward in despair, clutched Jimmy's arm and cried:

"Look! Look! There they are! There come our boys! American machines! See the Indian head! Now we'll see Mr. Hun on the run! Oh, boy!"

Jimmy gazed for a moment in the direction indicated by his excited churn. Then he exclaimed:

"You're right! The American aviators are here at last, and I'll wager it wasn't their fault that they didn't get here sooner! Now for a fight in the air!"

And up just beneath the clouds, sometimes out of sight in the mist, the American flying men attacked the enemy. Now there was no time for the Huns to loose their bombs. They must look to their own safety. No longer did they have all the odds on their side.

"Look! Look! See our man engage those two!" shouted Roger.

They all saw what he meant. One intrepid American airman had headed for two Fokkers which were flying directly toward him, close together.

But in another instant one of the German planes was seen to swerve to one side, and then it darted downward, and in a manner to indicate that its pilot had been killed or wounded, for the machine was out of control. Like a dead leaf it descended, crashing into a shapeless mass in a field some distance from the woods.

"Now he's after the other!" cried Bob. "Oh, they're going to collide!"

But he spoke without knowledge of the skill to be shown by the American pilot and his accompanying gunner. For, just as it appeared as though the two hostile craft would come together in a mid-air crash, the American machine seemed to slide up and over its opponent. And then, just as the first German had done, the enemy craft crumpled up, and down it went in dizzying whirls.

"Two at once! That's going some!" yelled Jimmy, capering about. They were comparatively out of danger now, sheltered as they were in the woods from the artillery and rifle and machine-gun fire of the Germans. And no more airship bombs were being dropped.

"Some stunt, that!" declared Bob. "Wonder who they were---those Americans?"

"I hope they live through it so we can find out," voiced Franz. The battle in the air was now going on fiercely. There were ten American machines attacking more than double that number of Germans, and, as was always the case, the Huns were brave when they had the numerical advantage. They fought bitterly, and with skill---that could not be denied. And before the battle had been going on very long two American machines had been shot down. Whether the men in them had been killed, or not, remained to be seen.

"It's sort of going against us," said Jimmy, with a dry, choking sob.

"This is fierce!" cried Roger. "Why don't we send up some more machines?"

"Haven't got 'em, maybe," remarked Franz. "Oh, look at that! They collided head on!"

This actually happened. One of the larger American machines, the ammunition probably having given out, was being attacked by a German Fokker. Knowing that it was either kill or be killed, the pilot of the craft with the Indian head painted on the underside of the wings took a desperate chance.

Straightening out his craft, he headed it directly toward that of his enemy. The latter tried to steer out of the way when it was seen what the game would be, but he was unable to do so.

They came together with what must have been a fearful crash, though of course not the faintest echo of it could be heard down in the woods. And then, locked together in a death embrace, the two machines hurtled over and over to earth, bursting into flames as they fell. They smashed down in a swamp, and all four airmen were killed---the two brave Americans and their perhaps no less intrepid German fighters.

"It's going to be a tight squeeze!" murmured Roger, as he and the others gazed aloft. "There's three of our machines done for and here come some more Germans. Oh, this is fierce!"

"More German machines? Where!" cried Jimmy.

"There!" and Roger pointed to the sky behind the German planes. "Ten more of 'em!" he cried. "Now we're done for, sure!"

"Those aren't Hun planes! They're French!" yelled Bob. "See, they're French! They've circled up behind the Germans! Now we have 'em between two fires!"

And this was just what happened. The French, seeing that the battle of the air was going against their American allies, had hastily sent up a squadron of speedy craft. These arose very high, flew over and above the Germans, out of sight, and then, coming down, attacked them in the rear.

This was too much for Fritz. He had no taste for a battle against even less odds than this. The Fokkers turned to flee, but it was too late for all but two of them. These managed to elude the American and French cloud-fighters and disappeared in the mist in the direction of the German lines. It was presumed they reached there safely.

One after another the German machines were sent down, though at a price, for three Frenchmen were killed and another American went to his death. But he had paved the way with two Hun craft to his credit.

"Now it's over---all but the shouting!" cried Roger, and he was capering about in an improvised dance of joy when Bob cried:

"Look! Look! Here comes a German machine down, and it's going to land right about here! Oh, boy! This is bringing 'em down for keeps!"

His chums looked to where he pointed. A German craft was coming down, but in such fashion that showed it was in volplane control, at least. Swiftly it came down, headed for a field not far from the woods, in the edge of which were the five Brothers.

CHAPTER XVIII

CAPTURED

Swiftly as falls a bird with a broken wing, down came the German aeroplane. It was now within plain sight of the Americans stationed in the woods, and, as it happened, a squad, of which our five Brothers formed the major part, were nearer than anyone else.

"I can see their faces!" cried Bob. "They look worried all right!"

And well the Germans might, for they were being forced to land within the enemy's lines.

"Guess their gasolene tank was shot to pieces," commented Roger. "The plane doesn't seem to be damaged much."

And this, later, they learned was the case. A bullet had pierced the petrol tank of the Boche craft, and the pilot and gunner had been forced to land.

Down shot the craft, and, a moment later, it made a good landing in a field. The machine ran along over the rough ground for a little distance and then two figures, clad in regulation flying costumes, were seen to leap out. They paused for a moment, trying to set fire to their machine, so that it might not fall, comparatively undamaged as it was, into the hands of the Americans. But this was not to be.

"Don't let them get away with that!" cried an officer, quickly. "Pick off those two men, boys!"

Instantly rifles began to crack, and as the bullets sang about the ears of the Huns they stopped their incendiary operations and began to run. How they thought they could escape is inexplainable. They were surrounded by Americans, and were some distance away from their own lines.

"Come on, fellows!" cried Jimmy to his chums. "Don't let 'em get away. We can head 'em off!"

"You said something!" yelled Bob. "Oh, boy! That was some fight!"

The battle in the air was over now, and though there had been a lull in the contest in the immediate vicinity of our heroes, the firing was going on in both wings of the American army.

Emerging from their shelter in the woods, so as to intercept at an angle the fleeing Germans, Jimmy and his four Brothers ran hotfoot over the open ground. Then the Huns saw the five lads coming, and turned, as though to go in another direction.

"No you don't!" shouted Bob, as he sent a well-aimed bullet over the head of the foremost German. He did not intend to hit the fellow---merely to scare him. And it had that effect.

The man stopped suddenly, and raised his hands in the air.

"*Kamerad*!" he bellowed.

His companion was seen to be fumbling in his belt, as though trying to get a hand grenade or lose his revolver. But the man who had surrendered, realizing what would happen if any resistance were shown, gave his companion a kick that sent him sprawling.

"*Kamerad*!" cried the kicker. And his companion, struggling to rise, echoed:

"*Kamerad*!"

"You'd better surrender!" grimly observed Jimmy, as he and his chums rushed up.

Quickly the Germans were disarmed, and then they were marched back, ahead of their captors, to where stood the captain of the company of which the five Brothers formed so active a part.

"Good work, Sergeant," complimented the captain, when Jimmy, as a ranking non-com. over his companions, came back with the two German aviators. "Good work! And you may have the pleasure of taking the prisoners to the rear. We'll be held up here some time, I fancy. Report to me when you return. And don't let those fellows get away!" he added significantly.

"We'll take care of that, sir," said Jimmy grimly.

"Come on, you fellows! Hike!" ordered Roger to the captured airmen. And a little later they were turned over to the proper authorities in the rear. Some valuable plans and information concerning German movements were found on the prisoners, and their capture was regarded as important. Jimmy and his chums received commendation, and were mentioned in the official reports of the day's grim doings.

"And now we'd better be getting back," suggested Jimmy, who was in charge of the prisoner squad. "The fighting may start again any minute, and we don't want to miss it."

"I should say not!" cried Bob. "Now that we can have a show for our white agate there'll be some fun in it. But to have to crouch down in a wood and let some one take pot shots at you from overhead isn't my idea of a war at all."

They were marching along a camouflaged road when they saw an American and a French machine coming down together on a level spot not far away.

"Wonder if they're in trouble?" asked Roger.

"Doesn't seem so," answered Bob. "They seem to have the planes under control. But let's go and see. Maybe we can help. They'll surely need some attention after that fierce fighting."

The two machines, one a single seater and the other a double, came to earth at the same time, and not far apart. And at the sight of two aviators getting out of the American craft Jimmy gave a yell and exclaimed:

"Well, if it isn't the Twinkle Twins! Good enough! What do you know about that, fellows? The Twinkle Twins were among those who saved our bacon this day!"

And it was, indeed, John and Gerald Twinkleton, otherwise known as Jack and Jerry, or the Twinkle Twins, who had emerged from the aeroplane.

"Well, of all good things! Look, Jerry!" dried Jack. "It's the five Brothers!"

"Sure enough! Oh, say, what are you fellows doing here?" asked Jerry.

"Same as you were---disposing of some Boches," answered Jimmy. "Are you hurt?"

"Not a scratch, though our plane was hit a lot," said Jack. "But we ran out of gas, and had to come down here. Glad we did, too, or we'd have missed seeing you. Cousin Emile is in the same boat as ourselves. Here he comes! He'll be glad to see you."

And from the smaller plane there emerged an aviator whose very stride across the field told what he was---a brave, intrepid man. Such was Emile Voissard, cousin of the Twinkle Twins, and right well had he earned the title, "Flying Terror of France."

"Ah, my American friends!" exclaimed Voissard, as he came over, acknowledging the greetings he received. "I am glad to see you again. It is good---*tres bien*!" and he smiled.

"Well, say, it was good to see you and the other Frenchmen go at those Huns!" exclaimed Bob. "If we had known the Twinkle Twins were up there among the Americans we'd have been worse scared than we were, when we saw the Germans getting the best of it."

"Ah, it is nothing. *Voila*! What would you have?" and Voissard shrugged his shoulders. "They are but beasts and they fight as the beasts---they run, too, as the beasts! *n'est ce pas*?"

"Well, two of 'em tried to run, but we landed 'em!" exclaimed Roger, with a laugh. "We just took 'em to the rear. Their petrol tank was shot full of holes."

"Was it a machine with a sort of double iron cross on it?" asked Jack.

"That was it," said Roger.

"That's the one we couldn't seem to get," went on Jack. "She was a bit too speedy for us. But it seems we got her after all."

"Or Jimmy and his bunch did", commented Jerry.

"Oh, well, it's all the same as long as they were 'got'!" and Jack clapped Jimmy on the back.

"You are keeping up your good work, I see," commented Voissard. "France shall soon be free of the mark of the beast!"

"Well, you're doing your share, sir!" commented Roger.

"It is nothing! If I could only do a thousand times as much!" and the man who had earned such an enviable rating shook his head. "There are so many of the Huns! So many! But we shall never give up! Never!" and he drew himself up determinedly.

"But, my friends, we must not linger here," he went on. "The battle will soon start again, and the fortunes of war may turn against us. We should go and telephone for petrol, that we may take our machines back behind the lines, to safety."

"Yes, we'll have to do that," declared one of the Twinkle Twins. "See you again, boys!" and with waves of their hands they set off to find the nearest telephone, that they might send word of their plight to their hangars.

"Well, good luck!" called Jimmy and his chums to the brave Frenchman and his no less brave cousins.

"That was some coincidence---–that the Twinkles and their cousin Emile should be fighting for us and we not know it," commented Roger, as the five Khaki Boys trudged back. "I should say so," agreed Bob. "Say, we'd better hurry!" he went on. "Sounds as if they were starting the game once more!"

The noise of the big and little guns was beginning again, and hardly had our heroes reached their command in the woods than the order came to go forward.

With yells of savage delight it was received, and then there came a desperate dash that carried Jimmy and his friends, as well as those with him, well up toward the German lines.

Fierce and bloody was the fighting, and there was death in it, too, for many. But ever did the Americans press on, slowly but steadily driving back the Germans. On all sides great guns roared, and ears were nearly split with the riot of sound.

When night came it found our five Brothers occupying some of the trenches so long held by the Huns, who had been driven out. It was the start of the movement that was to clean the Boches from France.

Tired, weary, blood-stained, dirty, hungry and thirsty---–that was the condition of all the fighters. And yet they would be ready to do it all over again the next day, after a little rest and food. And food they had, though not of the best.

"Sergeant Barlow and Corporal Dalton take listening post number seven," the sergeant-major ordered two of the Brothers, after what passed for supper. "Be on the alert. The Germans will very likely try a counter-attack."

Bob and Roger prepared for their dismal night trick. Franz and Iggy were sent to another part of the line, and Jimmy was on duty in the dugout, assisting the telephone operator.

The night settled down. It was comparatively quiet now in the trenches, in front of which barbed-wire entanglements had been hastily put up. The Germans had done the same, and between the stretches of wire another No Man's Land had been established.

Worn and weary, Roger and Bob waited for what they feared might happen. But as the hours passed, and there was no sign nor movement from the German lines, they began to think there would be no fighting.

Suddenly, however, the blackness of the night was broken by the red glare of a rocket.

"What's that?" cried Bob.

"Signal of some sort," replied Roger. "Guess we'd better get on our feet. The attack may be coming."

"Shall we go back and report this?"

"No, they must have seen it as soon as we did. We're only to report if we see any of the enemy approaching this post."

They waited. Another rocket---a green one this time---soared aloft. And then with a suddenness that was startling, a terrific firing broke out from the German lines. "Here it comes---the counter-attack!" cried Bob.

As he spoke he and his companion saw a dark, massed body moving toward them.

"Come on!" cried Bob. "We've got to report this!"

But before they had time to run back more than a few paces they were surrounded by an attacking party of Germans. On either side of Bob and Roger there was fierce fighting now going on. The two lads who had been on duty in the listening post felt themselves caught and their rifles wrested away before they had a chance to use them, and then they were dragged over toward the German trenches.

"What's it all mean?" gasped Bob.

"We're captured!" said Roger. "Keep still! Don't give any information no matter what they do! Keep still!"

"I will!" said Bob grimly.

One of the Germans dragging him along cried out an insulting epithet and struck Bob across the mouth.

And then the captives were dragged away in the darkness.

CHAPTER XIX

THREE PRISONERS

The two Khaki Boys who had been on listening post duty were at once disarmed by the Huns, and fairly dragged along in the darkness over rough ground and among strands of barbed wire that scratched them, and over stones that bruised them.

Bob had received a cut on the forehead, either from a blow or from a glancing bullet, and the blood, running down into his eyes, blinded him temporarily.

"Are you here, Roger?" he managed to gasp, as two burly Germans pulled him along.

"Yes, old man, I'm here! Say, but this is tough luck!"

Again he was struck and ordered to keep silent.

Back they were hurried toward the German lines, whence had issued the raiding party that had had such luck as to defeat a small and very much surprised body of Americans. Perhaps it is not to their credit to say they were surprised, but the truth must be told. Some one was negligent, and failed to give the alarm in time.

Mackson and Jones, privates, who had been in the listening post next to the one where Roger and Bob were stationed, had escaped in the confusion. Amid the attack and counter-attack, and while the firing and throwing of hand grenades was hottest, they ran back to the trenches, calling out word of what had happened.

Jimmy was just coming on duty when the attack of the Germans took place, and, hearing what Mackson gasped out, cried to him:

"Did you see anything of Bob and Roger?"

"Yes, they're gone!" was the answer.

"Gone? You mean killed?" and Jimmy felt as though his heart would stop beating.

"No. They put up a good fight, but the Huns were too many for 'em. Roger and Bob were taken off by the Boches!"

"Captured! Prisoners!" cried Jimmy. For an instant he hardly knew what to do. The confusion was at its height, and there seemed to be some demoralization among the Americans at this particular post. But order was gradually coming out of it. A captain and two lieutenants hurried up and took charge of matters. A brisk artillery fire was ordered to sweep the German lines, to prevent, if possible, any further advance in force. At the same time up and down the trenches and from dugouts the gallant doughboys poured, ready to take revenge for the attack of the Huns.

"Come on! Come on!" cried the captain, and with wild cheers and yells his men followed him. Jimmy had a sudden thought. Rushing up to the captain, who was listening to a report from a corporal who had been wounded, and who had escaped after being captured, Jimmy cried:

"Two of my friends have been caught---–Sergeant Barlow and Corporal Dalton. May I take a relief party out, sir, and rescue them?"

"Yes, Sergeant Blaise! Take six men with you, and good luck! Keep in touch with us, though. We don't want to be separated at a time like this!"

"Yes, sir!" cried Jimmy, his heart now on fire with a desperate resolve. He wished Franz and Iggy could be of the rescue party, but they were already out of the trench, under the leadership of one of the lieutenants, making a fierce counter-attack.

Quickly Jimmy picked out six privates, and rapidly explained what he wanted. They ran forward in the darkness. Shells were exploding overhead, there were flashes of rifle fire on every side, and a more continuous stream of wicked spurts from machine guns. Rockets were being sent up from the German lines, together with star-shells, and these made the scene of the fight brilliantly light with, now and then, recurrent periods of intense blackness.

"Barlow and Dalton captured?" cried one of the privates whom Jimmy had selected. "That's tough!"

"We'll bring 'em back, or go over with 'em!" added another.

"Come on!" cried Jimmy, and he led the way.

He had only a vague notion of where to look for Bob and Roger. But he and his companions in arms saw immediately ahead of them a dark mass of fighting men. And they judged this to be the attacking party of Germans, taking away prisoners, and fighting off the attacks of those Americans who had hurried to the rescue.

"Come on! Let's get in on that!" cried Jimmy. "Forward!"

"Forward she is!" came the grim answer from one of the lads he was leading.

There came a fierce burst of machine-gun fire from the German line to the left of that fighting, struggling bunch of forms. It was followed by yells of rage, mingled with pain, and then deep groans.

"Anyone here hit?" asked Jimmy.

"I think Jepson has gone out," some one answered. Jimmy hesitated. He was between two duties---–that toward one of his immediate force, and the desire to rescue his chums. But he knew his duty as an officer required him to look after his command first. He ran back to where two of the privates were bending over Jepson. A look and a touch convinced Jimmy that the man was past all aid.

"We'll carry him back later," he said. Then, stifling his own feelings he cried: "Come on!"

Grimly his men followed.

On in the darkness they stumbled, now scarcely seeing where they were going, and again blinded by fierce lights. Their ears were deafened by the rattle and bang and roar of big and little guns.

"Why don't you call out?" suggested one of the remaining men in Jimmy's small command. "Maybe Bob and Roger could hear you and answer. Then you'd know where they are."

"Good idea! I will!" shouted Jimmy. He had to yell just then, for a burst of artillery fire from the German lines, answering the guns of the Americans, drowned all ordinary talk.

Then, when it was comparatively quiet again, Jimmy cried:

"Bob! Roger! Where are you? We're coming to the rescue!"

"Americans over this way!" was shouted in answer. "Over to your right!"

Whether or not this was either Bob or Roger, Jimmy could not tell. But the words were English, though immediately afterward could be heard guttural German voices.

"That's funny!" said one of Jimmy's men. "I thought the main fighting was over to our left. Now they tell us to go to our right."

"Well, we'll take a chance," said Jimmy.

He turned and was about to lead his small command in that direction when they were subjected to a fierce burst of fire. There was no time to drop and escape it, though Jimmy called to the men to lie flat as soon as he realized that a machine gun was aimed in their direction. For two of his men there was never any more need of orders. They were instantly killed, and one was so wounded that he could not move. This only left Jimmy and two men. But the sergeant had no thought of turning back.

"Will you stick?" he asked, when the sudden spurt of machine bullets was over.

"Go ahead!" was the grim reply.

They had hardly taken a dozen paces when from the ground all about them dark forms suddenly arose, and from what were afterward found to be shell holes, and the remains of trenches, other forms leaped. There were commands in German, and, in less time than it takes to tell it, Jimmy and his two companions were seized by several German soldiers, their arms taken away, and, after being beaten and kicked, they were rushed over toward the Hun lines. Dazed, wounded and sick at heart, Jimmy could hardly understand what had happened. Then it was borne to him that he and his rescue party---or what was left of it---had been the victim of a trick. They had run into an ambuscade of Germans who were hidden among the holes and ruined trenches, and had risen up to capture more prisoners.

Rousing himself, and determining to find out how many of his fellow soldiers were in the same disastrous position as himself, Jimmy cried:

"Any of the Five Hundred and Ninth here? I'm Sergeant Blaise and---"

"Great guns!" cried a voice Jimmy well knew. "It's Blazes! We're here, Jimmy!" went on the voice in a half sob. "Bob and I are here---prisoners!"

"Then we're in the same boat!" answered Jimmy, who had recognized Roger's voice. "I'll try and get to you, and then---"

"Shut up---American pig!" cried a Hun in fairly good English as he struck Jimmy in the face. And then the Sergeant knew how he had been betrayed. It was by a German who spoke English.

CHAPTER XX

THE CAPTAIN AGAIN

Worried over the possible fate in store for them, sick at heart, smarting with wounds and bruises, and with Jimmy regretting the deaths of the men he had led out to help rescue Bob and Roger, it is no wonder that the three Brothers hardly knew what happened in the next hour. All they remembered was that they were pushed, dragged and fairly punched along in the darkness that was, every now and then, lighted by gun flashes or the star-shells. The fighting was still going on, though it was growing less intense, and it seemed evident that the attacking party of raiding Germans had been beaten back.

But it was at a heavy cost, for many Americans had been killed or wounded, and several taken prisoners, including our three friends. Later, however, they learned that the losses of the Huns had been heavier, except in the matter of prisoners. Only two had been captured as against perhaps a score of Americans. The raid had been a surprise, and this quality of it led to its success.

For a time, after he had learned of the presence of his two chums in the raiding party of Huns, Jimmy was separated from them in the darkness and confusion. He could not locate them by calling their names, for each time he tried this he was struck by one of his captors, which led him, finally, to desist. He realized that if he exasperated the Germans too much they would not hesitate to kill him, even though he was a prisoner.

But later on, when it seemed as though he had been pulled and dragged over miles and miles of rough country, Jimmy was aware that the party of men who had him in charge had been joined by another squad of the Boches. And to his delight he heard some one say:

"Wonder what became of Blazes?"

It was Bob's voice, and Jimmy at once answered:

"Here I am! Is Roger there?"

"Yes," came a voice out of the darkness, and it ended in a gasp of pain, as if the words had been stopped by a blow.

Jimmy felt as though he could tear himself loose and hurl himself on the cruel captors, but he was held fast.

There was rapid talk in German among the members of the raiding party, and it could not be doubted that they were exulting over the success of the sortie, such as it had been.

A little later Jimmy was prodded forward again by the butts of German guns, and he was aware that Roger and Bob were advancing along with him. Whether there were any other Americans in that party Jimmy could not tell, as it was dark now, since the "fireworks" had ceased.

"Tough luck!" murmured Bob, as he limped along beside Roger.

"You said it," answered Jimmy. They spoke in low voices so as not to incur the further enmity of their captors.

"What do you think they'll do with us?" asked Roger.

"Try to get information," was Jimmy's answer. "But don't give them any! Keep stiff upper lips and let 'em ask all they want to. Don't answer!"

"We won't!" murmured Roger and Bob, but they did not realize how hard it was going to be to keep that resolve.

Forward in the darkness they stumbled, being pushed and shoved when they were not roughly seized and dragged, and at last they seemed to have been brought to a place where they were to be detained for some time. They were led down into a trench and along this in single file, a German preceding and following each of the three captives, so they were thus separated. They discovered that the German trenches were not much better as regarded mud and water than their own, and they did not have the protection of "duck boards" except in a few places. So that the progress of Bob, Roger and Jimmy was through mud that came nearly to the knees.

Suddenly their captors halted. They had reached a wider part of the trench, and in the dim light from a small electric bulb, which indicated this place to be one of the more permanent German positions, the three Brothers saw a concrete dugout.

The door of this was kicked open, and after the three Khaki Boys had been hurriedly searched, and all their personal belongings taken from them, they were thrust inside in the darkness and the door was closed.

And then, clinging together in their pain and woeful state, they told each other what had happened---Roger and Bob relating how they had been cut off and captured, and Jimmy telling of his leading the rescue party, only to be betrayed into going in the wrong direction, deceived by the call of some Hun whose English was good enough to do the trick.

"And now we're here," sighed Bob. "What's to become of us?"

"I think they'll take us before some officer and question us," said Jimmy. "They'll wait until morning, though, to give us a longer taste of misery."

"Morning!" gasped Roger. "Will morning ever come to a hole like this?" and his eyes tried to pierce the blackness.

"There may be a window to it, or some way of letting light in, unless it's away down underground," Jimmy went on. "I couldn't tell what it was from the outside."

"Me, either," admitted Bob. "Well, this sure is tough luck!"

"Don't be downhearted!" advised Roger. "Our boys may attack in a few hours and rescue us."

"Yes, they may," assented Jimmy, and this cheered them up for a time.

How long the hours seemed! Would morning ever come, and would they see a gleam of light when it did? Or would they still be in blackness?

This question was answered for them some time later, when, after being sunk in painful silence, they were aroused by a faint gleam coming in through what proved to be a small opening in the roof of the dugout. It was a little gleam of sunshine, and it cheered the boys almost as much as if it had been news from home.

"We're not in an underground dungeon, anyhow," said Jimmy.

The light grew stronger, and presently the door of their prison was opened. "I hope it's breakfast," gasped Bob. "Even if it's only a glass of water."

But it was not even that. Several burly, brutal Germans leered in the faces of the boys, and one, who spoke fairly good English, ordered them to come out.

"Where are you taking us?" demanded Jimmy.

"You'll see," was the enigmatical answer.

They did not have long to wait, for, presently, they were taken before a German officer, whose rank they were unable to determine, though he seemed to wield considerable authority.

He was seated at a table in a dugout most comfortably fitted up. Before him was a mass of papers, and at his side stood a bottle of wine from which he poured a glass now and then, as he puffed at a pipe. There were several others in the room, some officers and others, clerks or secretaries.

I shall not relate what followed. Suffice it to say that the reason for the night of misery inflicted on the boys, and the failure to give them breakfast, was soon evident. It was to break their spirits, and cause them to answer and give information as to their own forces opposed to the Huns.

Every device of refined and barbarous cruelty was practiced as well as every trick of cunning. But the three remained steadfast, and even laughed in the faces of their captors. But not a jot of vital information did they give, though they boasted in exaggerated terms of the strength of the commands to which they were attached, and told of countless armies on the way over to wipe the Huns from the face of the earth.

At last the German officer, in a burst of rage, ordered the three prisoners taken away, and this was done with great roughness. This coupled with their terrible night and the mental and physical torture inflicted at the inquisition, made the young soldiers sick at heart and body. Once more they were thrust into their horrible prison, and not until nearly noon was any food given them.

Then it was only some greasy, slimy water, probably intended for soup, together with some chunks of mouldy bread.

"But we've got to eat it, boys!" said Jimmy. "We've got to keep up our strength."

"What's the good of it!" sighed Bob, with a half cry of anguish.

"So we can escape, of course!" said Jimmy with more fierceness and energy than he really felt. "Think I'm going to stay in this hole?"

"How are you going to get out?" Roger wanted to know.

"I'll show you!" went on Jimmy, and by his strength of character, and by his forced spirits he bolstered up the courage of his companions. They managed to choke down the food, vile as it was, and seemed to feel a little better for it.

Their miseries of the next few days I will not detail. In fact, the boys themselves could not remember all of them, horrible as they were. Again and again they were questioned, but always they remained steadfast, and gave no information that could be of any value to the Huns.

Then they were taken from their horrible prison and removed to a camp, some distance in the rear, where there were a number of other Allied captives, in as miserable a condition as that to which the three Khaki Boys were now reduced.

"Well, we've got a better chance now," said Jimmy, with an assumption of cheerfulness, when they were thrust into the barbed wire enclosure.

"A better chance for what?" asked Bob.

"To escape," was the answer, "It's a common occurrence for prisoners to get out of German prison camps, though I won't say that they all get back to their friends. Anyhow, we'll try the first chance we get."

There was one advantage of being in the prison camp, and away from the dungeon that was partly underground. The air and light were better, and the food was somewhat improved, though it was far from being good, satisfying, or even decent.

But the natural healthfulness of the boys kept them up, and they soon recovered from the slight wounds and bruises caused by the fight during which they were captured.

"Heard of any chance to escape?" asked Roger, when they had been in the camp about two weeks.

"No, though there is talk of digging under the barbed wire and a lot of the men going out," Jimmy answered. "You want to hold out and hide all the food you can. Well need it if we do get away."

His advice was followed, and, though the prisoners did not get much more than enough to keep them alive, the three boys managed to hide some scraps of bread and a bit of what was called "sausage," though it was made mostly from the meal of peas and beans.

As Jimmy had said, there was a plot, hatched among some of the English prisoners, to break out of the prison camp. But before there was a chance to put it into operation Fate stepped in and gave her aid---that is, it was aid for some, and death for others.

Not far from the German prison camp was a German ammunition dump, and one night there passed over it a raiding squadron, though whether of French, American or English airmen could not be learned by our heroes.

At any rate several bombs were dropped and one, either more accurately placed than the others, or falling more luckily, fell on the dump and it went up in a terrible and fearful burst of powder and shell.

The concussion caused several of the prison camp buildings to collapse, and a number of Russians were killed. The barbed and charged wires about the camp were torn loose and then it was that Jimmy saw his chance---a chance taken by many of the captives.

"Come on!" he shouted to Roger and Bob, as they awoke in the darkness and confusion, hardly knowing what had happened. It seemed like the end of the world.

Out rushed the three Brothers, catching up their few belongings and the precious packets of food they had hoarded against just such a chance as this, though they had not hoped for it so soon.

The Germans were in such confusion, and such havoc had been caused among them when the ammunition dump went up, that they had no time, then, to look to their prisoners. Consequently the unfortunate men who had been kept in the horrible camp scattered to the four winds, eager to make their way back to their own lines.

Jimmy, Bob and Roger formed a little party among themselves. They had only a general notion of which direction to take, but again Fate seemed to help them, for they were not stopped all that night. They tramped on, taking the most unfrequented ways, stumbling on in the darkness and on the alert for a sight of German soldiers. But the attack of the Allied airships, and the consequent destruction of a great pile of German shells, had caused such havoc back of the Hun lines that for several hours all was in confusion.

"It's getting daylight," murmured Bob, as he and his two chums were limping down a road. Limping is the correct term, for their own good army shoes had been taken from them and replaced by German apologies, with paper soles, which now were all but gone.

"What shall we do?" asked Roger.

"Keep on until we see something to stop us," advised Jimmy. "We are going toward our own lines, I think, or where our lines used to be, though there may have been a lot of changes since we were caught."

"Can't we stop and get a drink?" panted Bob. "My tongue is like a piece of that leathery stuff the Germans gave us and called meat. I've got to drink!"

It was light enough now to disclose a small stream not far away. Looking about to make sure no Germans were in the vicinity, Jimmy led the way toward it. A drink of water and the eating of some of their scanty stock of food would put new life in them.

They reached the water safely, near a small clump of trees. They drank, and though the fluid seemed half mud never was there a sweeter draught to parched throats and dry mouths. Then, as they were about to open their rude packets of food. Bob clutched Jimmy's arm.

"Look!" he exclaimed, pointing off to the left.

"A searching party!" gasped Jimmy. Then Roger saw at what his chums were gazing---a squad of German soldiers under the command of an officer, and they were marching straight toward the clump of trees where our heroes hoped to stay and eat!

"Quick!" cried Jimmy. "Burrow down in the leaves and dirt! If they see us we'll be shot on sight as escaping prisoners! No chance for quarter! Burrow down!"

And amid the dirt and dead leaves of the little patch of woods the boys scratched shallow hiding places for themselves, stuffing their food inside their shirts.

They were only just in time, for no sooner were they as well covered as they could manage in the hurry than the Germans came tramping into the little grove.

However, they did not seem to be acting on any precise information, as presently, after a cursory search in the grove, they left, and the boys breathed easier again.

"Shall we chance it now?" whispered Bob to Jimmy, cautiously raising his head from the hole amid the leaves.

"Wait a bit," advised his chum. And, in ten minutes more, when it seemed that the party of Huns must be far enough away, the lads emerged.

"Close call!" murmured Bob, brushing off some of the dirt. "But I guess we can eat now---such stuff as we have! Say, Roger, did you---"

He paused, to gaze in the direction where Roger was looking. And Jimmy, attracted by the attitude, gazed also. And they saw a strange sight.

Marching away, for which the three Brothers felt great relief, was the searching part of Germans. But this was not at what Roger was looking. It was the sight of a man, in a German uniform, seated on a fallen log at the edge of the clump of trees. The man was looking over some papers, and he must have been there when the searching party passed. Perhaps he had been with them.

"Look! Look!" murmured Roger. "It's the captain again. Captain Frank Dickerson---the officer who saved our lives at the red mill; and he's in a German uniform!"

CHAPTER XXI

BACK WITH FRIENDS

There was no doubt of it. So dramatic had been the circumstances under which they had first seen this strange man that the boys would never forget his face. He was dressed differently now---in an unmistakable uniform of the Germans---but it was the same man.

"What in the world is he doing here?" demanded Bob.

"There can be only one answer to that question," said Jimmy, and his voice was low and intense.

"And what is the answer?" Roger wanted to know.

"He's a German spy!" was the declaration.

"When he saved us at the burning mill he was in an American uniform. And now he is in German uniform. He's a spy!"

"He's in German uniform all right, there's no question of that" declared Bob. "But what makes you think he is a spy---I mean a German spy, Jimmy?"

"Because he was within our lines, or close to them, in a uniform that was calculated to appear like one of ours. And, instead of going back with us to help us find our own command, he hiked off in the direction of the Huns. And now he's here again."

"But maybe he's a regular German, though he didn't talk much like one," suggested Bob. "I mean the time he saved us at the mill. He might be a decent, human sort of German---and he couldn't bear to see us roasted to death. Maybe that's why he saved us. Of course, I remember he acted queerly, and---"

"I don't know why he saved us," declared Jimmy. "But I believe he's a German spy, and he was close to, if not actually within, our lines, trying to get information. And if he's a spy he ought to be hanged for it---that's the punishment of all spies."

"Yes, hanging isn't any too good, for a German spy," agreed Roger.

"And if we ever get the chance we'll denounce this fellow," went on Jimmy. "We can tell how we saw him in an American uniform, or part of it, near the red mill, and now he wears a German outfit. Hanging won't match his crime."

"And yet," said Bob slowly, "it would be sort of hard to denounce him." "Why?" asked Jimmy quickly.

"Because he saved our lives," was the quick answer. "Of course, we'll have to denounce him, fellows, if we get the chance. But it will go hard. He saved our lives!"

Jimmy was silent a moment, as he gazed out amid the trees in the direction of the German searching party and the officer seated, looking over some papers. Then Jimmy said, slowly:

"Yes, he saved our lives!"

The three hardly knew what to do. And yet, now, there seemed to be but one thing---they must make all haste in the direction of the American lines. At any moment the searching squad might come back, or another might make its appearance, for the Germans would not let the inmates of the prison camp get away without an effort to bring them back.

"Well, this Captain Dickerson has an American name all right, and he may be a German spy," said Bob. "But he isn't within the American lines just at present, so he has a right to wear a German uniform I suppose. Remember how he hesitated about giving his name? Maybe he made one up."

"He won't wear that uniform long if any of our boys catch him!" declared Jimmy. "Look here, fellows. His saving of our lives was a fine thing, and we can never forget it. But, at the same time, duty is duty, and our highest duty is not to the man toward whom we feel so grateful, but toward our own army and the boys of the Five Hundred and Ninth. If we ever get back to our friends we'll have to denounce Captain Frank Dickerson, or whoever that fellow it. That's all there is to it"

"I---I guess you're right," agreed Bob, slowly. "It's tough, but it has to be done!"

"If we get the chance!" added Roger.

"Of course! If we get the chance," agreed Jimmy. "Mind, I don't say that we actually have to give him up, or capture him," he added. "That would be too much. But it's our duty to tell what we have seen."

The others nodded their heads.

"We haven't a chance to capture him now." Jimmy resumed. "He's armed, and we're not. Besides, even if we three could overpower him, he might signal to the Germans who were just here. No, all we can do is to wait and see what happens. And the first thing we'd better do is to get out of this neighborhood. It isn't healthy!"

They looked once more in the direction of "Captain Frank Dickerson," as he had called himself. He had folded up his papers and was about to rise from the log.

"Duck, fellows! He's looking this way!" hoarsely whispered Bob, and the boys dropped behind a fallen tree.

The officer in the German uniform did, indeed, look toward the woods, but he made no advance that way, and presently walked off in the direction taken by the searching party which had been so close to the three former captives, evidently without knowing it.

"And now we'll make tracks the other way," decided Jimmy, and they put some distance between themselves and the man they believed a spy before they halted to eat.

"I'm glad I didn't have my five thousand francs with me when we fell into the hands of the Germans," said Sergeant Jimmy, as they sat and rested after the rather meager meal.

"Why?" asked Bob. "Maybe you could have bought some food, by bribing a guard."

"Not a chance!" was the answer. "The Huns would have taken every cent. No, I don't mind Maxwell having it---even if he's skipped with it, or if he's missing with it in his pockets. That's better than having German jailers take it. But I guess

we'll never see the sergeant or the money again."

"It doesn't look so," agreed Roger. "Well, it's the fortune of war, I reckon. But have we any chance of seeing our friends again?"

"We'll make a big try," declared Jimmy.

Of the miseries of the next two days the Khaki Boys never like to talk afterward. They ate all their food, and were still hungry. They managed to find some raw turnips which they devoured, declaring, in their hunger, that they were the best meal they had ever eaten. Fortunately they managed to find water, though they had to drink it by stealth for they were like hunted animals, making their way through a country held and devastated by a cruel foe. They hid most of the day and traveled by night, not knowing whether or not they were going in the right direction.

But they kept moving, though, at times, Bob, who seemed worse off than either of his chums, said he must give up. But Jimmy and Roger fairly dragged him on.

One day, when it seemed that they must lie down in a field and give up, they saw, coming over the top of the hill, a party of soldiers. It was getting dusk, and they could hardly distinguish the uniforms.

"If it's Germans I'm too tired to run," said Bob, weakly. "Let 'em take us!"

"I will not!" declared Jimmy fiercely. "I'll fight 'em with stones, and die fighting, rather than go back to a prison camp!"

"I'm with you!" cried Roger, and this attitude on the part of his chums seemed to rouse Bob.

Each one selected a large stone, though whether they really would have used them in their desperation I can not say. But in a moment all was changed.

The three figures, standing together in the field, attracted the attention of the officer leading the party of soldiers. He gave a sharp command, and at the sound of the words Jimmy cried:

"They're English! They're English! Hurrah, fellows! We're with friends once more!" And he ran forward followed by his chums.

It was true. A party of English soldiers, sent out to get some information, had come upon the three escaping prisoners, and, a little later, Bob, Roger and Jimmy were being well cared for while they told their story of what had happened.

"And so we blew their nasty dump to bits; eh, lad?" asked an English lieutenant, or "leftenant," as they are called.

"Yes," assented Jimmy.

"A little bit of hall right, I call that!" commented a cockney sergeant.

So weak and exhausted were our friends that they had to stay in the English billets several days before they could be sent under escort to their own command. And you may imagine better than I can describe it the joy of Franz and Iggy when they welcomed their Brothers once more.

"It's like having you back from the dead," declared Franz, with tears in his eyes as he held the hands of the three friends.

"Better even, for alife they is!" exclaimed Iggy. "I home a letter will write saying not to read the other what I sent."

"What other?" asked Bob.

"Oh, he wrote one saying you had been captured and that he was going to hike into German territory and find you the first chance he had," explained Franz.

"Sure I would go, but now not," declared Iggy. "I home write annudder letter soon."

"It was good of you to think of us," said Jimmy. "And now tell us about yourselves. Are you all right? Have you done any fighting, and have you heard anything of Maxwell and our missing money?"

"Oh, have a heart!" laughed Franz. "You're worse than an intelligence officer wanting to know the results of a trench raid. But we're all right, as far as that goes."

"Except we wos of broken hearted yes for fears of you," put in Iggy.

"Sure we were worried to death," agreed Franz. "There didn't seem to be a chance for you. As for fighting, well we haven't done much, though I hear there's a big battle about to come off. And as for Maxwell, we haven't heard a word."

It was one afternoon when the five Brothers were in a dugout, awaiting orders to go on duty for the night, that Jimmy bethought himself of the sight they had had of the mysterious captain.

"We didn't tell Franz and Iggy about him," he remarked to Roger and Bob.

"No. Go ahead with the story," said Bob. "Maybe they can throw some light on it."

But Franz and Iggy---though the latter did not say much---could offer no explanation save that put forth by Jimmy and the two lads who had seen what he had seen---that Captain Frank Dickerson was a German spy.

The night passed without incident of moment, except for two false alarms that the Germans were starting a general engagement. And in the morning, after breakfast, the long-looked-for word came.

"It's the advance!" was the general cry. "We're going forward and pinch out the German salient!"

There was one on this sector---a salient, or wedge, driven into the American line, or, rather, one that had existed since the Americans had taken over this particular part of the country.

"Now for the big battle!" cried Bob.

"And may it soon bring the end of the war!" added Roger.

Jimmy marched along with his chums, going to take charge of a squad that would be among the leaders of the advance. And, as he passed a group of American officers, saluting as he did so, his heart almost stopped beating. For standing in their midst, and conversing earnestly with them, was Captain Frank Dickerson, and this time he wore the uniform of an American officer, with the two bars denoting his captaincy!

CHAPTER XXII

FIERCE FIGHTING

Jimmy's astonishment at seeing the man they had called a German spy was duplicated by his companions. With one accord they halted and stood staring at the captain who had saved their lives. On his part he did not see them, apparently. He stood there talking with other officers as calmly and coolly as though nothing worried him.

"There he is!" exclaimed Bob.

"No question about it!" said Roger.

"The dog!" fairly hissed Franz. "And to think he's going to betray our secrets to the Huns!"

"Not if I can help it!" declared Jimmy, and there was firm resolve in his voice.

"What are you going to do?" asked Roger, though he could almost guess the answer of his chum.

"Come over here," said Jimmy Blaise to the otter Brothers. It was time they should be marching up on their way to the front to take part in the big advance. But there was also vital necessity of action at this juncture. And so many soldiers and officers were hurrying along that the temporary halt of Jimmy and his bunkies would not be noticed.

"Don't we to fight go?" asked Iggy, somewhat puzzled by the halt. "I mine gun haf und many bullets. To fight it is my idea, yes."

"You've got the right idea!" declared Bob. "We'll be fighting soon enough. But Iggy, do you see that fellow over there?" and he pointed to Captain Dickerson.

"Sure I see him. Him was the man what saved us at the fire."

"Exactly. And he went over toward the Germans, didn't he?"

"I thinks me he did," admitted Iggy.

"When did you see him last?" asked Franz, as if this was a trial and he had the examination of witnesses in hand.

"We saw him between our lines and the German forces, and he wore a German uniform," declared Bob.

"And now he wears an American outfit," added Roger.

"That settles it!" declared Roger. "The verdict is unanimous. Captain Dickerson, as he calls himself, is a spy, and it's our duty to denounce him!"

"Yes," said Sergeant Jimmy, "he saved our lives---–there's no doubt about it. But he's a spy. It breaks my heart to do it, but duty is duty! We'll have to expose him!"

He looked at Roger and Bob. Solemnly and mournfully they nodded their heads in assent.

"I don't know as much about it as you three fellows do," said Franz, "but it sounds as though you'd have to. Tough luck, but it's got to be done."

"How about you, Iggy?" asked Bob.

"I fights mit youse," said the Polish lad simply, "and what you says I say!"

"That ends it!" went on Jimmy. "I'd rather lose ten times five thousand francs than do this, but---well, let's get it over with, and then we'll jump into the fight and try to forget it."

He walked up to the group of officers, in the midst of which still stood the captain. Jimmy saluted Major Wrightson, the senior officer then present, and when the latter looked at the lad, seeing that he had something to say, Jimmy spoke:

"My comrades and I," he said, indicating his four Brothers, "wish to denounce that man as a German spy!" He spoke quietly, and pointed an accusing finger at Captain Dickerson.

"What's that?" cried the major, in great surprise.

Jimmy repeated his statement, and as he did so he kept his eyes on the face of the accused. The latter smiled faintly, but did not seem at all alarmed.

"Have you any evidence to support this amazing statement?" asked the major.

"Plenty," answered Jimmy, and then, briefly, he told what he and his chums had seen. During the dramatic recital, which was corroborated at several points by Roger and Bob, as well as Franz and Iggy, the captain never said a word. He continued calmly smoking a cigarette he had lighted.

"Can this be possible?" exclaimed a lieutenant, and he seemed to shrink away from Captain Dickerson.

"Have you anything to say regarding the accusation of these lads, Captain Dickerson?" asked the major, at length.

The accused flicked away the end of his cigarette. He looked at the boys, smiling cynically, and then answered calmly:

"No, I have nothing to say!"

"It is my duty---my painful duty---to order you under arrest then," said the major. "And it breaks my heart to do it. You were once my lieutenant and---"

Emotion overcame him, but he signaled to a captain, who summoned two orderlies, and in charge of these Captain Dickerson was led away under arrest.

"This matter will be taken up later, Sergeant Blaise," said the major. "It will have to wait until after the battle. He might better have been killed in action a dozen times than have this happen," he added rather ambiguously. "This is terrible!"

"It was hard to do this, after he had saved our lives," said Jimmy, "but it had to be."

"Yes," assented the major brokenly, "it had to be. And now let's forget it in giving battle to the Huns! It's up to us to redeem whatever wrong he may have done," and he nodded in the direction of the captain, who had been led away under arrest.

"He took it calmly enough," remarked Bob, as the five Brothers marched away.

"Never turned a hair," added Roger. "But you've got to have nerve to be a spy."

"I suppose they'll shoot him," observed Franz. "They don't have time for hanging any more. He'll face a firing squad all right."

"It's too bad!" declared Jimmy. "But it had to be. I'll say this for him---he's a brave man to venture back here, when he might be sure he'd be exposed---if not by us by some one else. Yes, he's a brave man!"

It was with no very light hearts, at first, that Jimmy and his chums marched on toward the front lines where they had been ordered to take their places for the general advance. The scene of the last half-hour preyed on their minds. But they were satisfied that they had done their duty.

"What's the program, sir!" asked Jimmy, as he reported to his second lieutenant.

"Well, we're going forward just as soon as our barrage gets in working order," was the answer. "I expect that will be any minute, now. See to it that every man in your squad has his gas mask, his pick and shovel, his canteen and mess gear. We may be several days under fire, and the supply wagons won't be able to get up if the Huns start shelling the roads, as they're likely to."

"Yes, sir," answered Jimmy, saluting. Then he and his chums put in several busy minutes.

Jimmy, Roger and Franz, as sergeants, would each have charge of a squad to lead into the fight, and in Jimmy's squad were Bob and Iggy, the corporals.

"Everything in readiness here?" asked the young lieutenant who had given Jimmy, Roger and Franz their orders. He came along the trench, glancing now and then at his wrist watch to note the approach of the hour set for the beginning of the barrage.

"Everything ready, sir," reported Jimmy, and Roger and Franz repeated this.

"Very good. You won't have long to wait now."

The lieutenant passed on, making his observations. The five Brothers were talking in low tones, speculating on many things. They talked of what they had gone through in the past, for each one realized that there might be no future for him after this great battle that was pending. And they talked of the spy captain, of the missing Sergeant Maxwell, and other matters.

"If we live through this," Jimmy was saying, "I'm going to get leave and see if I can't find Maxwell. It isn't so much for the sake of the money as it is for him. He was a good friend to me."

"To all of us," declared Bob.

"Well, I can't imagine what has become of him," said Roger. "If he---"

There was no chance for further words, for at that moment it seemed as if all the thunderstorms from the beginning of the world to the present time had broken loose at once.

"It's our barrage!" cried Jimmy. "Get ready to go over and fight!"

And ten minutes later the five Brothers were in the midst of the most desperate struggle in which they had had a part since the start of the World War.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LONELY HUT

And now it was that Jimmy and his chums were advancing across a dangerous stretch, protected by their own barrage. They rushed forward shouting, though it was hard for any one to hear his own voice, so terrific was the din.

There was little use in firing rifles now. The shrapnel from the American guns would take care of any Germans among which it fell. But when the barrage ceased, and the infantry would rush forward to try to take the Hun positions---then would come the most deadly fighting.

Forward, foot by foot, rushed the Khaki Boys, and on either side of them their bunkies also advanced. They were to go forward until their barrage ceased.

But it was not easy going after the first rush, for the Germans had awakened to the importance of the pending battle and they were now sending over a counter-barrage. With a roar that matched the opening chorus of the American guns, those of the Boche sent out their missiles of death.

And many of the shrapnel bullets, or pieces of exploding shells, found their marks. The ground was strewn with dead and dying, for the German barrage was meeting with and passing through that of the Americans.

Yet the advance never stopped. Company after company of khaki-clad youths and men rushed from the trenches and started across that vale of death. They advanced in battle formation---not too close together---for that offered too good a target for the machine-guns, and though many nests had been wiped out, many still remained.

Suddenly the awful ear-rending chorus on the American side died away as if by magic. The silence was almost as appalling as had been the terrific noise, for it portended more.

"Come, on!" cried the officers to their men. "Come on! Wipe out the Huns!"

And the men followed them to victory or death.

Jimmy found himself yelling and firing his rifle as rapidly as he could pull the trigger. For a moment the five Brothers, all together, seemed to be in comparative safety. But then bullets began to sing about their heads like angry wasps.

"Come on! Come on!" cried Jimmy, and no one faltered.

Suddenly, from a little mound of earth in front of the five, there came a sound as of some one tearing stiff cloth, or beating a drum more rapidly than one was ever beaten before. The Khaki Boys knew what it meant---a machine-gun nest.

Instinctively they dropped to earth, and the bullets flew over their heads. If they found living targets farther on the lads did not turn to see.

"We've got to wipe that out!" cried Jimmy.

"We're with you!" shouted Bob.

Franz, looking forward from between two little hummocks of earth, suddenly fired his rifle.

"There goes one Hun!" he exulted.

"And I got a second!" exclaimed Roger.

They were both good shots and each had gotten his enemy.

"Come on---rush 'em!" yelled Jimmy, jumping up. Bob attempted to pull his chum back, for it was almost certain death to stand up in front of a machine-gun emplacement. But it was too late. Jimmy had taken his chance, and he lived through it.

For a brief instant there was no firing from where the machine-gun was hidden and this was Jimmy's opportunity and that of his chums. With wild yells they leaped up and followed his lead.

A moment later they were fighting fiercely with half a dozen Germans who composed what was left of the automatic gun squad. The weapon appeared to be jammed, for one of the Huns was frantically working at the firing mechanism. And it was this same jamming, as was learned later, that, undoubtedly, saved the lives of Jimmy and his chums.

Roger shot pointblank at one Boche and Bob bayoneted another. Then the remainder raised their hands and cried: "*Kamerad*!"

"We haven't any time to take prisoners!" yelled Franz.

But they did not get the chance. The Germans left alive leaped out of the shallow pit in which the gun had been hidden, and ran toward the rear. But they had not gone far before they were wiped out of existence by the explosion of a shell which fell right on top of them.

"Come on! Come on!" cried Jimmy, when it was seen that the machine-gun was of no further use, since the weapon was damaged. Besides, the American advance would soon be up to this point and it would be within the Allied lines.

Forward leaped the five Brothers, into the midst of the fighting again. And it was hot and heavy. They would advance a little, firing as they went, and then would drop as they realized that they were getting too close to danger. After a moment's rest they would rush on again.

And these tactics were slowly but surely driving the Germans back. True, now and again the Huns rallied, and beat back their foes, but this was not for long. The overwhelming rush of the Americans kept up.

Once, after the battle had been raging with unabated fury for two hours, Jimmy and his chums, with some other brave lads, found themselves cut off in a sort of pocket, surrounded on three sides by Germans.

With exultant yells a squad of Boches rushed up to capture the hated Americans, but the five Brothers never quailed. They fired their rifles straight into the faces of their enemies, killing several, and then a counter-attack by a large number of Uncle Sam's boys turned the tide of the fighting at that particular place, and our heroes were saved.

With rattle and roar, with sweat and blood, the big battle raged. At one time it seemed as if the American advance would be held up because of determined resistance of the Germans on the crest of a certain hill. This was stormed again and again without result. But at last the position was flanked, and the Huns wiped out. Then the American line was made straighter and the battle began to lull. The foe was in retreat.

"Dig in! Dig in!" came the command.

With their picks and shovels Jimmy and his chums, as well as the other fighters, began to scoop out for themselves shallow holes in the ground. And when these had been made as deep as was desired the five Brothers, who had come through the fierce fighting with but minor scratches, had a chance to look about them.

They were down in a little valley, the heights of which were held by their comrades, and so they were comparatively safe, for a while. Realizing this they began to think of food and water. They had very little left in their canteens, and as there was a stream, not far away Jimmy and his chums received permission to go to fill their canteens and bring some to the wounded.

As they finished this work of mercy, and had taken some water themselves, Jimmy saw, through an opening among the trees, a lonely hut not far from the bank of the little brook.

"Wonder if anyone is in there?" he said. "It might have been a German machine-gun nest---–just the place for one."

"There may be one there yet," suggested Bob. "Let's take a look. We've got time."

The idea appealed to all, and, a few minutes later, secure in the knowledge that the Germans were on the retreat, our heroes entered the lonely shack. It appeared to have been the home of some French farmer, though now everything about the place was laid waste.

"Nobody at home, I guess," commented Jimmy, as he went from one room to another.

"No machine-gun been here," declared Bob.

At that instant an unmistakable groan was heard. The boys fairly jumped.

"Some one's here now, that's evident!" declared Jimmy, starting toward a small bedroom, whence, it was evident, the groan had sounded.

"Look out for a trick!" cried Roger. "The place may be mined!"

But Jimmy kept on. A second later his chums heard him shout from the inner room, and rushing to his side they saw him gazing at a figure huddled on a small cot bed.

"There he is!" cried Jimmy, pointing. "There he is! We've found him at last!"

"Who?" asked Franz.

"Sergeant Maxwell!" was the startling answer. "There he is!"

And as the others looked more closely they saw that Jimmy was right.

CHAPTER XXIV

A GLORIOUS VICTORY

"How did he get here?"

"What happened to him?"

"Is he wounded?"

These were some of the questions that were, literally, fired at Jimmy as he stood over the cot on which reposed the wasted and scarcely recognizable form of Sergeant Maxwell. Jimmy's chums asked these questions of him because, I suppose, they thought he ought to know the answers.

"I don't know any more how poor Max got here, or what happened to him, than you fellows do," said Jimmy.

"Is he hurt?" asked Bob.

"I'll ask him," said Jimmy. Bending over the form of the sergeant, who was now tossing restlessly to and fro, Jimmy inquired: "Do you know us, Max? Are you hurt? What happened to you?" An incoherent murmur was the only answer.

"He's in a fever," said Roger, as he held his hand against the flushed face. "He ought to be taken to the hospital!"

"Give him some water," suggested Franz, holding out his full canteen.

Jimmy raised his friend's head and Bob managed to get a little water between the parched lips.

"Good! Good! I wanted water!" murmured the man somewhat indistinctly. "I've wanted water a long time."

"Do you know us? I'm Jimmy Blazes, and here's Bob, Roger, Iggy and Franz," said Jimmy. "Do you know us! Can you tell us where you've been all this while, and what happened to you!"

"Good water! Good water!" was all the reply that came from poor Maxwell.

"He's out of his head," said Bob.

"We'd better send a doctor if we can find one, or get him to a hospital," suggested Roger.

"You go see if you can find any stretcher bearers, or a doctor or anyone like that," suggested Jimmy to Franz and Iggy. "We'll stay with him. Or Bob and I will. You'd better go report to the captain where we are, Roger. He might think we've deserted."

Bob and Jimmy, left with Maxwell, made him as comfortable as they could, washing his face and giving him more water to drink. But he answered none of their questions, murmuring only about the cool water. He was in a delirium of fever.

Of course Jimmy did not ask about the missing money. It would have been useless at this time. But, naturally, he wondered if the sergeant knew where it was.

Franz and Iggy came back with a doctor who, after a brief examination, said the sergeant was suffering from bad treatment and lack of food and water more than anything else. He did not seem to be wounded, but, of course, there might be some internal hurt which did not show at the first examination.

"Hospital's the place for him," decided the doctor. "Ill have him sent back with the first batch of wounded."

And so poor Maxwell was rescued from the oblivion of "missing," and again put on his company's rolls. But the mystery about him was not solved, and over it Jimmy and his chums wondered much.

"Well, things have certainly turned out queerly!" remarked Jimmy, when he and his chums were back once more in their "holes," eating their emergency rations, and wondering when the real "chow" would come up. "To thing of finding Max like that!"

"That place was held by the Germans before we rushed them back," declared Bob. "They might have kept him a prisoner."

"That's very possible," admitted Jimmy. "I'd like to know the whole story, but we'll have to wait."

"And a long time, I'm afraid," added Roger.

"Why, do you think Max will die?" asked Franz.

"No, but this fight has only just started. We've got to go forward, and land knows when we'll ever get back where we can see Max again."

"Oh, well, it isn't as hopeless as it was at first," remarked Jimmy. "I'm not worrying about the thousand dollars---only I'd like to know what he did with it."

As Roger had said, the fighting was not over. Before an order came to turn the "holes" into trenches, another advance was ordered, so that the Germans might be driven, if possible, from the vicinity of the hills dominating the valley in which was located the hut where Maxwell had been found.

"Forward!" came the battle cry again, and once more our heroes joined the advance.

This time, however, the fighting was not quite so fierce. The Germans had had a taste of the kind of medicine dealt out by the Americans, and the Huns had no liking for it.

True, they did not give up without a struggle, and many a poor lad went to his death, or came back from the front with a leg or arm missing, as a result of the renewal of hostilities. But it had to be. It would not have been safe to allow the Germans to have a chance to get back the dominating hills won at such cost.

And there the storm of blood and steel was renewed with fiercer energy, until at last, just as night was settling down, the German flank was turned, and they began to retreat in what ultimately was a rout.

"A glorious victory! A glorious victory!" was shouted from all sides in the American ranks.

It was not the end of the war, by any means, but a dangerous salient had been wiped out, and the American line was straightened, so that now the fighting could go along on more even terms.

"Oh, but I am tired!" sighed Jimmy, as he flung himself full length down on the ground when the signal came to cease firing.

"I'm all in, too," added Bob.

"But we're none of us hurt to any extent," said Franz, binding up a place on his leg where a bit of shrapnel had grazed him. "Won't even get a wound stripe for this," he said, grimly.

It was next morning, when the supply wagons had come up with more substantial food, and hot rations, that the good news circulated around.

"We're due for a rest billet! Hurray!"

"And then I'll have a chance to see about Sergeant Maxwell!" exclaimed Jimmy.

That same day, following the one of such fierce fighting, the battalion in which Jimmy and his chums served was ordered to the rear. They would have a week's rest before going into the terrible game again.

Jimmy's first action, once he had been relieved from active duty for the time being, was to seek out the hospital whither Sergeant Maxwell had been removed. He went alone, for he did not want to excite the patient by taking in too many chums, should it prove that the man who had held the five thousand francs was in a dangerous physical or mental condition.

But, to Jimmy's relief, the doctor's and nurse's reports were favorable. It was more a case of exhaustion than anything else, though the sergeant had been wounded.

"Did he tell where he had been ever since he has been missing?" asked Jimmy of a hospital attendant before going in himself to see his friend.

"Well he remembered some of it. It seems he was captured while out on a listening post one night, and taken away a prisoner. Instead of sending him to a camp, as the Huns do with most of our poor chaps they get, the Boches kept the sergeant with them, taking him from place to place. It was their idea, I believe, to either force him to desert and join them, or use him as a decoy---or perhaps make him a spy.

"Anyhow they kept him with them, and once he was struck and wounded by a beast of a German officer. After that they neglected him and he got terribly run down, though his wound healed. Then, just before the last big fight---the one you say you were in---the sergeant was held a prisoner in the hut where you found him. He was in a bad way and I suppose the Germans thought he'd die when they left him---which they did when our boys knocked the spots off 'em, if you'll excuse my slang."

"Oh, I'll excuse it all right!" laughed Jimmy. "It isn't any too strong."

"Well, I guess you may see the sergeant now," said the orderly. "Only don't talk to him too much. He doesn't like to dwell on what happened to him. They must have treated him worse than they would a beast!"

"It's awful!" declared Jimmy. "But they'll be made to pay for it! No, I won't tax him with any talk of the past. I just want to see if he knows me and remembers a certain matter."

"Oh, he'll know you all right," returned the orderly. "As a matter of fact, he has been asking for you."

"That's a good sign!" thought Jimmy.

Sergeant Maxwell held out a wan hand to his friend. "I can't begin to thank you for what you and the other boys did for me," he said, weakly. "If you hadn't discovered me in that lonely hut I wouldn't be alive now."

"Oh, maybe someone else would have found you," said Jimmy, cheerfully. "But we're glad we did."

"I've been wishing you'd come in," went on the sick sergeant. "There's something that's been worrying me. It's about that five thousand francs you gave me to keep for you."

"Well, don't worry about it," and Jimmy tried to keep his voice up to the cheerful mark. "Have you got it?"

"No," said the sergeant, "I haven't. But--–"

He paused to take a drink of water, and Jimmy's feelings went down to about the zero position.

"But I know where it is," added the sergeant.

"I suppose the Germans took it off you."

"Indeed they didn't!" was the rather vigorous answer. "I didn't have it on me. It's back in the dugout!"

"The dugout!" cried Jimmy, his spirits once more soaring.

"Yes, the one where I was quartered when you gave it to me. I knew we were in for some hard fighting, so before I went out on listening post I hid the franc notes in an old tin can and stuck it up under the roof beams. It's right under where a picture of President Wilson is tacked up. And if the dugout isn't destroyed the money is there yet."

"Well, the dugout can't be destroyed, for there haven't been any Germans there in some time," said Jimmy. "And I do hope you're right about the money being there. Not so much for my sake," he added quickly, "but because I promised to whack up with my bunkies, and I want to keep my word."

"Well, you send a message there and see if I'm not right," concluded Maxwell, and then, being rather weak, he was ordered by the nurse to take a rest.

Elated, but hardly believing the good news, Jimmy received permission not only to send a message, but to go back in a motor truck to the place where the headquarters of the 509th Infantry had been just before the big advance.

Jimmy did not get back to his chums until late that night, for his leave covered him up to midnight, and he was not on duty. He found Iggy, Franz, Bob and Roger in a Y.M.C.A. hut, writing letters, and from the labor Iggy was undergoing, his tongue sticking out and following every movement of his pen, it was evident that the Polish lad was not finding English correspondence any easier as the war progressed.

"Where have you been, Blazes? Back home?" asked Bob a bit sarcastically at Jimmy's absence.

"Sort of," was the answer. "That looks like stuff from home; doesn't it!" and he threw on the table some crumpled and rather stained thousand franc notes.

"Suffering shrapnel!" cried Bob. "The prize money!"

"Where'd you get it?"

"Did Max have it?"

"How'd you get it away from him?"

"How is he?"

"One at a time, please!" laughed Jimmy. "But first I'll tell you good news---–Max is going to get well," and he related the story he had heard about the sergeant.

"Well, that's quite a yarn!" exclaimed Roger.

"However, that hasn't anything on what we're going to tell you, Jimmy Blazes!" cried Bob Dalton excitedly.

"Have we all won the *croix de guerre*?" asked Jimmy, smiling.

"No, but here's a note from the 'spy' we denounced," and Jimmy, as he accepted a paper Bob held out, wondered at the happy looks on the faces of his chums.

It was explained, however, when he read the note. A glance at the signature told him it was from "Captain Frank Dickerson."

"Boys, you only did your duty in exposing me, as you thought you did," wrote the officer. "I congratulate you on your nerve, and on doing what you so plainly disliked to do, after I had saved your lives, as I may flatter myself I did.

"So don't worry about me. I was only doing my duty, too, for Uncle Sam when I was within the German lines and in a German uniform. And I was also doing my duty when I was within your lines in an American uniform. My superior officers know all about it. That is all I can say now, except to add that I was not under arrest very long. But that action had to be taken to keep my plans from becoming known, even to the major. I hope to meet you all again."

"Say, what does it all mean?" asked Jimmy, to whom so many things had happened in the last few hours that it was no wonder he was a bit dazed. "What's all this talk about the government knowing he was in German uniform and all that?"

"Don't you understand?" inquired Bob, with a smile. "He was a spy."

"Of course he was a spy!" asserted Jimmy. "I sized that up all right. He was a spy inside our lines and---–"

"Yes, but he was also a spy inside the German lines," put in Roger. "Don't you understand, Blazes! Captain Dickerson wore the German uniform to get possession of some of their secrets. He's in the United States Secret Service."

Jimmy looked first at one and then at the other of his chums, until he had faced them all in turn.

"Gee!" he exclaimed at length. "What a chump I was not to guess that, when he acted so coolly after I denounced him! What a chump I was!"

"Oh, well, we couldn't guess everything," said Franz, "And he certainly acted suspiciously at times."

"Yes, so I dinks myself," agreed Iggy, who had not spoken for some time.

"Well, it's all over---at least we've cleared up two mysteries," observed Bob. "I wonder what will happen next?"

"Well, there's going to be more fighting; that's sure," declared Jimmy, "and I want to do my share!"

"Same here!" echoed his chums.

And whether they did or not will be told in our next volume, entitled, "The Khaki Boys Fighting to Win; or, Smashing the German Lines."

THE END