SPIES I KNEW

By the same Author:

I WAS A SPY (52nd Thousand)
A SPY WAS BORN
MY MASTER SPY
DRUMS NEVER BEAT
LANCER SPY

SPIES I KNEW

by

MARTHE McKENNA

7th Thousand

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Spies I Knew

CHAPTER I

THESIS

MY book must begin with a good-natured objection. Mr. Winston Churchill, in his laudatory comments on my work as a spy during the Great War, remarks: "Behind the German lines many people followed the honourable profession of a spy. . . ." This would seem to convey to the average reader that my compatriots and myself undertook this dangerous work for some material gain.

I am sure this meaning must have been far from Mr. Churchill's mind, as none of the women or men whom it was my good fortune and privilege to work with, or who crossed my path no matter how fleetingly, were what was commonly called "in the pay of this or that Government". I can think of none who could have been in that position, and many spies of lesser and greater renown were in touch with me at one time or another.

In Flanders, the organizations, if they could be termed as such, crude at the best, were usually formed on the spot to meet some particular need of the Allies. When counter-espionage agents got too hot on the track

the organization would disappear, only to spring into life in another form in an entirely different place. Every action, every piece of information sent "over", was entirely voluntary and was purely actuated by patriotic motives, or through disgust at the brutal decrees and ruinous fines laid on the unfortunate civilians by the invader.

It was this very elasticity which proved so difficult to suppress and so exasperating to the Germans, and was yet so fruitful to the Allies.

It must be understood that I speak of the battle-zone areas, and in particular the sector in which my operations took place. Back-area organizations were more elaborate, and were conducted usually under the guise of some business undertaking.

In the battle-zone areas a set organization would most certainly have been detected immediately. If the term can be applied, and I think it may, it was sleepless, ceaseless guerilla espionage under the most difficult and terrible handicaps.

It speaks well for this particular sector that practically every movement of note contemplated or planned by the invader (and countless smaller items of information, in the aggregate of no less importance) was promptly sent "over" and placed at the disposal of the grateful Commander of the British Forces.

The information thus garnered was of immense value to the British Armies, fighting as they were in an almost impossible position. When it is remembered that the invaders had in their possession every height of note overlooking the Ypres salient, it will give the reader an idea of the terrible position

the British troops were forced to endure, battling hopelessly in low, flat-lying, sodden country.

That the British Army defied all rules and tenets of war in the deathless stand in the Ypres salient, a humble measure of the glory can be claimed by the agents, "professional" and non-professional, who, at the risk of a secret firing-squad, were only too anxious to flash "over" what they had learned in time for the information to be of benefit to the Allies.

Every phase in the four years' bitter struggle was taken advantage of by these undaunted civilians. It will be shown that even the very food shortage paved a way to get vital information across.

In very truth, a German agent once innocently remarked to me that one of the first lessons they were forced to learn was that the only Flemish person the German service could not suspect of espionage activities was a dead one! I took this as a marvellous tribute to my compatriots.

As the invader settled down, secure in the belief that the kingdom of independent Belgium would shine henceforth in the Crown of the Hohenzollerns, he discovered unexpected and exasperating resistance on the part of the civilian population. Brutal decrees followed brutal decrees, which only seemed to temper the steel of the civilian opposition to the invader.

As the bitter struggle progressed, the food shortage became terribly acute. On the part of the harassed civilians food-rationing was voluntarily effected from the early days. They were forced to this method, as the invader never at any time made any attempt to organize rationing or distribution to the population. Usually

two or three trustworthy citizens in a town or district formed themselves into a committee and handed out what was available after the invader had confiscated the lion's share. Such committees were carefully watched by the German military authorities, as they were always suspect.

The food obtained through the American Relief Commission helped to tide over acute periods, and at all times the prices for this were most reasonable.

This is mentioned for these reasons: as the troops became more hungry, that great leveller, Starvation, had this strange effect—it drew soldier and civilian together in an endeavour to steal or buy (the military authorities proscribed it as "smuggling") the bare necessities for existence.

In the back areas the Allied Intelligence Bureaux seized on this weakness and organized very efficient posts for the passing of information and fugitives. German transport-drivers, bribed to carry foodstuffs from place to place, were at the same time innocently transporting vital information towards the frontier!

Postage was suppressed; indeed, no civilian post existed during the occupation. One of the biggest mistakes the Germans made, for it forced the civilians to resort to the methods of the Middle Ages. Letters and communications were carried by hand from town to town and from village to hamlet. The carriers became adept at hiding communications against search patrols. Then came the obvious avoidance of such patrols, and what more natural result than that this method should be used for the dissemination of espionage news and instructions?

There were "message-runners" who developed into such wonderful scouts that some of the feats they accomplished would put to shame the legendary exploits of the Red Indian trackers. The ground covered by these men and women was astonishing, considering the adverse conditions.

As early as the beginning of 1915 I was communicating regularly with my brothers, who were actually fighting in the Belgian trenches! I was also receiving letters from Belgian soldiers and distributing them to their kinsfolk in the occupied area!

Newspapers and periodicals in the Flemish and French languages were rigorously suppressed, and where it was discovered that printing and distribution was secretly carried on, the editors and assistants received and underwent extreme penalties. The only journals that could be purchased were German.

Travel by train was an almost impossible feat. So the broad highway, when a sufficient pass could be obtained, or the ploughed field, the by-ways, and the constant dodging of search patrols when a pass could not be had, was the mode of travel.

We all became as hard as nails, and as active as panthers, with, I am afraid, that animal's cunning, against the hated invader. Persons I knew in 1914, shuffling along in blissful, fatty contentment carrying 250 lbs, became active citizens of 160 lbs. in a few short months, eating their meagre rations and accomplishing their twenty to thirty miles per day.

Houses of worship were suspect, and no celebration of divine service took place without a Secret Service agent being present.

The foregoing will convey a faint idea of the disabilities under which our activities were carried on.

From the beginning of time Governments and ruling bodies have found the absolute necessity of using spies both for defence and offence. Right through the pages of history the deeds and work of espionage agents have caused romantic pages to be written. "*Forewarned is forearmed*", and woe betide the leader or Government who disregarded this axiom.

The Greeks brought espionage to a fine art. Julius Cæsar used spies extensively. Napoleon, in his sweeps through Europe, owed much to his clever "path-makers". But the classic example, similar to the conditions in Flanders during the German occupation, was the American Civil War. During this tragic war marvellous exploits are recited of wonderful deeds on behalf of both North and South; here, however, although strict devotion to duty was observed, great chivalry was shown by both sides, very unlike our experiences, for my unfortunate compatriots were subject to brutal suppressive acts which do not bear retailing in print. No quarter was given to the spy, nor, indeed, was such mercy expected.

Owing to the very secrecy of espionage, romantic history has lost epic stories of gallantry, devotion and sacrifice unparalleled in other warlike activities. The glamour and excitement of battle compensates the Gallant Charge or the Desperate Stubborn Defence; but the cold-blooded seeker after the enemy's intentions is bereft of the trumpet-call, the heroic comrades, and the flare. He must plough a lonely furrow. His only

reward may be a word of thanks from a superior, or his end the lonely "felon's" grave.

Although "Intelligence Services" are recognized institutions, Governments will deny the existence of such bodies. If asked, they will throw up their hands in horror and point to the nearest neighbour as the guilty one, and hint that the neighbour is the country with the most perfect organization for the carrying on of such secret work. So, if one of their emissaries happens to be caught "red-handed", he is at once repudiated by his own Government. That surprised body knows nothing of him or his work. It is this feeling of utter aloneness, operating in absolute secrecy and the certain knowledge that his very own leaders will disown him, that is the most trying ordeal of all; his only recompense a lonely, dishonourable grave, or prison.

Intelligence Services are always on the look-out for the espionage genius. The Perfect Spy is, of necessity, taken young, and tended jealously as if for a vocation, a call. Every action, every step, almost every thought is weighed in the balance, and the finished perfect product is a pearl beyond price. He avoids like the plague the conspicuous, he is meticulously careful, and never appears clever; indeed, he must lead the other fellow to believe he's the clever one.

To the end of the War the British Intelligence Service led its German counterpart to believe in the rank stupidity of the British Service; thus the underrated one had won half the battle of wits at the outset.

A minute attention to detail and a blind faith that events will unravel the riddle in time for the information to be of use for counter-action, and a gift to separate

the chaff from the grain of countless rumours, are the first essentials of the skilful spy.

He can save his country from disaster by his timely information. He can prevent war. War was prevented at the Agadir incident in 1911 on the urgent warnings given to the Kaiser by his agents, but was precipitated in 1914 by the optimistic advice flashed to the same august person by his spies.

The whole course of national events can be swayed by the actions of a clever spy. But it is given to few to accomplish this, as the opportunity arrives once in an age, and then the MAN must be there ready to seize with both hand and brain that which Providence has sent him. During 1915 a member of the German Embassy in America, whilst riding on the New York elevator, had his portfolio "lifted" by a British Secret Service agent. The papers purloined from the German proved more than interesting—they disclosed sensational espionage ramifications, and showed that no less a sum than £400,000 per week was being spent in the United States by German organizations! (A maximum of expenditure for the minimum of return!) These disclosures were promptly published by a leading New York journal, and, needless to say, created a first-class uproar. It irritated beyond measure the long-suffering American people; but the crowning blow was a letter written by a German agent who alluded to the bewildered American citizens as "these idiotic Yankees", and made other caustic remarks not in praise of the American nation.

Now the mule in general is a very patient animal, but, when roused, he has a proverbial kick, and when

the time came for the roused Americans to kick, they kicked with such purpose that when the first "Doughboy" left the shores of the New World to take his part in the struggle in the Old World the final result was a foregone conclusion: utter and disastrous defeat for the German nation. When the British agent secured that portfolio he was accomplishing more for the Allied cause than the waiting policy and the undoubted genius of President Mr. Wilson. Subsidize murder, subsidize the blowing-up of factories, subsidize the sinking of ships, and create every type of chaos in a long-suffering country—excuses may be found to gloss over the sabotage. But ridicule and laugh at the same people, and wound them in their *amour-propre*—here is the unpardonable sin. The British Government should canonize that agent!

But on a no less colossal scale was the error of the German agent. Unforgivable the under-estimation of the temper of a powerful neutral, but criminal the putting on paper his derisive opinion of the same neutral!

Every intelligence service knows there is a certain type of individual who, for a price, is willing to sell his own country, but to enlist this type into the ranks of secret service is never satisfactory. The traitor is always suspect, even by his own employers.

The type actuated by material gain is also unsatisfactory, for usually the highest bidder obtains these doubtful services, and in both these cases, human nature being what it is, demands tend to increase, and even for espionage Governments do not possess bottomless purses.

Again, there is the type suffering under some burning wrong, fancied or real. Great care is taken with this subject, as reports are usually in this case biased, and in extreme cases fantastically distorted.

Most desired is the quite rational being actuated by deep patriotic motives. Absent must be the craven knowledge of the traitor, the greed for gain, or the burning temper for revenge.

To this latter the work is a call to serve the beloved Homeland.

"Who shall die if home and honour live?"

It is never a thankful task for an author to explode the legendary tales and romantic fancies surrounding a subject so dear to the heart of a vast reading public. Stories have grown up of marvellously beautiful women conducting sumptuous *salons* and with clever ruses securing the future war-plans of ambitious Governments. The beautiful vamp purloining the plans of the latest battleship from the good-looking naval attaché, or who pockets the last-minute orders from the infatuated old general, only exists in the imagination of the novelist. She simply lives her short, luxurious life between the pages of the book.

The society leader, or the famous dancer, would be the object of suspicion to a village constable, let alone to the extraordinarily clever counter-espionage bureaux most modern Governments possess.

Not in that manner are intelligence services organized. Oh dear no! The limelight is shunned, and the beautiful decoy left to the pages of novels.

Although there are instances of women accomplishing exceptionally fine work, men, in the nature of things, make infinitely the best espionage mediums.

Chiefly in the imagination of the public legends have grown up round the names of various women-spies, but it is not my forte or wish to disillusion these romantic fancies.

In peace-time the sphere of activities left to the woman-spy is very limited compared with the tremendous amount of ground that has to be covered by the average intelligence bureau, and in war-time the woman's scope is even more reduced.

In fairness, however, I must say that one of the cleverest spies it was my privilege to work with was a woman. But, in startling contradiction to the usual conception of these romantic figures, this one was a battered-looking dame of sixty summers, mother of nine children, and a grandmother! But the mark of genius is seen from the outset, for she led the invader to believe she could neither read nor write! Of her, "Canteen Ma", we shall read anon.

As the world now knows, much can be accomplished by the peaceful penetration of trade. The Germans before the war built up with ant-like industry a marvellously cumbersome world-organization, but its very hugeness defeated its own object. Under sail, with the gentle breezes of peace, the craft gave promise of wonderful results in case of war; but the first gust of the terrific storm tore to ribbons the overladen canvas, leaving the stricken hull to ride the tempest as best it might. All the wealth, all the years, all the loving care and thought expended on this organization, which knew

no end to its ramifications, was shattered in the first few weeks by the Allied blockade of the German nation. This must count as the classic tale of a huge failure! Of what use was the information of the cotton-broker in New York, the tea-merchant in India, the spice-merchant in Persia, the banker in Italy, or the nut-exporter of Africa?

The information was all very well had the fountain-head been in a position to use and take advantage of the advice. But the beautiful edifice built so laboriously collapsed in the first months, and the backstair methods were noisily exposed by the hob-nailed boots of the abandoned agents.

The peace-time spy is in a far different category from the war-time spy. The former may call (as the latter always does) for a very high degree of courage, but, unlike war-time, where the last-minute order, or the rapid movement of troops, and the thousand and one details of active service are of the utmost importance, the peace-time agent demands in all cases a high technical knowledge. The information required may be as different as the poles apart; the revolutions of the propeller on the latest aeroplane-fighter, as against the contemplated plans of the building and strength of a modern land fort.

Obviously the agent for the particular job in view has to be carefully chosen from the ranks of those who are versed in that subject.

It beggars description the legion of espionage roles necessary to a modern Government which is determined to keep *au courant* with this ever-changing and advancing world of ours. The lot of the agent may lead to the

palace, or may lead to the stokehold of a cruiser, but in all cases he must be ever alert, serving his country with blind faith.

But of more moment to this volume was the situation in 1914 when the invader had swept over the plains of fair Belgium, the low-lying gateway to France.

All recognized institutions had gone, swept away with the first grey wave. The Government were in exile. All that remained was the undoubted courage of the bewildered civilian population—what was left of them—bereft for the moment of leaders or guidance. The invader might well say in the commencement: "A few battalions of line-of-communication troops can keep this disordered rabble in order"; but the time was to come, and come quickly, when corps upon corps were to be expended in garrisoning the small country which harassed the invader ceaselessly day and night.

Immediately the Governor, in the name of his Imperial Master, established himself, the Germanization of Belgium began apace. German currency was introduced, and teachers, doctors, and all kinds of professional job-hunters flooded the land. The crude endeavours were openly laughed to scorn by the Belgian nation, but the Germans were in deadly earnest. The annexation of Belgium was an accomplished fact, Antwerp would be a bigger and better Hamburg, and woe betide those who resisted the dream! The "benefits" of German rule and culture were advanced in all seriousness by these modern harbingers of a new gospel.

But the Belgian nation, now inspired by her two heaven-sent leaders, her King and Cardinal Mercier,

exclaimed as in the words of Wordsworth's divine inspiration:

> We can endure that he should waste our lands,
> Despoil our temples, and by sword and flame
> Return us to the dust from which we came . . .
> . . . But when of bands
> Which he will break for us he dares to speak,
> Of benefits of a future day
> When our enlightened minds shall bless his sway,
> Then the heart of fortitude proves weak.

Later, the job-hunters abandoned us to the might of the military machine, saying, "Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad." The mailed might of this machine was infinitely preferable to the canting bribes of benefits to be, and the stupid, brutal decrees accepted in preference to the teachers of the new "culture".

My work commenced under these repressive conditions. Many "law-abiding" citizens, who in peace-time would hardly say "boo" to a goose, were driven by the brutal, arrogant edicts of the invader to work entirely against him.

Frans Murice was of this category. He owned a brewery, and was in a fairly prosperous position. Although he detested the invader, a man cannot quarrel with his bread-and-butter, thought Frans; so, whilst keeping strictly to himself, so far as the Germans were concerned they had nothing to fear from his activities. He gladly helped his fellow-civilians as much as he humanly could without being denounced as the leader of some imaginary secret organization. A bachelor, he resided with his widowed mother in a large house close to the

station. His parents lived in one wing of the large house and he in the other. In the rear of the house was the brewery, with all the appurtenances for that trade: bottle-washing machinery and barrel-loading stage.

He had not been requested by the town commandant to supply space for billets, but one day a Major arrived in the town on some special mission. At the moment the town was crowded with troops, and the Major found his way to the Murice home.

The Major informed the maid that he wished to speak to the master of the house. When the master arrived, the officer enquired what quiet room could be put at his disposal. As Frans had foreseen the advent of such an unwelcome visitor, he had had the furniture removed from the available bedrooms and had it stored. So he replied that he had no spare bedroom. The officer peremptorily ordered Frans to show him the house, and with a bad grace Frans complied. The master's well-appointed bedroom overlooked the brewery and other working arrangements. This enabled the owner to keep a sharp eye on his workpeople, who arrived early most mornings.

The officer was charmed with Frans' bedroom, and indicated that he would be quite comfortable there during his enforced stay in such an awful place as Roulers.

Frans was speechless with rage.

"My orderly will come with my baggage in one half-hour. See to it that the room is ready for him to lay out my things," the Major ordered, and with that he left the boiling Frans.

Frans sat down, and, so far as his rage allowed,

considered the matter for some little time. Jumping up, he had made up his mind. Giving orders to his man to have the room made ready, he walked down to his workpeople.

The bottle-washing machine was the nearest appliance to his bedroom, so he spoke to the rough-and-ready girls thus:

"A 'knub', an officer"—and screwing up his eye as if holding therein a monocle—"has taken my bedroom. To-morrow morning, with the lark, my dears, give him a little music to blend with his sweet dreams of the Fatherland." The girls laughed. This was something after their own hearts.

Early next morning, underneath the Major's bedroom went up a terrible clatter. Strident singing, and calling of jokes from one girl to another. The carters joined in the fun, and the horses, scenting the unusual atmosphere, pawed the cobble-stones. The distracted Major walked around his bedroom for hours, waiting the arrival of his servant. On the arrival of this soldier the presence of Frans was requested immediately.

"Herr, your work-folk seem most happy," he said frigidly to Frans.

"I treat them very well. So it is they have to be joyful," returned Frans brightly.

"Ha! For worlds, Herr, I would not spoil the rabble's innocent fun." So saying, he brushed past Frans and the soldier, walked out of the bedroom, crossed the landing and flung open the door of Frans' beautiful sitting-room, which overlooked the quiet front street.

"With such happiness I am loth to interfere, so I think this room will suit me better," he called to Frans.

Returning to the bedroom, he addressed his servant, barking his orders out:

"Request the town commandant to lend you two men. Return and have every stick of this room moved into that room"—deliberately pointing to the sitting-room—"and the sticks in that room put here. See to it that the place is ready for my return."

Unable to contain himself longer, Frans coldly explained to the officer his opinion of the Fatherland, and Boches in general.

The result was that Frans received three months' rigorous imprisonment.

On his return to everyday life Frans found the Major had departed, but that zealous officer had given us a splendid helper, for Frans Murice, following this, became one of our best mediums.

From sullen obedience in the beginning, the attitude of the civilian developed into open defiance, and then in the end laughing disdain of the invader, until, just before he was so ignominiously bundled out of the country, the *Kamerad* was at a huge discount.

I very quickly discovered that the German counter-espionage agents were crude and heavy in their methods, but, like most clumsy people, were apt to stub their toes against the clever ruse, or stumble clumsily on to the well-thought-out plan or secret hiding-place. I therefore quickly adopted the *obvious* and open, innocent-looking methods. Clever tricks I avoided. Special thin parchment paper and invisible ink were discarded, as also were the secret pockets and special hiding-places on the person, and code for messages was abandoned, for on April 7, 1915, in a proclamation issued by the

German military authorities, persons found with such paper or with code messages or secret hiding-places were proscribed as dangerous spies and were to be shot as such. But even before that time I had despatched all my messages on ordinary notepaper, in my own handwriting, but signed "Laura". With one exception, during the commencement of the starvation period, when food was the all-prevailing topic, cabbages became the "Wurtemburg Army", potatoes became "artillery", and so on, and never once were the British Intelligence agents at a loss to read my messages aright when the screed was signed "Laura."

Only my mother and Alphonse knew I was "Laura". The circle of my accomplices was kept down to the absolute minimum, and at no time was I actively aware of more than five workers, although I was aware and knew of organizations criss-crossed over the land. Contrariwise, only six or seven persons absolutely trustworthy knew of my activities, and even to them I was not known as "Laura", for it is one of our human failings that a secret that is shared is no longer a secret. I knew of dozens of trustworthy citizens whom I could trust with my all, but that which I most feared was the innocently dropped remark, or the laughing boast of a friend. The secret knowledge of the crowd quickly becomes the clue of the seeker.

So it was that when an agent arrived from distant parts to see me, I had to rapidly judge the genuineness of the caller, but at no time, with the exception of one or two cases, was a name asked or the district from whence the agent came enquired for. No questions were asked nor any volunteered. This system had nothing but

advantages for everyone concerned, for should one be captured, the less one knew the better. The invader had his methods—methods which would put to shame the Inquisition of old—for forcing the unfortunate one to speak. Although I knew Canteen Ma obtained vital information from the Quartermaster-Sergeant of the Roulers canteen, an Englishman who was a lieutenant in the British Intelligence Corps, I never once attempted to see him, though sorely tempted at times from shortage of food and starvation; and he never attempted to see myself. Moreover, I knew that a Belgian soldier was hidden for several months by people who were close friends of mine. As they never ventured the subject, I in return respected their secret.

This system was invariably rigidly adopted throughout the organizations, and where it was disregarded only disaster resulted, in many cases on innocent people. The old adage, "Let not your right hand know what your left hand does", of necessity was strictly observed.

Back-area organizations I used at various times. They did wonderful work in hiding, and conducting to the frontier, escaping prisoners of war and hard-pressed fugitives. In addition, naturally, vital information was passed through, but in general their activities were confined to escapes and concealment.

False passport-bureaux which reached to great heights of ingenuity, supplies of civilian clothes, the all-important question of funds (which at all times were tragically short), food and the heroic guides and runners, all was organized by these back-area bureaux.

Palace and hovel, farm, factory and private house supplied the sanctuaries. Prince and bricklayer, princess and washer-woman, teacher and poacher, participated in the desperate hazard, for in the same proclamation of April 7, 1915, all persons found harbouring such fugitives, or who helped in any way to effect escapes, were proscribed as spies and the unfortunate fugitives were classed the same.

Very many suffered the extreme penalty, British, French and Belgian. To praise those modern "Joan of Arcs" would be an impertinence, but the civilians showed their defiance and appreciation of the courageous examples set by these heroic martyrs by redoubled efforts, and where death notices were posted *pour encourager les autres* daring spirits wrote underneath, *Mort pour la Patrie*, *Vive les Alliés*, or, where they were posted in the towns, they were immediately torn down.

The procedure was similar in most instances. The fugitive, an escaping prisoner of war, or a soldier who in some hurried retreat had got cut off from his battalion, hidden for weeks, and sometimes months, by civilians, was put in the hands of one of the organizations. A passport was forged for him, civilian clothes secured, and a guide supplied to lead him on to the next post. Hundreds of miles were covered by these escaping soldiers, passed from post to post by the heroic, devoted guides, until at last the desperate dash over the electrified barbed-wire at the Dutch frontier.

Countless numbers of youths of military age were passed over thus, avengers eager to join up in their own army to avenge some burning wrong.

The deeds and devotion showed by these guides catch at the throat.

SERGEANT ROBERT PENNIKET.
Regimental No. 4590.
1st Battalion Loyal North Lancashire Regt.
British Expeditionary Force. 1st Division.

During the retreat from Mons, Sergeant Penniket was cut off from his Battalion at Marbaix. Wandering over the countryside, expecting to be taken prisoner at any moment, he was spoken to by Madame Legrand outside the village of Grand Fayt. The Legrand family undertook to hide him until such time as the expected British counter-attack would again free that part of the country, but the long-expected sweep forward took four long years!

The sergeant was hidden in a tumble-down hut used as a duck-shooting vantage point alongside a large lonely pond. Twice per day one or other of the family Legrand made the trip to the pond with food, and thus he was concealed from August 28, 1914, until May 4, 1915.

On May 4, 1915, a false passport, civilian clothes and money were supplied, and an intrepid guide was found in Madame Louise Thuilliez, a school teacher. Not without many hairbreadth escapes, the sergeant was finally passed over the Dutch frontier. The journey had taken eleven days, a journey which can now be accomplished in a few short hours by train.

And of the leaders of this heroic little nation—King Albert and the late Cardinal Mercier, Burgomaster Max of Brussels, and others of undying memory—it were best to allow one to speak in the simple language of the peasant, as *he* saw it at the moment of stress, for heroics are easy after the danger is past:

There can be no finer tribute than some words spoken by a refugee, a quiet little man who had lost family and livelihood, and who seemed to peer out upon a new world like a dazed child,

"Frankly, Monsieur, we did not think we could have behaved so well. We are a small people, a people of traders, not greatly interested in high politics or war. We needed a leader, and God sent that leader. We owe everything to our King. He has made of our farmers and tradesmen a nation of heroes. When the war is over, he will rule over a broken land and a very poor people, but for all that he will be the greatest King in the world."

(Extract from Nelson's *History of the War*, p. 201.)

What count ye the world's material gain,
When brother-nations pæan ye in such refrain?

CHAPTER II

CHRISTMAS EVE, 1914

THE Wurtemburg Army held our sector of the Front. The invaders had pushed on, not without bitter and bloody fighting, down the gentle slopes of the Passchendaele-Westroosebeke Ridges, but were brought to a stand just beyond Poelcappelle, and in front of Langemarck.

Westroosebeke was left in the reserve lines, and during the day steady streams of stretcher-bearers, in endless relays, and walking cases singly and in groups, arrived at the Convent, improvised as a military hospital, where I was nursing. During the night Red Cross ambulances helped in the work of removing the wounded from the front-line medical posts.

Everyone was hopelessly overworked. The doctor and dressers sometimes fell asleep as they automatically attended to their stricken comrades. But still the stricken ones arrived with monotonous regularity, many of them young boys, volunteers, just from school and college.

Now and again a batch of wounded prisoners would arrive, and more from sympathy than design I would busy myself amongst them. The doctor and the dressers had become so accustomed to this practice that no notice was taken of it. So at times, when the guard was

not too officious, I was able to have a few words with the prisoners before they were bundled off to some prison hospital.

During intermittent bombardments of the village several civilians were killed, and along with the dead soldiers both were at first given decent burial. But as the dead had grown to frightful numbers, nearly all the male population of the village was pressed into the labour of grave-digging, and instead of single graves huge holes were dug, and as many as one hundred were thrown in, Germans, prisoners and civilians, to sleep the long last sleep together.

My parents had taken a house on the main street, by the simple process of walking in and taking possession. The owners had abandoned the place in panic and fled before the invaders. Our own home had been destroyed on the first day of the entry of the Germans into the village. We lived in our new home fairly comfortably, except when heavy bombardments fell on the district, when we had to repair hurriedly to a cellar which had been allotted to us by the "town commandant". The cellar was very large, and in a sheltered part of the village. The house over it had been struck several times from stray shells, and the walls and upper floors had collapsed, making the cellar almost shell-proof.

We had dropped into an almost monotonous round of grinding, endless hours of work and exhausted sleep, eating and drinking in snatches. And always was the movement up to the Front. Columns after endless columns, singing, and tramp! tramp! and weary shuffle. Now and again an urgent clatter as a gun-team dashed through to take up a position on the Poelcappelle road,

in the open, and then the sudden vicious bark as they opened fire.

The second of November saw a decided change for the worse in our everyday life. Two soldiers had formed our immediate guard. We had christened them "Flat-foot" and the "Tiger". They did not know what exactly their duties were, so from at first being harried from pillar to post, we were left in comparative peace, as the soldiers became more accustomed to us.

But it was just this that caused most of the misery we women were to endure for four long weeks.

The trenches were getting alarmingly short of line-troops. One day a staff-major arrived in the village and saw "Flat-foot" and the "Tiger" idling their time away. He stamped round to the town commandant, and ordered the two soldiers back to their battalions.

Now we had perfect freedom of movement; but, alas, this again proved too good to last.

Another staff-officer arrived. He was struck with spy-mania. Spy-mania was rampant then, especially with back-area commands. Had it not been so tragic for us, it would have been laughable, the ingenious devices and diabolical tricks which were laid at the door of my countrymen and women by panic-stricken lines-of communication commands.

Again a stormy interview with the town commandant. The result was, all the male population of the village were evacuated to Roulers, eight miles further back, the women to follow a later day. Meanwhile we were to have a strict guard. A strict guard over fourteen women, all that was left of the inhabitants!

Cavalry-sergeant Paul Schmittenn arrived to take

charge of us. He was accompanied by a batman, whose duties were to make two trips per day back to the cavalry headquarters for rations and polish up the sergeant.

Cavalry-sergeant Schmittenn was the typical Prussian drill-sergeant. Everything he had about his fine physique —equipment, riding-boots and rifle—shone. He carried himself as if the whole German Army depended on his correctness.

But I got his measure the first five minutes I knew him. He was a bully and, as all bullies are, an arrant coward.

He rounded us all up and addressed us as he would his recruits on the barrack-square, and with the same ferocity.

"I want no monkey games with Sergeant Schmittenn; because you are women, don't think you can pass me the dirty Flemish tricks. No hanging out linen in nice little ways for the damned Englander to read where we are. And smoke from chimneys, or lights from doors or windows, means this!"

Smartly propping his rifle to his shoulder and pointing it direct at us, click-click! spoke the trigger.

My mother was there. Her three sons were fighting "on the other side of the valley". Four other women had sons who were similarly placed with the Belgian Army.

My heart cried out, "Give me the weapon, O Lord!"

My prayer was to be soon answered, but there were to be moments during those terror-stricken days and nights when I would have welcomed a bullet from the rifle of Sergeant Schmittenn.

The very next morning I had my first encounter

with our sergeant-guard. The village had been shelled during the night, so we had all repaired to the shelter. I walked alone to the hospital through the mud and rain. I had been working with Corporal-dresser Evandan for about an hour, when suddenly the door flung open. Sergeant Schmittenn stood in the doorway, rifle at the ready. "Come out!" he ordered. "Who gave you permission to leave your hole?"

I took no notice, but continued my work.

The corporal was a great, stout man with the most amazingly beautiful hands I ever saw. His quickness in dressing the wounded was bewildering. He was stooping over a soldier when the sergeant flung open the door. Corporal Evandan looked up with astonishment, and then understood the situation. Straightening himself up, and fixing the sergeant with blazing eyes, he hissed:

"You get out, and quick!"

He walked towards the door and forced the sergeant out into the passage. I heard angry voices for several seconds, and then the sharp click of heels as the two men came to attention. The sharp, incisive voice of the doctor spoke, and then the corporal returned, large face beaming.

"The Herr Doktor settled that swine-hound. I think he'll leave you alone in future."

After this encounter he did leave me severely alone, but I knew he was for ever on the watch, seeking for something with which to denounce me.

The psychology of numbers told against such a character as the sergeant's, and, scenting this, I contrived never to be alone, nor, indeed, to let any of the younger members of the fourteen women be without a companion.

The youngest of the fourteen was Veronica Colton.

She was a tall, beautiful girl with great wistful eyes. During an early bombardment she had lost both her parents, and the shock had turned her from care-free, happy girlhood to questioning womanhood. Instinctively she had dressed and made herself look as plain as possible, but there was no hiding that startling beauty.

I could see that the sergeant was strangely attracted by her, but Veronica could not bear his presence.

My inseparable companion was Marita Valter. She did not know "a" from "b", but she was as brave as a lion and as strong as a horse, and her contempt of the whole German Army was comical to see. She was large in every way, having the large bones and flat, good-humoured, pleasant face of the typical Flemish *boerin*. Marita fondly imagined that she was looking after me, but I seemed to be the only one who could get her to suppress her supreme disdain of the "knubs".

She had had a successful encounter with the General commanding the division in our sector.

General Max von Wunder was a soldier of the old school. He believed in making the hardships and trials of war as comfortable as possible for . . . General Max von Wunder.

So amongst other amenities which surrounded the General in comfort, he, finding that most of the livestock in the area had already been confiscated by his predecessors, commandeered the whole of the milking-goat stock of the village. Besides being a sound soldier, he must have been a far-seeing tactician, for, having secured the female goat population of the district, he sent his orderlies scouring the area for a billy-goat. They found him. One Rufus.

Now Marita in an unguarded moment had boasted to one of the General's orderlies that she had been the "Cheese Queen" of the countryside. A few trembling moments in front of the fierce General, and Marita was installed, and, indeed, her pass was marked: "Frau i-c Goats".

Knowing Marita, I had an idea that the advent and close proximity of Rufus could not last long. "The wife in charge of goats" would speedily find a way to dispose of her command.

One night when our sergeant had somewhat relaxed his close vigilance, I missed her from our cellar refuge. About two hours afterwards I heard her creeping softly down the cellar stairs. In whispers she told me she had made her way across the fields to the tumble-down shed where her charges were. Still avoiding the highways and byways, she had taken the seven and, after an hour's walk towards Roulers, deposited one here and one there in farmsteads that she knew were inhabited. She also knew that as soon as the surprised, early-rising farmers caught sight of the precious animals they would be lovingly taken in and safely hidden away. Future raiding-parties would have no chance of finding them again.

Rufus she had left loose to work out his own destiny.

And a chuckling orderly shortly afterwards told Marita what had happened.

Rufus, early next morning, finding himself in unaccustomed freedom, and missing the presence of his mates, thought he would investigate.

Unfortunately he trod the wrong path.

After munching at the weeds in the General's

garden, he vaulted through an open window into a spacious room.

The General, in accordance with his usual custom, had taken as his headquarters a fine house, well sheltered from shell-fire, on the outskirts of Westroosebeke. He was an early riser, and on this particular morning he came down in his carpet-slippers to collect some papers from his orderly-room overlooking the garden.

He was aware of Rufus long before he got into the room, but when he bravely opened the door and found Rufus devouring the maps and plans of the next great attack, his rage knew no bounds. Now goats are no respecters of persons, and Rufus was no exception to the rule, for as soon as he saw the door flung open and a hostile figure standing there, he brushed past the General and nimbly mounted the stairs.

The General had forgotten to close his bedroom door, and Rufus, espying this haven of rest and refuge, trotted into the room.

In a hoarse parade voice the General called his orderlies and commanded them to remove the invader.

They found Rufus masticating the General's best parade hat.

After an unequal battle of twenty minutes Rufus was finally shot amongst the weeds.

The orderly also told Marita that the sight of Camembert cheese was enough to send the General on a month's sick-leave.

Marita was inclined to swagger after this resounding victory, and I had to use a great deal of tact in restraining her.

The snow fell steadily and covered the landscape.

It covered our scarred village, giving it almost the look of the village we knew in more peaceful, happy days. But an angry mumbling roar in the near west told that no peace or rest came to the tortured town of Ypres, or to the gallant ones defending the age-old city.

In middle December the rumbling roar along the Front appeared to slacken.

Perhaps, I thought, Christmas, the season the invaders set so much store on, would see a slackening off of hostilities.

I was right, for during the following days the village commenced to fill up with trench-soiled, weary troops returning from the Front to rest.

Even in those early days my intuition and perception had become very keen. The result of several deductions I had arrived at had surprised me with their correctness. Unconsciously I was fitting myself out for the dangerous rôle I was to undertake later.

As the troops streamed into the village our sergeant-guard was pressed into the service of settling the weary troops in billets. It was whilst on this work that he met an old comrade, Feldwebel Orthfeld, the non-commissioned officer in charge of No. 4 platoon.

Sergeant Schmittenn promptly allotted to the Feldwabel and his platoon the best billet in the place, the Tindenberg. The Tindenberg house was large, and stood on the highest point in the district, overlooking the broad Flemish flats sloping gently down to the Ypres railway and canal. The gables facing the Allied lines were roughly camouflaged with bushwood, and the whole building was surprisingly little damaged.

Henceforth most of our sergeant-guard's spare time

was spent in the company of the Feldwebel, he evidently divining that Sergeant Schmittenn knew things, and knew his way about. So the cavalryman had met a spirit after his own heart—more bold and cunning than himself, and one who cared for or feared nothing. With such a leader the braggart grew brave.

A few days before Christmas Eve Marita exploded.

"Those two are as thick as thieves. I've seen them following Veronica, and I'm sure they're up to some mischief. Flat-foot and the Tiger were a rotten pair at first, but they are the whole Royal Family to this lousy Schmittenn."

"Marita," I enjoined, "don't say a word, or otherwise if they see they are observed, they might do something desperate. Keep your anger to yourself, and let me handle the sergeant. He's very uncertain of me," I explained to the indignant Marita; "doesn't know how to fathom me, and I flatter myself that he's secretly afraid of me."

We were to learn of the clever plot in the morning of Christmas Eve.

Meanwhile the behaviour of the troops looked quite strange to us, for the festive season of Christmas is held much quieter in Belgium than in Germany.

The soldiers frisked about like overgrown puppies, we thought, and their enjoyment of the snow was immense. We gazed on in tolerant amusement, secretly laughing at what we thought was their childishness.

Surrounding the village were several beautiful forests of Christmas trees. For days parties of soldiers had made raids into the forests and dragged home huge Christmas trees, with yells of delight.

The trees were proudly erected in the billets, until every unit and platoon, no matter how small, had its spreading fir tree.

An angry officer of the artillery complained to the town commandant that the infantry were removing all the cover from his guns and transporting it to the village!

And No. 4 platoon had dragged home the largest and best. In addition, they had secured by some means innumerable small coloured candles, bright-coloured globes, and tinsel. The tree could be seen through the large window, and as the soldiers passed by they gazed on its hanging presents, gaily-coloured balls, and unlighted candles with reverent pleasure.

Christmas Eve night would see it in all its lighted glory, the envy of all other units. Feldwebel Orthfeld would hand out the presents.

Every morning the battalion postman was snowed under with parcels and letters. Great fat parcels arriving from the Fatherland with every conceivable delicacy. If there was no peace in the world, there was certainly plenty by the invaders that first Christmas.

But the only rift in the lute was Schnapps. *Schnapps* were at a distinct premium. In fact, unobtainable. Still, the soldiers were happy. The War would be over in three months. "The Watch on the Rhine" was lustily sung as "The Watch Beyond the Rhine", but the mumbling roar near us in the west, I thought, was like the growling, angry warning of the crouching lion, ready to spring.

We women told ourselves that the Allies would surely make a sweep forward, freeing us and our loved

ones from the iron heel of the invader. It was this fond hope which kept us hovering in the danger-zone, and there were innumerable souls in a similar position to ours.

The tide of battle had swept away their homes. They insisted on living as near to their old homesteads as possible, as near as the fortunes of battle would permit.

In this respect they were following an instinct as old as Time itself, possessed by all humans, and, indeed, by most animals. Scatter the nest, and they will flutter close around the violated spot, waiting and watching, until the danger seems past.

Countless thousands of refugees were afflicted by this instinct. They waited on the fringe of the Front, living as best they could, often in utter destitution, but always hoping against hope that the fortunes of war would free the beloved spot, hardly caring whether deliverance came through the advance of the hated invader, or a reverse, so long as they were allowed to settle down. Many families returned two or three times, only in the end to be blasted and blown out. But always was the hope springing eternal that the Allies would make the final great sweep which would free the land for ever of the grey hordes.

The doctor had offered me quarters at the hospital, but I refused, because my mother was anxious about my welfare, and then I was the only one amongst us who could speak fluent German, so outside the hours when I was employed at the hospital I threw in my lot with the others.

As Christmas approached the firing died down to fitful mutterings. The hospital was almost empty, so the

doctor and the town commandant took this opportunity to snatch two days' leave over Christmas. And many of the officers and personnel who could be spared went happily off.

Christmas Eve morning, Cavalry-sergeant Schmittenn informed us that he desired to speak to the whole group of fourteen. We grouped into the shell-torn front room of our shelter. With false fierceness he said:

"I've an order from the town commandant that this gang of women must be split up. Fourteen living in a hole like this might mean typhoid. Medical officers are overworked enough without typhoid getting in amongst the troops." Raising his voice, he continued, "There'll be eight of you left here. You and you"—pointing to four of the middle-aged women—"will go to Murrer's cellar; it's just as good as this one. And you and you"—pointing to Veronica and myself—"will billet in the Vries' cottage." Then, turning away, he ordered in a rage, "Have all your traps ready for five this evening."

Veronica's startled eyes sought mine. Mother was by my side. I felt her whole being stiffen in protest, and she made a movement as if she would address the sergeant. I pressed her arm to be quiet and say nothing. She took my warning. Anything said or done now would only lash him into a worse fury. I had already decided to meet him on his own ground.

I saw the clever trick immediately. The sergeant and the Feldwebel, knowing that the town commandant and the doctor and most of the other officers had gone on leave, had induced the town commandant's spineless clerk to stamp the order for our removal. Should we

appeal to any of the other officers, strangers to us, they would laugh at our fears, and the very word typhoid would sent them into a panic.

And the Vries' cottage was a lonely forest-keeper's home which had been abandoned in the beginning and had not been used as a billet, as it was in the forest and a considerable distance from the village.

I walked round to the commandant's orderly-room and quickly discovered that the town commandant had not signed the order. In fact, the order had only been stamped that morning.

Making my way to the hospital, I found Corporal-dresser Adolf Evandan reading a novel, his great form relaxed. I said to him: "Corporal Adolf, are you married?"

The corporal's huge face beamed. Pulling a bulky pocket-book from his inside tunic pocket, he proudly drew out a photograph and handed it to me. The photograph was of his wife, surrounded by four beautiful girls.

"My daughters," Corporal Adolf said simply.

"They are very beautiful," I admired, and, as all good fathers will, he elaborated further on the virtues of his children.

"You perhaps have seen young Veronica with the women here?" I asked. He nodded assent.

"Two months ago the poor girl lost both her parents in a bombardment of the village." And I went on to explain the sergeant's order of the morning, adding that I was well aware that the order was not signed by the commandant.

The corporal looked at me in dismay. "Ah, that's

Feldwebel Orthfeld. The other has not the brains. Up to a point Orthfeld will keep out of it to save his own skin." He mused. "I cannot go to any of these other officers; they would not listen to me, especially if typhoid is mentioned. And the Herr Doktor does not return until the day after Christmas." A pause, and then I saw he had made up his mind to follow out some plan.

"Fräulein, get all the women together into your shelter, and make it as early as possible, for the troops may get merry later on in the day. The sergeant comes for you at five o'clock, you say. All right; but don't get your things ready."

Walking over to a heavy medical box, he opened it and drew from it a revolver-holster. Taking the weapon from its cover, he examined it, found that it was loaded, and dropped it into his tunic-pocket.

"I'll come and sit with you all for an hour or two. I'll let the orderly know where I am."

I looked at his ungainly form, and regretted we were as poles apart.

Considerably reassured, I made my way out into the cold and wind-swept village streets. I had not walked many yards, when I was joined by Marita, who had been waiting for me. She was speechless with indignation. I told her of my interview with the corporal-dresser, and warned her to be in the cellar early. Whilst we were speaking we had passed soldiers crowding round a field-kitchen, happy as schoolboys at the sight of the extra rations. In broken Flemish they shouted jokes after Marita, and usually she gave as good as she received, for she possessed a broad, pungent wit which invariably

turned the joke against the soldier; but this time she just scowled. At last she exploded: "That dirty Prussian beats flying pigs, and what can a corporal do against a sergeant?"

We had arrived at the turning which led to our shelter, when we heard a warning, "Hi, Fräulein!" A dirty German soldier was waving us towards him. With great vigour he was pointing to a light handcart which stood by the side of the roadway almost hidden away amongst the rubble.

"Come," he insisted, as he saw our intention of passing on. "Come; it's good," at the same time making digging jabs with a dirty forefinger at the interior of the cart.

Alone, I would have taken no notice, but Marita belonged to the mentality of those who, catching sight of anything out of the ordinary, are drawn as if by a magic wire.

A charlatan, visiting the village, had only to roll up his sleeves, open and close the palms of his hands, and he had Marita's undivided attention from his first word to the last. Step by step, as if mesmerized, Marita walked over to the soldier, who continued his energetic movements even when the curious one had arrived. From his greasy appearance I placed him as a cook. The soldier uncovered the cart by removing a waterproof ground-sheet.

"*Schön*, eh, Fräulein?" he demanded, as Marita peeped in the cart, mouth wide open. She turned and beckoned to me, her eyes shining. I went over to look, and inside the cart were several delicious-looking hams, large Flemish pork-pies, and other appetizing viands.

My companion looked at the gratified soldier, and, pointing vigorously to herself, working her thumb and forefinger before her mouth, she asked, "For us, Kamerad?"

"*Ja*," he answered, "*für Schnapps*." I explained to the expectant Marita that the good things in the cart would be ours if she could deliver the *Schnapps*. I was well aware that she knew of a large stock of hidden liqueurs and wines. She had worked for well-to-do farmers, and they had always prided themselves on the excellence of their wine-cellar. Marita had helped to deposit the stock in some secure hiding-place before the farmer had fled the coming of the invaders.

Nothing would have induced her to disclose the spot to anyone.

Pointing to the ruined house where our shelter lay, she said :

"It's good, *Kamerad*, *Schnapps für das*." With a broad grin the soldier nodded his head. Turning to me she said : "Tell this 'knub' where to put this Christmas dinner. I'll be back in a few minutes." As she was hurrying away she called : "And see that he leaves every crumb."

At a sign from me the greasy one followed, and on arriving at the shattered building he deposited all the eatables in a corner of the ruined front room, carefully covering the food with sand-bags, and sat down to await the return of Marita. Some little time after she returned, and from her ample skirts she produced bottle after bottle of Kümmel and gin.

The beaming cook stowed away his precious catch, and in a grateful voice said to Marita, "For this, Fräulein,

I shall bring you a nice fat goose, and cooked, to-night." Her eyes shone, but, suspicious that the cook would not carry out his promise, she demanded, "What platoon, *Kamerad*?"

"Number Four, The Tindenberg," he answered, waving his arm in the direction of that billet.

"Well, I'm . . ." she exclaimed. "If I'd have known that, my Wurtemburg cherub, there'd have been no *Schnapps* for you. Well, never mind; you've got the spirits now, but don't forget the goose."

I explained to the soldier that Marita was worried about the delivery of the bird.

"Trust Cook Maes," he promised.

'Well," said Marita disgustedly, "I've given that precious Prussian pair most of Farmer Rennes' best spirit. If I'd have known, they'd have got rat-poison from me." But her face changed to comical contentment as she again surveyed the results of the barter, and with great satisfaction she added in an undertone, "I've got three nice bottles of light wine here for us," patting the side of her dress. "I'm sure Farmer Rennes would forgive me if he knew our rotten position."

"We had better hide our store well from friend Schmittenn," I warned.

"Trust me," Marita returned. "What he'll get after I've hid it won't keep him busy very long."

We walked down the cellar stairs and found most of the women had returned, and Marita, like a true campaigner, brought forth the pies and the wine.

As we were enjoying our repast I explained to those who had received the order for removal not to worry about putting their things together. Veronica was

overjoyed, thinking everything had been arranged for us to remain as before. I had not the courage to enlighten her, knowing that we still had a struggle to come.

Dusk had turned into night, and the covered candle had just been lit, when a stumbling noise on the stairs heralded the coming of the corporal.

As he sat himself down he whispered to me:

"I've had a walk round the village, and friend Schmittenn is with Number Four platoon, drinking. They've found a drink-dump somewhere, so I don't expect he'll be here for some time yet, as I believe Orthfeld will hand out the gifts to his platoon when the tree is lit."

Although Corporal Evandan looked happy at the ordeal in front of him, I did not feel at all at my ease. I knew the almost slavish discipline of the German Army. The corporal of the hospital ordering out one of superior rank might pass in the hospital, but this was a different matter altogether. A corporal defying a sergeant in the course of carrying out his duty was different, and might be made into a very serious crime.

However, he seemed to be perfectly at his ease, and he gratefully accepted the meal proffered by Marita.

That the sergeant would not succeed in separating our group that night I was sure. And, after all, it was only time the corporal was playing for.

At intervals we heard shouting and singing and a little brawling.

Although we were unaccustomed to such a relaxed guard, we all thought it wiser to remain in the shelter. Marita grumbled once or twice.

"This will always happen on a nice, quiet, heavenly

night; some silly sergeant is sure to get ideas into his thick head."

After the continuous roar of the last few months, the deathlike stillness seemed more portentous than the appalling noise of the Front in boiling action.

With startling suddenness we heard the whining shriek of heavy shells.

Crash! Cr-ash! Crump! They seemed to land just outside the house, and as plaster fell from the ceiling the candle was shocked out. The corporal struck a match, but paused a moment as we all heard a stumbling noise on the stairs. He hurriedly applied the match to the candle, and I saw his hand go swiftly to his tunic-pocket, but his hand dropped to his side when he saw who the intruder was.

The shelling had ceased with the same startling suddenness as it had commenced, and in deathly stillness an ashen-pale orderly filled up the doorway.

"Come, my corporal," was all he could gasp. "Number Four platoon."

Making a sign for me to follow him, the corporal quickly mounted the stairs, and, ignoring the startled looks of the other women, I followed, dimly divining what had happened.

"Please go to the hospital, Fräulein. I'm going to see how bad it is. I'm afraid we'll have our hands full to-night."

As I made my way to the hospital I passed the stretcher-bearers carrying a groaning burden.

On reaching the hospital I found orderlies were on duty, and everything ready for the reception of the wounded.

On the first stretcher brought in lay Sergeant Schmittenn. His was a hopeless plight.

"What happened?" I demanded of one of the stretcher-bearers who stood by the bedside. He was chewing at the stump of a cheroot, and as I worked away on the sorely stricken sergeant the stretcher-bearer in an aggressive tone of voice explained.

No. 4 platoon were all merry. Where they got the drink from, only the devil knew, and when the time came to hand out the gifts, all the candles were lit, but the fuddled Feldwebel had forgotten to order the covering up of the window.

The twinkling window with a hundred lights must have amused every one of the "Tommies" sitting in the broad Ypres valley. It must have been observed for miles around, and no self-respecting Allied artillery observation officer could be excused for resisting the offer of such an open target.

He wound up by saying, "The sergeant was just about to leave; he stood on the doorstep of the Tindenberg, and he got one practically to himself. That crew might have got the whole place blown to atoms with their drunken forgetfulness," he grumbled.

Corporal Evandan returned and confirmed the stretcher-bearer's story. Nearly every shell had been a direct hit. It was a miracle that anyone was left alive to tell what had occurred. The Feldwebel and seven men killed, the sergeant and most of the remainder of the platoon wounded. The wounded were being rapidly brought in, and we did all we could to make them comfortable until the Red Cross ambulances arrived. They would be evacuated immediately to the Roulers Hospital.

I was dreadfully weary as I returned to our cellar shelter.

Suddenly I heard cheering and singing in the village. Twelve o'clock had just passed; it was Christmas morning. One bright soldier had hung various-sized empty brass shell-cases on a line, and with two bayonets was playing a Christmas peal on the improvised bells. Perhaps, I thought, this man was a bell-ringer in some peaceful German village. "Peace on earth . . ." crossed my weary brain. Then the ringer began to play triumphantly the tune of "The Watch on the Rhine".

My thoughts went back to Sergeant Schmittenn. "In the midst of life we are in death." The sergeant had been too far gone to speak, but I fancied he had recognized me as I worked trying to relieve his pain. The tightly drawn skin and deathly pallor of his face told only too plainly the nearness of his end.

If his pain-racked eyes sought mine for forgiveness, they were answered, for he was already forgiven, and I was comforted by the thought that men so near to death were given the divine power of understanding and knowing everything.

Marita was waiting up for me. She had been out and discovered for herself the result of the shelling.

"Depend on Cook Maes," she greeted me, her voice full of disgust. "These 'knubs' are all the same, high and low; you can't depend on *one*. And," she added plaintively, "our Christmas goose has gone up in smoke, too. Whatever Farmer Rennie will say about his best spirits, I don't know."

"And I don't care, Marita." And before I fell into

exhausted sleep I murmured, "Perhaps he'd be pleased . . . if he knew all!"

The Christmas morning was extremely quiet, and, although tired after the stress of the previous day, I left our cellar shelter early. Unconsciously I avoided the hospital and found myself in the house that we had taken possession of.

The reaction from violent strife to deathly stillness brought back fresh hope to the sorely tried hearts of the remaining women in the village. We all began to busy ourselves in little household tasks which a few short days before we never dreamt of attempting again. The sense of safety and relief drove us back to something approaching our normal lives, and for a few tragic happy hours we lived the everyday routine, dear to every woman's heart, of pre-invasion days.

The house which mother and I had moved into was a shambles, so for an hour or two we slaved away, straightening a room or two to make the place habitable. Such is the adaptability of most humans, and it is really astonishing what the frail mind and body of man can do to meet and conquer the most terrible conditions and travails. Here we were working away, almost happily, at the tasks which but a few weeks before had been our daily round, but which the sound of marching feet and the vicious bark of guns had rudely shattered. While still a lurking fear overshadowed us all that it was all make-believe and useless, we actually persuaded ourselves that future days would bring less strife. Under such conditions human nature will always seek to find excuses to deceive itself, and that it would all be futile we would not admit even to ourselves. I suppose

the wish is father to the thought and mother to the hope.

Three young soldiers, the overflow from a billet too small for their platoon, had found their way into the house. They ate and slept in a back room. Two of the boys volunteered to help us put the house in some kind of order. They were boys just from college, and one of them told me that he had only dined at his parents' table once. That was the night before he left for the Front. He was seventeen years of age! The work of straightening the house was great fun to them.

One said, "This room, Mother, would look the business with a Sukure carpet and two small exquisite Van Dyck pictures."

"Fit for an officer," chimed in the other.

"Or a schoolmaster," surmised the veteran of seventeen. "Ho, ho! Just imagine Smeltz being here." And at the thought of their late schoolmaster being with them they doubled up in merriment.

"Now, then, Halensen, which is the right side of a brush to sweep with?" he asked, in what I supposed was the voice of his teacher.

The other asked, with the same comic croak, "How would you carry a man on an oblong square, shot through the stomach?"

"How many soldiers eat from a loaf in Vanala?" countered the other.

And then they began to look at each other with large, questioning eyes, wondering what it was all about. What did it mean? Laughter was on their lips, but bitterness was in their hearts. The awful shambles had worn off the first patriotic high endeavour. They should

have been told what was in store for them in the holocaust, or even forbidden to take part, for they were still schoolboys. One had a great collection of souvenirs: French soldiers' numbers and British soldiers' cap-badges. The other was the more practical soldier, for he showed me the shining cavalry-boots of Sergeant Schmittenn. They were at least two sizes too large for the new owner, but, he explained, with his feet wrapped in cotton-wool the boots would fit, and were just the thing for the cold weather in the trenches. He had also the sergeant's gleaming rifle, which I recognized by its black waterproof cover over the magazine. He was very proud of his captures from the hospital stores.

The troops were in a gay mood. The tragedy of No. 4 platoon was already forgotten. Plenty of good rations, abundance of cigars and tobacco, and a quiet Front. The day was fine, with a shining, smiling sun on the glistening thin cover of snow. The atmosphere gave us all the feeling of another and happier world.

The invaders imagined that in some magic way the war would soon be victoriously over, and certainly before the spring they would all return to a Fatherland just as the countryside was tenderly budding out into fresh life.

A fit setting to the return of the conquering heroes.

The first Christmas had many illusions, but none which were to receive such shattering treatment as this one, for the pause was just a quick intake of breath on the part of the combatants to nerve themselves on to greater effort, as a runner will before he makes his final dash for the tape.

A hospital orderly stood in the kitchen, and he

asked me to go to the hospital at once. As I donned my cape I wondered what could have happened. I hurried round to the building, and was met by the smiling face of Corporal Evandan. With a broad grin he explained.

"I have often heard how anxious you have been to visit your father in Roulers. Well, I made a visit to the corporal in the commandant's office, and I induced him to sign and stamp a day-pass for you to visit Roulers to-day. He gave the pass," the corporal-dresser said with a wink, "on condition that I did not mention to the commandant the little arrangement Sergeant Schmittenn had induced him to sign. The corporal also hopes that the pass will help you to forget the incident. In any case, this will give you an opportunity of seeing your father, if only for a few hours."

I was speechless with gratitude for the corporal's thoughtfulness. He went on, before I had time to thank him, "An ambulance is going to Roulers in a few moments with the last of the wounded, and the driver does not object to you riding with him. He seems to know where the refugees are billeted in Roulers, so altogether you are in great luck, sister."

I breathlessly thanked good-hearted Corporal Evandan as he accompanied me to the door.

"Here you are, driver. Here's your passenger," he said to a short, stocky soldier who stood by a Red Cross ambulance.

I asked the driver: "Would you mind waiting just a few moments? I must let my mother know."

The driver in a slow, quiet voice replied, "That's all right, Fräulein. But make it as quick as you can."

I rushed round to our cellar shelter first, and looted

as much of Marita's store as I could carry, and then went round to mother and told her of my good fortune. She was overjoyed, and gave me all kinds of instructions and messages—instructions which I, of course, promptly forgot.

I knew how happy my parent would be to see me, and to hear of mother's safety. Father was some years senior to my mother, and was a lovable, dependable kind of a man, and he must have missed his womenfolk terribly, for I knew the anxiety and events of the invasion had rapidly aged him.

As I sat down beside the driver, he handed to me an old woollen cover for my knees, but I did not feel the bitter cold, as I was burning with excitement. As we were driven rapidly over the roads to Roulers I asked him:

"Are you German?" And he answered me in French, in his slow, quiet voice:

"No, mademoiselle, I am Alsatian."

"Ah!" I exclaimed. "That explains much."

This was my first meeting with Alphonse Le Coutrier, the Alsatian.

Little did I think then that with this short, stocky-looking soldier I was to take part in hairbreadth escapes from death, time after time, and share adventures stranger than the wildest flights of fiction.

In the coming four years' bitter struggle the town of Roulers, nestling behind at the foot of the Passchendaele ridges, was to be an all important railhead for the invaders.

This first Christmas Day it bore a festive look, and I was amazed that a few short kilometres could make such a vast difference in the lives of both civilian and soldier.

Already halls and large rooms had been requisitioned for the troops, and German concert parties sang and played to enthusiastic soldier audiences, for be it said the civilians kept strictly away. With the help of the quiet Alsatian I quickly discovered where the refugees were quartered, and before the good-natured ambulance-driver left me I thanked him for his kindness. But my disappointment was keen when I found I could not discover my parent. At last a village friend of his told me that a few days previously a field gendarme had arrested my parent for some venial offence.

Almost without a hearing father had been condemned to three weeks' imprisonment. At first a wave of shame swept over me at the thought that anyone belonging to us could be tainted with "prison", forgetting that the same civil code did not now exist as before. Then came the reaction. Burning anger against the senseless brutality that could send such an inoffensive man as my parent to prison for some trivial mistake. Poor Marita's provisions I handed to the civilian and, with burning indignation against the invader, walked the long journey back to Westroosebeke. Mother, too, was disappointed and broken-hearted. However, the time came quickly when, as a civilian, had you not seen the inside of a German prison, "there was something the matter with you". Father and those first punished ones only anticipated the coming "fashion".

Early in January the battle flared up again and the Allies seemed to creep ever closer and closer. Shells rained into the village, and two of the women were slightly wounded. Several times I had narrow escapes, and one day, after an intensive bombardment, the

town commandant sent for me and said, "Fräulein, I have given orders that all you women are to be evacuated back to Roulers. In your case both the medical officer and myself will strongly recommend you to the hospital authorities at Roulers." Under escort next day, with our few miserable belongings, we took our last look on the beautiful village of our childhood, for its disappearance was to be utter and complete.

Two events of supreme importance were to happen quickly after our arrival in Roulers. Gratefully the hospital authorities at Roulers accepted my offer of help and, remembering my snub when I had offered to nurse the wounded prisoners of war, this time made no stipulation. The medical officer at Westroosebeke had said to me, "Fräulein, the stricken have no nationality to we doctors!"

Then the mysterious appearance of Lucelle Deldonch, my promise to her to spy and work for the British Intelligence, and the instant success of my initial attempts. All nerved me on to greater efforts, and very soon I was to discover intrepid allies in the dangerous work.

CHAPTER III

ALPHONSE LE COUTRIER

ALPHONSE LE COUTRIER was born in Mulhouse, Alsace. He lost his father whilst still a child, and the boy was taken and tenderly cared for by a doting grandfather, old René Le Coutrier.

At the old man's knee young Alphonse heard the stories and sympathies which, before he reached school age, made France the country of the boy's affections. For the fiery old Le Coutrier had shouldered his pack for *la belle France* in the disastrous war of 1870. Alphonse, even in those early days, was a romancer and mystic, and was never tired of hearing the old warrior relate the deathless courage and misfortunes of those tragic days in the history of his beloved France.

For the lad's edification the cunning old man turned every humiliating defeat into a moral victory for France, and always, after recounting some breathless adventure, he would wind up with the pious prophecy that one day not far distant, please the Virgin, would see the final and complete collapse of the "enemy within the gates" of Alsace.

On every opportunity he took the boy roaming over the border into the beautiful France of his dreams, but his disappointment was almost unbearable, and his

contempt hard to conceal from the grandson he had set so much store by, when that youth informed the old firebrand that his yearnings were irrevocably turned towards a monastic life.

The grandfather begged of the youth to first take his studies in Louvain, and in that age-honoured temple of learning the young man commenced his studies, his eyes for ever on that serene life his soul craved.

Alphonse fell sick—the result of overwork, the wise-head medical men said—and Alphonse found himself back again with his grandfather, the old man now more silent and more watchful. Frequent roamings over the border brought the youth back to robust health, but the historical distortions of old Le Coutrier were left severely alone. Alphonse had read and formed his own opinions, but his grandfather, wise in his age, discovered in the boy a burning and romantic love for France. Alphonse was preparing to go to a monastery in Germany when, with the suddenness of a thunderbolt, the rumours of war and the nations' warlike preparations swept the world.

The old man turned a tired but eager, burning face to his grandson. Would his almost abandoned dreams be fulfilled by seeing the boy he loved with all his soul don the sky-blue uniform of France?

He has ample time to clear out, thought the cunning old man. I myself will go to Paris. Alphonse is sure to follow.

But in Paris the disgusted grandfather, for the second time a sorely disappointed man, learned that his boy had been conscripted into the ranks of the hated German. His boy an enemy of France!

But Alphonse's choice was deliberate. He foresaw he would have far greater opportunity of serving the country of his affections in the rôle he would adopt than by joining her fighting ranks.

Reporting at the German Army Headquarters, he pleaded a non-combatant's rights, but volunteered to drive a Red Cross ambulance. After a deal of red-tape had been pulled, this request was acceded to, and the soldier who was not a soldier found himself drafted to the other extreme part of the far-flung front, in Flanders, attached to the Wurtemburg Army Field General Hospital.

Alphonse had secured the rôle he desired, and a dangerous, clever spy was henceforth to work against the military Junkers he so much despised.

His was a gain to the Intelligence Service, but a loss to the fighting one, for I am certain, had he decided otherwise, his would have undoubtedly been a leading figure in the armies of France.

Short and stocky, with absolutely undistinguished features, slow of speech, but a brain quick and razor-edged, and a courage that laughed at danger and scorned death.

I think, of all that I met in my activities, Alphonse Le Coutrier filled in every respect the conception of a perfect spy.

That Christmas morning in 1914 when, in French, he answered my enquiry, "I am an Alsatian, mademoiselle," his quiet, friendly voice invisibly drew my sympathies towards him. Here, I thought, is an enemy one could bear; but little did I dream that we should meet again and share adventures which were

to bring us face to face with death as a common occurrence.

When I took up my duties at the Roulers hospital I frequently saw him with his Red Cross ambulance, but never by a look or a nod of recognition did he appear to have noticed he had seen me before.

His one peculiarity was the holding of his trouser-leg by the cloth with his right hand, as if holding a gown, as he strolled along, never seeming to be in a hurry.

On his discovering the nature of my activities through old Canteen Ma and the quartermaster-sergeant of the Roulers canteen, we quickly became appreciative and fast friends. . . .

No. 63 had been shot, and as Canteen Ma had not shown her portly presence for nearly two weeks, the channels for disposing of our information were for the moment closed.

Something vital must have been discovered in the rooms of the shot No. 63, as a veritable reign of terror commenced in the town, and spy-hunting became a mania in the area; for spy-catching was a profitable business to the German Secret Service agents and troops. He who caused a spy to be convicted received that which was most dear to the heart of the German rank-and-file: Firstly, Iron Cross, 1st class; secondly, immediate promotion; thirdly, a Base job.

Amongst the civilians, in café or in home, nothing else was discussed, and the more faint-hearted ones murmured against the activities of these mysterious spies. Thinking of their own poor skins, they exclaimed, "Are not conditions terrible enough without these spy

activities bringing down extra punishments on our innocent heads?" But they failed to see that the work, if it accomplished nothing else, was rattling the "bully", and a rattled bully, although vicious, is a beaten being.

I was full of nerves myself. A sudden step behind me in the hospital, I had to summon all my will-power to prevent myself from screaming aloud; or the tramp, tramp of a squad of soldiers at night on the cobble-stones in front of our home caused me to tremble like a leaf for hours.

I heard the name of "Laura" whispered several times, and one breath-taking second nearly unnerved me altogether. A sergeant in the hospital suddenly asked, laughingly, "Fräulein, are you Laura?"

Not turning my head, I hastily answered, "No; you will probably find the person is a Prussian General, if he's ever discovered, sergeant," remembering the bet an officer once made in my presence.

The sergeant chuckled and remarked, "Perhaps you are not far wrong, Fräulein."

Then came a thunderbolt which required all our fortitude to keep wits and courage together.

It was Alphonse who brought the news, and it was he who, calm and unhurried, parried the terrible danger. He stole in by the rear end of the café at midnight, a very unusual occurrence with him, and I knew by his demeanour that some disaster threatened.

"Sister," he said, with a very grave face, "I've got to do something quickly. I've heard news to-day which, I think, if we don't move sharp may turn serious for all of us." Alphonse went on to explain.

Agnes Verbrey, the good-looking daughter of the owner of a busy cigar-stores opposite the station, was friendly with Gustav Woolf, a German plain-clothes Secret Service agent. Billeted in Roulers, he was attached to Army Headquarters Intelligence Staff at Thielt. We were aware that he was a dangerous, capable agent.

Agnes was a courageous, intelligent girl, and she allowed the little pleasantries of the detective to develop. Every morning, when his duty did not take him from the town, he would arrive at the cigar store carrying a single rose, which he would gracefully hand to Agnes, with some suitable compliment, at the same time ordering his cigar stock for the day.

Now it was Alphonse's rule to study the little weaknesses and foibles of the counter-espionage agents, and the would-be gallant had his movements, almost his every word, faithfully passed on by the clever Agnes.

German Secret Service agents, for their own carousals, avoided the cafés and public places, so the detective had requested Agnes, as a special favour to him, to put at his disposal a back sitting-room for one afternoon. He required it, he said, to give a farewell bottle and a cigar to an old comrade who was about to leave the Army Intelligence Headquarters to take up a dangerous mission in another area. After a little demur, Agnes managed to obtain the consent of her parents to the arrangement. The happy detective intimated that Agnes could supply the cigars, and the two agents would bring or send along their own wines and what food could be obtained.

One afternoon the detective arrived with two roses

and Comrade George Prassek. Prassek we knew very well, as he spoke Flemish fluently, but that was all we knew to his good.

The two made themselves comfortable in the back sitting-room and prepared to drink and toast themselves to future successes in the difficult art of spy-catching. Agnes had promised, so far as the call of the store allowed, to wait on and serve the two comrades so soon to be parted.

They were both, at first, rather reticent, but Agnes, from snatches of conversation, divined that the mission of Comrade Prassek would be of infinite interest to the intrepid band of spies in the Roulers area.

Once, when the girl was in the room, Gustav Woolf turned to her and, in a sentimental voice, said, "Agnes, my rose, my Kamerad George Prassek is about to leave us. You will drink a glass to his success, for when he returns he will be loaded with honours."

Comrade Prassek smirked, and in a boastful burst said, "After I've cleared up this nest of rats, things should be easier for you in this treacherous district; so, my Gustav, you cannot expect me to return to this hole. I shall demand a Base job round Brussels. There a man can live. Here, life is just existence."

Agnes's curiosity was sufficiently aroused to make her determined to discover the destination and kind of mission Prassek had been detailed for. She drank the wine, making suitable wishes, excused herself and withdrew.

As the two comrades drank their last bottles together, their tongues became loosened, and their intentions boastful, so Agnes gave a very attentive ear to the door,

and she discovered this: In the rooms of No. 63 had been found the code, instructions for dispatching information to the headquarters bureau at Eecloo, but no address was mentioned. In addition were various numbers, and the name in code of "Laura". The name, of course, represented myself, and the numbers my accomplices. Luckily everything found was in the writing of No. 63. The spy-catching mania we had suffered, and were still suffering from, was now sufficiently explained to me, and I was somewhat relieved to find that so little was known, for without the key in Eecloo being discovered, it would be impossible for the detectives to know who "Laura" was, or whom the numbers represented.

But Alphonse continued the tale of Agnes. Prassek, with his fluent knowledge of Flemish, was to disappear from the district, but was to reappear in another district, with forged passport complete, and pose as a fugitive Flemish workman anxious to cross the Dutch frontier. He was to assert his burning desire to join the Belgian Army, and Eecloo would be the organization Prassek would endeavour to get into touch with. Eecloo! Where the headquarters of our organization was situated, both for passing over the frontier vital information and hard-pressed fugitives!

The two agents left the stores and Agnes in complete contentment with themselves and the War in general.

If Prassek was allowed to worm his way into the Eecloo organization there would be no end of the tale of disaster. A bull in a china shop would be nothing to the damage Prassek could do, and the method he was

to pursue and excuse held forth was easily the quickest way of gaining the confidence of the bureau.

But here we were without the help of Canteen Ma or No. 63.

In the dim light of the flickering candle Alphonse looked at me, and his face was set as grim as death.

"Sister, before I came here I thought of a plan. A little depends on how quickly Stephan can work, but I think he will be able to manage all right, as he's in the good graces of his Colonel." Alphonse went on to explain: "As we Alsatians are not trusted by our Prussian comrades-in-arms, so we are never allowed to return to our homeland on leave. We must ask for another point of the compass, and the farther the point is from our homes the better the Prussian likes it, and the more likely we are to obtain permission to spend a few days enjoying other scenery than our own homeland. I've never asked for leave up to date, but I'm going to to-morrow, or, to be precise, to-day morning. I have a comrade in a Ghent hospital; him I am anxious to visit. I don't know him yet, but Stephan will be able to give me a name of some soldier lying there. Stephan will also lay my pass and request before his Colonel, and Stephan must see that it's signed immediately. I must also get this news over of that movement. I shall hand it over to a responsible agent, for *that cannot wait.*"

Alphonse was referring to great preparations we had observed moving west towards the coast. Battalion after battalion had marched past on the outskirts of the town, as if making a great detour. All marks on the troops and transport were carefully covered, but Alphonse had been able to get into conversation with two stragglers,

and had recognized them for "storm troops". The transport had strange-looking appliances in tow, and again, without much difficulty, he had found out that these were the new flame-throwers. In addition, the Courtrai-Brussels railway, which made a loop detour similar to a crescent round the town of Roulers, was chock-a-block with pontoon-bridge material and the bulky paraphernalia of many observation-balloons. All, evidently, reinforcements for the Marines, who were holding the coast sector.

"I cannot rest," said Alphonse urgently, "until I have made some attempt to warn our relations. Sister, I don't think I shall be long away, but even so, should old Romany appear, ask her to put someone at my call in case of need. Meanwhile, you keep quiet here, sister; do nothing rash. Nobody knows, or as yet dreams, who you are."

My heart gave a great bound of relief, for I was certain if Alphonse could get away in time Prassek would stand small chance of destroying us.

"What was the name of that tall runner who came once to you, sister?"

"Of course," I said, "you will want to know where to find him." I told Alphonse that the cottage of Jan van Candalaere was a small dwelling on the junction of the Eecloo-Lembeke road. He could not mistake it, for it stood alone. I said, "Only approach the place at night."

"Prassek has forty-eight hours' start, but I have this advantage: he does not know me by sight, but I know him," Alphonse mused.

Ghent would not see Alphonse, but the small

country town of Eecloo would, and I felt it in my heart to be sorry for George Prassek's dreams of a Base job.

Stephan stopped me as I was returning from the hospital, and in a matter-of-fact voice said, "Our Alsatian has gone to visit a sick comrade in Ghent this morning. He will be back by Monday. If he's not, he'll be for the mat, in front of the Colonel. You know, that Alsatian is good at arranging Base jobs for his pals."

I smiled, and then Stephan gave me the news I was most anxious in all the world at the moment to hear. He was biting at a large apple. "That old Romany certainly gets hold of some wonderful fruit. Do you know, she sold out before eleven o'clock this morning." So Canteen Ma was about again.

I hurried home, and my mother, all smiles, told me that Canteen Ma, with her great, smiling, ruddy face, had stood outside the door of the café, selling her wares. She told everyone around that she had been laid up with influenza, and she accused the soldiers crowding around her of stopping the war because she had been laid up. My mother had managed to slip her my request for help in case Alphonse needed it. It seemed like ordinary times to hear of bluff Canteen Ma again. But my heart was heavy with anxiety for the outcome of the Alsatian's daring mission.

Obeying the order of Alphonse, I remained perfectly quiet during the next few days, but on the Monday morning I could not work. I pleaded a sick headache, and the Oberartz let me return home. Unable to keep still, I strained my eyes looking at every figure passing in the square.

Late in the afternoon, after an age of waiting, to my unutterable relief I beheld the unhurried slouch and characteristic holding of the gown of Alphonse! No mother ever beheld her son return safely from the trenches with greater relief and joy than I beheld the stocky figure of Alphonse.

I did not get an opportunity to speak to him for three days, but I was content. I knew if there had been any urgent necessity Alphonse would have come. That was the essence of his faith in me. He never questioned that I would understand that events had straightened themselves out for us. But I heard the whole story from him later.

Without any difficulty, Alphonse reached Eecloo the same evening. Scorning the roundabout train journey, he "jumped" ambulances and lorries, all the time being mortally afraid that he would not arrive in the district before Prassek had found some fatal clues which might have been already reported to that agent's chiefs.

The dusk was deepening as he arrived in the small country town of Eecloo. Walking through to the Lambeke road, he readily recognized the cottage of Jan van Candalaere, but against the wall near the door was the bicycle of a feld-gendarme, so Alphonse decided to wait until this unwelcome visitor departed. He was troubled. Had Jan been raided already? This would make matters desperately unpleasant, thought Alphonse as he sat himself down some distance from the door in a friendly clump of bushes on the opposite side of the road. Nobody passing along the road could see

him in his hiding-place, but he could watch every movement from the cottage.

After a long wait, at last the scion of law and order came out noisily and somewhat unsteadily mounted his bicycle. Alphonse immediately understood, and with the understanding was great relief. Jan mixed his work as a runner with selling illicit Schnapps. Now that there was no game left for the poacher he must needs dabble in some other illegal pursuit.

Alphonse approached the door and knocked. A great, tall figure, absolutely unafraid, flung open the door and stood threateningly looking at the stocky figure of the soldier.

"What want ye?" demanded the giant in the doorway.

"Comrade, I've lost my way. I'm looking for the cottage of Jan van Candelaere," returned Alphonse meekly.

"Oh, you are, are you? And what will my little comrade do with Jan van Candelaere's cottage when he finds it?" asked the imperturbable Jan.

Alphonse whispered, "Try to sell some safety-pins to the good Jan's wife."

Jan moved his great form sideways, leaving just enough room for Alphonse to pass. "Come in, come in. Wife, put out a plate and a glass for a friend," called Jan in a hearty voice, and closing the door, not before he had had a good look up and down the road, he hobbled over and sat himself down on a chair near a long Flemish stove.

A tall, buxom woman, built on the same generous scale as her husband, busied herself preparing a meal

for the famished Alphonse, who, with a pang of disappointment, noticed that the poacher had a huge, fresh-looking bandage wrapped round his foot.

"Eat first; we'll see what we can do for you afterwards," ordered Jan.

Alphonse gratefully attacked the meal, and not a word was spoken.

"A thimble of Schnapps, comrade?" enquired Jan, after Alphonse had finished.

"*Non, merci,*" returned Alphonse.

The poacher looked with considerable surprise at a soldier refusing such heaven-sent comforts. "Ha! Well, each one to his taste. Now, comrade, the birds are coming over. Up with the gun and fire away."

Alphonse rightly understood this injunction to mean that he was being asked the object of his call, so without loss of time he told of Prassek and his plot. As he progressed with the denouncement he saw the face of the hearty Jan change until it took on the terrible look of the hunter about to seize his prey. The only remark he made was to his wife. "Wife, these things will always happen when I've broken my foot. When the 'knubs' are beaten, my head'll be broken, I suppose."

The woman waited until Alphonse had finished, and, with startled eyes, she asked:

"Soldier, what was this clever one like?"

Alphonse described Prassek minutely.

"Ha! There, that clever one was here to-day!" she said, as Jan nearly fell out of his chair with surprise. "Jan, here, was away to the doctor's with his foot. This afternoon a tired Flemish workman came in and

sat himself down there"—pointing to the chair that the bulky form of Jan filled.

Jan's eyes opened wider and wider in astonishment. Taking his very own chair! At this affront Alphonse thought the poacher would collapse from apoplexy.

"But, soldier," continued the woman, taking no notice of her husband's surprise, "in these days we have to be careful, so I let him say and do, and I watched as I washed. He told me the usual tale of being forced by the 'knubs' to work at the Front, building concrete dug-outs. He had skipped, as two of his comrades were blown to bits in a sudden bombardment. What that clever one said against the 'knubs' is beyond belief, but I see now why he knows them so well! At the end of his lovely tale he said quietly that, if he could find a way, he was going over the frontier to join the Belgian Army. I said nothing, just nodded my head like a stupid ass, because I was puzzled." She paused, mentally collecting her suspicions of the afternoon. "I've sat with Jan here near thirty years, day in day out, and you understand, soldier, in the old days we had many good friends to drop in to see us. The men take a glass and smoke a pipe. Always the pipe. The pipe is one of the biggest comforts in a Flemish man's life, and Jan and his pipe are never separated. I've seen it filled and emptied so often it's second nature to me, for I can tell the humour Jan is in the way the pipe pulls. Well, *when a Flemish man fills his pipe, he always builds a dome of tobacco over the bowl and lights it upside down; but this clever one just filled his pipe, without the dome, and lit it bowl upwards.* I thought, better let Jan have a look at you first, my cherub."

The admiration on Jan's face was comical to see as his wife unfolded her tale of watchfulness. He was speechless, and could only look at Alphonse, nodding his great head towards his good wife in token of his unbounded admiration.

"He's coming again to-morrow, to ask Jan if any jobs can be found hereabouts," she told the two interested listeners.

Alphonse heaved a sigh of infinite relief. Prassek had not got too far as yet. In a way Jan's damaged foot had been a godsend, although it put *hors de combat* one extremely useful person. At last Jan found his voice:

"I'll job him! I'll job him!" was all he could get out, time after time. And then he grimly added, "He'll go over the frontier all right, all right! But there won't be any barbed wire to stop *him*! Oh no, soldier; leave the clever one to me!"

Alphonse, having obtained the complete confidence of the good-natured couple, introduced the subject of his information and the urgency of getting it "over".

Jan shook his head. "For two or three days it can't be done. I'm finished for weeks, and the others are away. Two have disappeared in four weeks. The dirty patrols got them, and we hear nothing of them again. We'll meet them up above, perhaps, some time."

Alphonse understood the meaning. Jan meant heaven. The runners had been captured and shot by the patrols.

Alphonse asked, "Could I not go to the wire myself? If given instructions, I am sure I could find my way,

and, as I am dressed as a German soldier, I'd stand much more chance of getting through."

Jan shouted with laughter until the rafters in the cottage rang.

"Soldier, do you think it's a walk like the little misses go to Sunday vespers? Ho, ho!" laughed Jan. "A German soldier! A 'knub'! Why, we've forgotten that trick months ago"; and as he wiped his eyes he continued seriously, "There's been dozens shot as German soldiers, aye, and as officers, too. Those dirty rats shoot first and investigate afterwards. Listen, comrade. When I was eight years old, my old one kicked me out of the house every night, fine, rain or snow. 'Don't come back here until you have two brace of hare and three brace of rabbit,' he ordered. I've been a night poacher for more years than I care to think of. It's in my blood now; I must go out now and then. And I know every blade of grass in this district for thirty kilometres around. But look at that"—pointing to his hair, a stiff, unruly mop, but glistening steely-white—"that's through going to the wire."

"Still, I'm determined to try," said Alphonse, firmly and quietly.

Jan looked at his wife as if for guidance. There must have been consent on her face, for in a different tone he said:

"All right. But you will have to take him over to Mynheer Verhagen."

The woman nodded. Alphonse, although weary to death, protested against Jan's wife troubling herself to guide him to the house of Verhagen.

"It's a farm, and you'd never find it even in daytime,"

she said quietly. "Someone must go with you from here. You could never get to see him alone."

Brut Verhagen was the principal agent in the district, and everything went through his hands. Alphonse's heart beat a little quicker; he knew he was about to meet one of the leading figures of the Intelligence Service in occupied Belgium.

"Comrade," warned Jan, as his wife was making ready for the journey, "do everything she says without question. She's like me, she can smell patrols. And leave the clever one to me. You can tell Mynheer Verhagen he's in my hands. The old one will be satisfied when he hears that, eh, wife?"

As they left the kitchen, Jan snuffed out the light. The woman led the way out, and, pulling her shawl tightly round her figure, she whispered to Alphonse, "Follow me, step with step. When you see me bend down, you do the same." She glided away like a flickering shadow with extraordinary quickness, direct over the fields, taking advantage of every spot of cover.

Alphonse had a second sense at night (which I had been thankful and grateful for on more than one occasion), but Jan's wife, notwithstanding her bulk, was never once more than a faint shadow, and he had to strain every faculty to keep the vanishing shadow in sight. Once, as they were gliding along the inside of a deep hedge, Alphonse, straining his eyes to keep the figure of his guide in view, suddenly saw her stop, crouch down and wait. She was part of the hedge. Alphonse followed suit. He could hear nothing, only the gentle, swaying croon of the trees. After a few seconds' wait, his heart beating furiously, he heard the faint noise of

someone speaking. Gradually the voices came nearer, and then along the by-road on the other side of the hedge three Germans passed on bicycles. "A patrol of feld-gendarmes," whispered the woman, and Alphonse wondered at her acute hearing.

After threading their way through a wood, they arrived at what Alphonse took to be the rear side of a large farmstead situated in a wood.

Jan's wife had guided them true, for they arrived before an extensive, squat-looking pile in a deep shadow cast by a fitful moon on a tall outhouse. They approached the living-quarters, and the woman whispered, "You can throw better than me. Take a handful of gravel and throw it at that window."

Alphonse did as requested.

"Three times," she ordered, and again and again the tired soldier threw the gravel.

They waited a considerable time, and then, without more ado, the woman said, "Come." Making for a side door, she passed into the darkness of the building. Alphonse had heard nor seen nothing, but he followed blindly into the building which seemed like an Open Sesame to Jan's wife. In the corridor she groped for and took his hand, leading him across a large room. She stopped and knocked, and on hearing a muffled "Enter" she pushed open a door, and they both entered the study of a cultured man. Bookcases lined the wall, and tasteful pictures gave a homely look to the well-appointed room. They were standing in the presence of a little, bald old man, shrivelled up almost to nothing. He stood with his back to an old-fashioned lamp which stood on a desk.

"Ah, Matilda, you have company," greeted the old man in a cracked, high voice.

"Yes, Mynheer Verhagen," returned the woman with deep respect. "He has news, and a warning, so we decided that I had better bring him over."

"Well done, well done, Matilda. Take a glass of wine in the corner over there, my good woman."

Alphonse had a sense of disappointment at beholding for the first time what must be the brains of the famous Eecloo bureau. But the soldier's tired brain jumped into instant activity as the old gentleman turned a steely glare on him, and rapped out:

"What number, friend?"

"Number Five," answered Alphonse.

"Ah, Roulers." And his eyes took on a kindly gleam. Courteously he asked, "And to what am I indebted for this visit?"

Alphonse rapidly told him: firstly, of Prassek and giving Jan's message; then of his news regarding the concentration of reinforcements in the sector of the Marines. He ended his narrative by saying:

"I understand, Mynheer, you are without runners for the moment. I myself will go, if you will give me the instructions and direction."

Brut Verhagen stood perfectly still, thinking.

"Monsieur," he said to Alphonse, and his voice was strained in seriousness, "I am an old, retired notary, and, like doctors, we experience and see many strange happenings. Have you ever at night done a death-watch alone by the bedside of an old crone possessed of the evil one? The wind shrieking in the trees is the evil one calling for his offspring, the rustle of the leaves is the

restless lost one on her bed of pain; every moment of the wait is a century."

Alphonse broke in sternly, "If it please the Divine Will, I am to be a man of God. I fear not, only Him."

Of all the answers Alphonse could have thought of this seemed to appease the old man immediately.

"Very well, you shall go, if you wish it, after I have given you your instructions."

As the woman was preparing to leave, Verhagen said softly to her, "Oh, Matilda, tell Jan I want the police identity card of Prassek."

"I'll tell him, Mynheer." And before she left the room she said, "Good night, soldier. God take care of you. Good night, Mynheer." The great-hearted woman left the house as silent as a shadow.

Brut Verhagen rapped on his desk and an old serving-maid entered the room. Alphonse remembered that he had never seen anyone with such an entirely vacant expression.

"You, soldier, had better get a complete rest now, and to-morrow evening you will be prepared to make the journey."

Turning to the stony-looking servant, he added, "Show Mynheer the bedroom."

Alphonse was guided along a corridor, and the servant showed him into a plain but comfortable-looking bedroom.

No sooner had he flung himself on the bed than he was fast asleep.

CHAPTER IV

THE WIRE

ALPHONSE was awakened by the stony-looking servant bringing coffee and bread into the room. In a dull, toneless voice she said:

"Mynheer wishes you to keep to your room until I call you."

Alphonse had no time to question the woman, as she left the room immediately. The soldier thought, "Well, I suppose he has good reasons for it." He refused to allow his mind to dwell on the coming trip, but he had a premonition, almost certain in its urgency, that something tremendous would come to pass on that weird stretch of wire.

Was this a premonition of death? he asked himself. If so, he was prepared. And he comforted himself with the thought that the agent Prassek would have the formidable combination of Jan and Brut Verhagen to deal with; and then, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred premonitions born of excitement are wrong. But Alphonse forgot that the hundredth one can be right, and that night's events were to show it.

There was a knock at the door, and the servant, opening it, said, "Mynheer will see you now. Come."

Alphonse followed the servant, and he was shown into the study.

Brut Verhagen was poring over a large-scale map of the district.

"Forgive me, my boy, for keeping you so long, but I have two feld-gendarme sergeants billeted on me. They occupy part of the other wing, and are no trouble whatever; with long use they have become quite friendly. To them I am a crippled invalid. Their times of arriving and departing are punctual, so what I did was just an ordinary precaution until they had left." Briskly taking up a long, thin ebony pointer, he began to trace a route on the map.

"This is the farm here, four kilometres south-east of St. Laurent. For a period the place was commandeered as a transport headquarters, but the out-of-the-way situation, and my repeated complaints that the noise affected my illness, caused the General to move the whole thing to the other side of St. Laurent, much to my relief," he said, with a twinkle in his eyes.

Pointing to a dotted red line running towards the Dutch frontier, he explained: "This was an old route leading up to the all-important wire, and there was an underground arrangement for passing underneath the obstruction. It was an almost natural burrow which Jan had discovered; but a passing German airman unluckily spotted the fairly well-worn pathway. He got his observer to take photographs of the area, and the local commandant set a trap. Fortunately, it was Jan that went up that night. He was going with two French airmen, and the hunters became the hunted."

He chuckled, and then went on, "Jan is a wonderful

woodsman, and I really think that big one will be sorry when the Germans are bundled out of the country. Now I will send a guide with you as far as the canal, but she cannot await your return, so mark well your route," and with his pointer he traced a route for Alphonse to follow on his return journey. "I give you the easy route back because you will be alone. You see, this will bring you back to precisely the same spot that you and Matilda arrived at last night. Throw the gravel and watch carefully the top left-hand corner of the window. If you see a minute stab of white light, enter. If you see red, wait until the white appears. I think that's sufficient for the return.

"Your guide to the canal will be as quick and as silent as Matilda, and this route you are going by has only been used four times before. It's one found by the invaluable Jan. The guide will show you a ford over the canal, in a part which has almost dried up from non-use. From the spot where you are sent over, take a northerly direction along the bank of the canal until you reach a tumbledown woodman's hut. Be extremely careful here, for the patrols sometimes use this place, as most soldiers will, to while away the tedious hours." And naïvely he added, "We use this place to make our way up to the wire just for that reason. It's well used, and therefore worth the risk as a jumping-off mark. You make a small detour here, but get the hut direct at your back. It's very low-lying land in this area, and at one time the owner, a real optimist, attempted to drain part of the wood with the idea of stocking it with game. You will find, if you search carefully, an almost invisible snake-like furrow. That furrow leads flush up to the wire."

When the route had been discussed, the old man sat down in a comfortable armchair. "Sit down, my boy, sit down," he ordered Alphonse.

"You cannot, of course, go attired as a German soldier," he said. "If you are shot, there would certainly be enquiries made. It would be discovered that you are from the Roulers area and—er—awkward questions might arise. As a civilian, if you are shot, no questions will be asked; you will simply disappear. If you are caught as a civilian, you are a deserter, and"—with a shrug of his thin shoulders—"you know what the penalty of most armies is for that offence." He made a long pause, and Alphonse thought he had fallen asleep; but suddenly, "What is the real reason of your determination of going to the wire?" he asked Alphonse softly.

The soldier looked and saw only kindness in the lined old face. And Alphonse, with a shamed face, trying to hide his emotion, answered:

"There's an old firebrand in Paris whose last years I would make happy by telling him that the grandson he loved so much is a soldier of his *la belle France*. I was determined that only my hands would carry the news to the agent on the other side." Then Alphonse, with downcast eyes, asked, "Will you see to it, sir, should I fail on my way up to-night?"

Brut Verhagen wrote down the address of old René le Coutrier, and promised.

"Now, my boy, as we have plenty of time before you must start, I will give you a few instructions, and I will endeavour to give you an impression, at the best a poor one, of my first trip to the wire. Some little hint may be the saving of your life. But, mind you, each time

I have been up I have been in the company of Jan, than whom no man could have had a more dependable guide. The first and foremost injunction is this : *Strike first and investigate afterwards*" ; and the grey, sunken eyes of the old man became mesmeric in their intensity. "Last night you had your baptism of being guided, but your senses were dulled, as you were greatly fatigued. To-night, all your faculties will be terribly alert, as mine were on the first occasion.

"Take a quill to chew; it moistens the parched mouth and prevents that betrayer, a sudden forced cough. I shall supply you with the costume. A tight-fitting dark kind of overall. And you must blacken your hands and face. I myself shall weight the news-packet, for it must be evenly balanced, and it needs a strong throw to carry paper thirty-five metres true.

"When you start out from here at four o'clock, if all goes well, you will arrive at the wire somewhere about six o'clock. The drain-furrow will lead you to the prearranged spot.

"The patrols nowadays are famished beings, and at this time they crowd around the cook-kitchens. You must then give your call of the owl. From the other side no sign will be given, for owls do not answer. Take the best cover you can find, some distance away, and cover yourself with leaves. This is the worst part of your ordeal. You must wait—wait an eternity—and a thousand doubts will assail you. 'Have I given my call loud enough? Can I throw so far?' The distance will look enormous."

Brut Verhagen paused for a few seconds, then continued in a low, impressive voice, his eyes half closed :

"In the fast-gathering dusk the trees receded as

quickly the sky darkened, until inky blackness descended. A blindness; and I thought I should never see anything again. Then slowly the objects began to take shape, but in a strange, new way. As the stars and the blessed moon vaulted the heavens, the objects in front from their soft contours of the fading daylight now took on fantastic forms. Jutting boldness and deep reliefs.

"The sinister wire stretched taut was for ever the magnet for my eyes, and it seemed one moment it would engulf me and the next it was playing devil's tricks, dancing a witches' dance leagues away.

"A patrol suddenly shot off a Very light. I have heard the vicious bark and roar of the guns at the Front, and it was nothing like the sudden unexpected roar as that flare was exploded, ripping through the deathly stillness. The swish through the air of the light awoke all the devils in the woods around me, and as I crouched flat to Mother Earth the glare seemed to expose me to the eyes of the world.

"Then the rustle-rustle as the patrols made their rounds. It seemed they must stumble over me, and in all my life I was never more tempted to do the unforgivable act by scrambling away and attempting to climb a tree.

"Reason was brought back to me by the low, scornful, guttural laugh of one of the patrol, and then, 'Oh, she was a fine piece. What a handful!' The patrol was discussing one of the eternal soldier's subjects as they passed.

"After an age my heart pumped at express speed. The call of an owl had come across the wire. With infinite care I crawled to the wire and peered through. A distinct whisper, and there in the void was another

human. The whisper was the password for the night. I whisper back in what I think is a shout that will awaken the dead, and watch intently. Gradually a branch is hoisted. That stick, looking like a periscope, is a precaution, for hand-grenades have been hurled before, instead of the all-important information. Jan is there, near my side, and he half-rises, takes a deep breath, and then makes the throw. The package lands true, within a few feet of the upstanding branch.

"Jan, in his turn, hoists a branch and moves with a scrambling rush quickly to one side. A package comes sailing over. I wait again, and a dark blot rises cautiously on the other side of the wire. It is the head and shoulders of the agent, and he begins to speak. I answer back, keeping my face near the ground, for the sound travels well on the hard earth. It has not rained for some time. Even so, I think the woods behind me have a million ears.

"'Sh-sh!' It is a warning from the other agent. A lower whisper comes over. '*Bonne chance, mes amis. En avant!*' The patrol is making a round on the other side of the electrified wire.

"All is as silent as the grave again.

"Now is the time to be on my guard. I am carrying vital information and instructions which I dare not destroy, and the consciousness of relief at accomplishing what I imagine is the harder part of the trip urges me to rush back home. A thousand times I repeat to myself, 'Even more so observe the same precautions that you showed on coming up, for this elated feeling will betray you, make you careless. For *nine out of ten runners caught are trapped coming back.*'"

As the daylight commenced to fade, the stony-looking servant swiftly and silently guided Alphonse to the canal crossing. He was dressed in tight-fitting overalls and a pair of rubber shoes. He carried thick rubber gloves, in case the throw misfired and he was forced to handle the electric wire. Round his waist was a broad leather belt with a sheath. In it was a long trench-dagger.

The old man had forbidden firearms. "They make too much noise," he had said with a grim smile. "The password for to-night, my boy, is 'Flushing'."

Alphonse had great fortune, for he crossed the canal and reached the wire without the slightest incident, and well within the specified time mentioned by Brut Verhagen.

He gave the call of the owl, and it was well that the far-seeing old chief had given Alphonse his vivid impressions of the eerie wait.

Alphonse moved away some little distance back, blacked his face and hands with some "baker's coal" that the servant had handed to him, and settled himself under a pile of October leaves and commenced his long wait.

The desolate spot with the weird-looking wire running taut across the country was frightening. He tried to impress on his mind all the outstanding instructions he had received. He found himself, time after time, fumbling at the package in his broad overall-pocket.

He willed himself into a frame of contentment, and he was surprised how calm he felt; but always at the back of his mind was the feeling of something enormous about to happen.

Two patrols passed, but at some little distance: one

on his side of the wire, and the other on the opposite side.

The first caused considerable heart-beating, but the second time he found himself trying to make out the figure in the darkness.

It was completely dark now, and the night promised to continue so, for dark clouds gathered in the heavens.

When he had first arrived he had noticed that a short, shallow hedge ran just near and parallel with the wire for some distance, and he had decided that it would make excellent cover for the throwing of the package and receiving the news from the other side.

In a few moments, he decided, he would take up his position there, taking a branch of a tree with him to serve as the "periscope".

The urge was so great that at last he made the move, more to silence the urge than in order to be there ready to speak to the other agent when called.

He was lying comfortably flat along the bottom of the hedge, willing himself to stop the eternal fumbling with the package of papers, when suddenly the blood in his veins congealed. At first he *felt* the presence of some thing or person moving towards him. It passed through his mind that perhaps it was a refugee who had found his way up and was awaiting his opportunity to make his lone dash over the wire.

The form was creeping stealthily towards him, and with a shock it came to him that the creeping figure must pass over him, for the stealthy one would follow the contour of the hedge.

"Shall I challenge?" thought Alphonse in a panic.

Then the staring, mesmeric eyes of Brut Verhagen

and the insistent, cracked voice came: "Strike first! Strike first!" The monotonous call of the owl came *plaintively over the wire, and Alphonse's hand went* swiftly to the handle of the dagger. The form crept on. "*Strike first!*" And Alphonse, like a streak of lightning, struck with terrific force. A gasping, gurgling grunt, and the figure of a man collapsed by his side.

His brain was working with bell-like clearness now. He crept a little to one side, half rose, and in an agitated whisper called, "Flushing."

Back came the reassuring whisper, "Flushing."

Then the rising stick. Alphonse took his precious packet and hurled with all his strength. It fell true. After a pause he hoisted his branch, moved to one side, and almost stumbled over the form of the man lying in a grotesque attitude. The package from the other side came hurtling through the air.

Again a wait, and always his subconscious thoughts with the form just a few feet from him. He was looking intently, and he saw a dark blot. It spoke as if from another world. In French came the warning, "A German Secret Service agent visited Flushing yesterday afternoon and left, we believe for Eecloo, this morning. Our man shadowed him to the frontier. We don't know as yet what he is after, and we were unable to identify him, as it's the first time this agent has been over. But the man he was in touch with we have reason to believe knows this particular district well. In twenty-four hours we shall know all. Thanks. Anything to report?"

"Only that you will see specially to a letter addressed to Paris in the package."

"Very good. I'm from B.I. [British Intelligence], but

I will hand the letter, with the special instructions, to F.I. [French Intelligence]. *En avant!*" came the warning.

Alphonse saw the form disappear, and, keeping perfectly still, saw a patrol pass by on the other side.

He crouched to the figure and forced himself to search it. The body was dressed in the rough clothes of a labourer, and suddenly he found himself examining the clothes with one hand; in the other he held the bloodstained trench-dagger in a threatening attitude over the still form, for grasped in the right hand was a German officer's automatic revolver. "This won't do," he told himself. Calming himself down, he went through the pockets methodically. A clay pipe and tobacco, a package of papers, and an old pocketbook. He searched further and found a leather case which would hold the identity-card of the dead man. He gazed into the face with a shiver, but, like his own, it was blackened, so he gave not a second look, as in the darkness it would have been impossible to recognize even a comrade.

Alphonse felt in the inside coat pocket and found a cardboard case. The feel was familiar. He put it to his nose and sniffed. It was an ordinary cardboard case holding five large-sized, good-quality cigars.

Strange, thought Alphonse. Labourers don't usually indulge in such luxuries.

Gathering all the papers and cigars, Alphonse covered up the form of the dead man and stealthily commenced the return journey.

On arriving behind the woodman's hut, three feld-gendarmes were about to depart. They were evidently passing some joke, for they were all laughing.

Alphonse again found himself grasping the dagger in his hand. A basilisk rage swept over him, and he had to summon all his will-power to prevent himself from jumping at the unsuspecting gendarmes. The "blood-lust" was on him.

The unforgivable sin. The unforgivable sin. Nine out of ten. *And coming back. Coming back.*

The insistent voice and cracked tones of Brut Verhagen pounded into his brains.

With unconscious cunning he waited a considerable time, then crossed the canal.

He found himself throwing the gravel at the window. Once, twice, thrice. The minute stab of white light, and with a stealthy rush he was into the house.

But after that Alphonse remembered no more.

Brut Verhagen sat in his study, facing a very bewildered Alphonse. The Alsatian had recovered quickly after his sudden collapse, which had been caused by loss of blood from a wound received either as he delivered the death-blow to the unknown intruder at the wire or as he rushed back in a half-wild state to the farm.

Verhagen spoke soothingly and quietly to the overwrought Alphonse.

"The messages from Intelligence are all safe, but, in addition, you had in your possession a cigar-case with the name of a Flushing cigar-stores printed on it, the bill for one night of a person who stayed at a Flushing hotel, a pocket-book with very useful information and, last but by no means least, that person's dual identity-cards. Now," he continued, almost in a whisper, "that man is the man whom we are all for the moment very

much interested in—George Prassek, the German Secret Service agent. On one identity-card are the particulars of Lieutenant George Prassek; on the other is Paul Vandenbeele, a Flemish labourer."

For the moment the full significance of the terrible encounter did not strike the confused mind of the Alsatian, so, without trying to fathom the mystery that old Verhagen was unfolding, Alphonse related the story of his adventures, and, as he explained, the startling truth came to him, with its seeming amazing coincidence. The man lying dead at the wire was none other but George Prassek! Almost at the same instant the truth must have struck the old chief, for his eyes gleamed with a smouldering fire as he spoke.

"You have removed a dangerous and persistent individual by to-night's work; but there is something behind all this. Something that I think, with these papers in my possession, I can untangle."

Alphonse told of the agent's warning, and that the man was shadowed to the frontier. "That, of course, was undoubtedly Prassek," said Verhagen, and Alphonse agreed. After a long pause, Verhagen said:

"Listen, my boy. For a long time now I have been suspicious of these two rendezvous. The cigar-store and the hotel. Employed in the hotel is a porter who, I believe, is a Belgian. His wife is a Dutchwoman and she serves in the cigar-stores. I must get those two over here. Oh yes, I must get them, and quickly—they are getting to know too much. It's they who have discovered Jan's route to the wire, and it's they who have betrayed it to our late friend Prassek. That route is too precious to give up just now. I must get them immediately,

immediately, before they have the sense to miss Prassek and go elsewhere with their information. I'll risk the German not having disclosed his mission and destination to anyone outside this precious pair."

Alphonse agreed that this was most likely, as the German agent was undoubtedly a most courageous man, and was working the *coup* with a lone hand, hoping for undivided handsome rewards.

"In forty-eight hours I'll have them both in my hands," prophesied the old chief grimly. "It will be rather a pity you will not be here to see the dénouement," he added; but Alphonse, with relief, shook his head, agreeing with the fiery old notary.

"I must return to Roulers for Monday, and before then I must make some effort to discover my 'comrade' who is wounded in Ghent, if only to cover up my tracks. I will first of all take a long sleep, and at dusk to-morrow evening I will get you to ask your good maid to conduct me to the house of Jan. All of this will take up my leave-period, and I shall just have time to get back to Roulers so as to report back on time."

"Yes, it is better not to risk the daylight to regain the Ghent-Eecloo road, for if you were stopped in this out-of-the-way district you might find it hard to explain your reasons for being here. Certainly I will give orders for my servant to guide you to Jan's cottage. But it's a pity, it's a pity you will not be here," said the old man regretfully. "I think you will find that the Flemish workman did not call on our good Jan yesterday. Oh, no."

Somewhat relieved, Alphonse saw the old chief knock on the desk and the servant appear.

"Show Mynheer to his bedroom, and to-morrow

conduct him to the cottage of Jan van Candelaere. Oh, and, when you arrive there, my boy, you might ask the good Matilda to come over post-haste. I have work for her—urgent work."

In a fast-gathering dusk Alphonse, refreshed, took his leave of the old man. Brut Verhagen shook him affectionately by the hand and said quietly, "*Bon chance*, my boy. We may meet again, and I hope in happier circumstances. If at any time I can be of service, count on me. *Au revoir*."

Silently and swiftly Alphonse was guided to the cottage of the poacher. The Lembeke road was deserted, so Alphonse crossed and knocked. The door was flung open by the bulky Jan.

"Ho, ho; come in, come in!" he shouted on catching sight of the stocky figure of the soldier. "Wife, a plate for a friend." In a whisper he enquired, "Did you go up?"

Alphonse nodded, and in return asked, more to relieve his overwrought nerves than that he doubted what the answer would be, "Did the Flemish workman call yesterday?"

"Why, no," answered Jan. "I was waiting and waiting for the clever one, but never a flutter did I see."

Alphonse gave the urgent message of Brut Verhagen, and the wife of Jan said, "As soon as you have eaten I will go over to see him."

As they ate, Jan enquired to where Alphonse was bound.

"Ghent," answered the soldier.

"Not a bad town, but spoiled these days," said the poacher.

"I don't know it," said Alphonse. "I've never been there."

"Ha, you are stationed in another town?" asked Jan, and, seeing no reason why he should not divulge his sector to the good-hearted pair, he said:

"Yes, in Roulers."

"Goodness me! My wife's sister lives there, and I have often made the trip. I suppose I'll be coming soon again, just as quickly as my foot mends, and as soon as I have settled the account with the clever one."

"I'm afraid that will have to wait a long time now, Jan, for Prassek is lying at the wire, dead."

The astonished eyes of the poacher looked at Alphonse.

"At the wire? What do you mean?"

And rapidly the soldier told the couple what had occurred. He took his leave and regained the Eecloo-Ghent road, satisfied that in the unlikely event of being challenged he had sufficient reasons for being in the district.

He "jumped" a motor-lorry going to Ghent, and after a few enquiries he found to his great relief that his supposed comrade had been evacuated to Germany. His tracks covered thus, he made his way back to Roulers.

Adventures are, like life, a jig-saw. They have not the even flow and continuity of a reasoned novel. An interesting event will occur which has no bearing on the immediate trend of our existence, nor on the characters of the story. So here I must turn aside and give the

history of the vengeance of Brut Verhagen on the two traitors at Flushing.

Louis Servaes was a porter at an hotel in Flushing. Married to a Dutchwoman with considerably more courage and *aplomb* than himself, he stayed "put" in Holland, avoiding his military service with his native country, Belgium. His only excuse for turning traitor to the country he had already deserted appeared to be the ambitions of his stronger-willed wife, who served in a Flushing cigar-store but cherished the ambition of owning her own smart shop in Amsterdam. To anyone who had experienced Flushing in war-time this was, no doubt, a very laudable and excusable ambition, and could be wholeheartedly sympathized with; but the method adopted of achieving the ambition was not only despicable but was exceedingly dangerous. No doubt they both felt perfectly safe, for even should the Allied Secret Service discover the nature of their activities they knew that the agents would think many times before taking drastic action on neutral soil, and that self-same soil in such close proximity to the iron heel of the invader.

They were both actuated solely by the lust of gain. Certainly not from love of their tempters, for they had promised themselves, just as soon as sufficient funds were accumulated, the move to Amsterdam would be made with all speed.

Forced to take a certain amount of risk, Brut Verhagen nevertheless laid his plans with great rapidity and infinite care. He rightly reasoned that the pair's activities were actuated by gain, and the trap was laid accordingly.

From the hotel bill and from various notes in the

agent's notebook, Verhagen knew that Prassek had stayed at the hotel in his own name, even giving his full title and rank. No doubt to impress Servaes. The first risk Verhagen took was that the pair had already received some reward from the agent, but as no note of this appeared, he dismissed it as slight. But the wily old notary made doubly sure by wording the letter (which requested one of them to come and meet Prassek) in such a way that a bountiful reward could be expected for the information already given and for future news the pair might get hold of. Again he rightly reasoned that the craven would sit tight, and that the woman would come. He said nothing to the Allied Intelligence, for if the pair were shadowed they would be frightened off, only, perhaps, to commence somewhere else in a more dangerous rôle.

He composed the letter, forging a fairly accurate copy of Prassek's handwriting, although he had not much fear that the woman would attempt to verify the handwriting of the German agent. Verhagen relied on her cupidity to bring her post-haste to collect the promised reward.

For your own sakes keep the present secret. I am authorized by headquarters to pay you the sum of 5,000 *marks for your services, which have been the means of destroying a dangerous nest of rats.*

Great pressure of work keeps me this side of the frontier. You can guess that work. If you will come to my headquarters, the farm Madou on the St. Laurent-Adegem road, I, or my deputy, will hand to you your well-earned reward in money. Please to bring any other useful information you may have.

You are perfectly safe when on this side, as all frontier guards will be notified of your coming. Burn this for safety.

Lieutenant George Prassek.

"All frontier guards will be warned of your coming," was rather a risk, too, but Verhagen's whole purpose was to allay any suspicions and make the woman determined to cross over the frontier, no matter what the cost. The German rules for passing over the frontier were very stringent, but a whisper from the woman that she was a native of Flushing on secret service work for the invaders would get her over easily.

The risk he took here was that a German guard might accompany the woman, so he purposely put the rendezvous a considerable distance from the frontier, and this would almost certainly make for the frontier guards allowing her to travel alone, giving her a specified time in which to return.

As Alphonse was making his way to Ghent the letter was passed over the wire, with instructions for it to be posted in Flushing. This would give the appearance of being quite genuine.

At the same time Matilda was dispatched for two of Verhagen's cleverest agents, men strangers in the district but capable, determined workers.

One of the men was detailed to shadow the woman as soon as she passed over the frontier. He was furnished with the *two identity-cards of Prassek.*

If he were challenged by passing patrols, he was quite safe as the German Secret Service officer. Should the woman be accompanied by a guard, he was to boldly call the guard to one side, explain who he was, showing,

if necessary, the authority of Prassek, dismiss the guard, and conduct the woman to a prearranged rendezvous, where the other of Verhagen's agents would carry out the final plan for the trapping of the Belgian traitor.

Madame Servaes came to the frontier and without much trouble was allowed over. To the great relief of the agent shadowing her, she came alone.

Carefully he kept her in sight until she reached the Adegem road, and then politely he accosted her and asked: "Madame, are you from over the frontier? And are you wishing to meet our agent, Lieutenant Prassek?"

After a slight pause she answered simply, "Yes. Why?"

"Because, madame, I am detailed to conduct you to the meeting-place. As our Lieutenant Prassek cannot be there in time to thank you for all you have done, and are doing, his deputy will hand over to you the money." And, as he joined her in a gentle walk towards Adegem, he asked, "Did you have much trouble at the frontier?"

Completely off her guard and absolutely unsuspicious, she tossed her head, laughed, and said, "Oh, no. Not much. The officer in charge knew of Lieutenant Prassek and his mission, and although the Herr Lieutenant had not warned the guard, as he promised, I had only to mention his name and I passed all right."

"Ha, you are fortunate indeed, madame, for sometimes those guards are more than particular, I can assure you. However, here you are, and we have to go to the deputy's office, as he's a busy man, too, and cannot get across to headquarters."

Still unsuspecting, the woman meekly accompanied the agent as he turned into a quiet, deserted-looking

garden which surrounded a house lying well back from the main Adegem road. The agent knocked, and immediately the door was opened. The agent led her into a room where a man dressed as a German officer sat at a desk, surrounded with great piles of papers and, to her inexperienced eyes, military-looking documents.

"This is Madame Servaes," said her guide with deep respect to the officer.

"Ha, madame, you have come alone? That is rather unfortunate," the officer said, evincing no little surprise. "My instructions are to pay the amount to your good husband."

Keen disappointment swept the face of Madame Servaes, so the officer interposed helpfully, "Well, that is easily arranged. If you will write out a short note to your husband, asking him to come over here, he can be in this office by five o'clock this afternoon"; and, with a most disarming smile, he added, "And we can then get a joint signature."

"But, Herr, I don't think for one moment that my husband will come."

"Tut tut! What has the man to be afraid of? The Germans are in command here, not the Belgians. Make the note strong, madame, as we have much further work for you both, with consequent reward, but my express instructions are to pay him, and I am sure he will come if you ask him rightly, and so save you a painful journey for nothing."

As, a little dubiously, she wrote out the command to her husband, his death-warrant, the bogus officer said cheerfully, "You, madame, can wait here and take a coffee with me." Looking at the agent, he

commanded, "Please to bring in the coffee and cakes from the next room. I think my servant has left them there, ready on the stove."

More than gratified by the offer of the officer's *tête-à-tête*, Madame Servaes composed herself to await the coming of her spouse. The letter the officer took and handed to the agent.

"See to it that it's delivered immediately." He turned to the woman as the agent left the room, and said, "Flushing nowadays, madame, must be the last word in ports?"

"Yes, Herr; we are hoping, my husband and myself, to remove to Amsterdam in a few months."

"Well, one or two rewards similar to that which we are about to hand to you should help you on your journey." After a pause, he said, "That was clever work you did, discovering the path up to the wire that these stupid Belgians are using for their passing of information and fugitives. How did you manage it?"

"Oh," she answered drowsily, "that was my husband. He disclosed himself as a Belgian to a fellow-countryman who had crossed over that way, and the man was able to give almost the exact position from some woodman's hut. My husband knows the district very well, but we kept the information to ourselves, waiting until we saw an opportunity of getting in with the right persons, for it was valuable information. Lieutenant Prassek promised us a good reward, but we hardly expected so much. He asked us to keep it as secret as the—as the . . ." and Madame Servaes fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Verhagen learned that he had the woman safe, but

would the husband fall for the urgent but innocently worded command of his wife? This was the old chief's only misgiving. The man, seemingly, had nothing to fear in crossing the frontier, and the whole excuse was quite feasible, especially to anyone acquainted with the family legal customs of the Germans. Invariably the custom was to treat with the head of the house, the husband.

Whilst the woman was still in a stupor, the letter with its fateful message was passed over the wire, with explicit and urgent instructions to deliver it by hand to Paul Servaes. The messenger was to pass as a man with a certain amount of knowledge. He was to say that the husband had to pass through the same post that his wife had used, exposing, if necessary, the name and business of Lieutenant George Prassek.

In great trepidation Paul Servaes came. He had considerable trouble with the guard, but on his swearing that he had helped the Secret Service agent Lieutenant George Prassek, he was allowed to cross, but only for six hours.

More careful than his wife, he asked for a guide as far as the headquarters mentioned in the letter, which, of course, was the veritable German brigade headquarters at the St. Laurent-Adegem road, but was not the quiet-looking house in which the woman was trapped. One of the guards was told off to guide the civilian to the spot.

With a very bad grace the soldier complied. He would probably miss his dinner through this stupid fellow. Very surlily he tramped along the road, never venturing a word to the frightened Belgian. At almost

the identical spot where his wife had been accosted the day before, the German guard and Paul Servaes were held up by a civilian. Verhagen's agent, taking no notice whatever of the Belgian, spoke to the soldier in a rasping voice of command.

"Where are you going with that civilian?" he asked.

"To headquarters, Herr," answered the soldier, standing stiffly to attention.

"Is his name Servaes?" was the next question.

"That your name?" spat out the soldier to the mystified Servaes.

He could only nod his head in assent, wondering what it was all about.

Drawing the soldier to one side, the agent whispered to him, "That's all right, then; you can leave this civilian to me. He's coming to see me." And, pulling out the pass of Lieutenant Prassek, he disclosed to the guard the authority of a Secret Service lieutenant.

"I will take him to headquarters myself. You can get back to your post."

Nothing loth, the soldier gladly saluted, and with a, "Very good, Herr Lieutenant; I will report that you have taken him in guard," he turned and rapidly made his way back to the frontier post, no doubt hoping to be in time for his almost abandoned dinner.

The bewildered Belgian turned to his new guide. "Is the office far, Herr?" he asked, not knowing what to do in this fresh emergency.

"No, Herr," answered the agent. "I am Lieutenant Holmann, of the Secret Service. Your wife awaits you, and I am going to take you to her now. Will you follow

me? Unfortunately headquarters are overcrowded, but we have snug little quarters to ourselves."

His fears put at rest, the Belgian followed the agent to the quiet house on the St. Laurent-Adegem road. He was being led to his execution.

Madame Servaes, that same night, awoke with the cold stars overhead. For a considerable time she lay there, unable to collect her wits. Wonderingly she felt her clothes. They were soaking wet; and then she discovered that she was lying in an open field. Confused, and with a horrible racking pain in her head, she tried to remember what had happened. The last thing she could recollect was the keen, clever face of the German officer as she drowsily related the latest information of Flushing. Then had come oblivion. Here she was, lying in the open fields, God knew where.

She struggled to her feet and scrambled to a pathway deep in mud. Making her way along, she at last discovered a main roadway which seemed vaguely familiar as she staggered along. Suddenly she heard the guttural voices of men coming towards her, and feebly she called out. Two German feld-gendarmes dismounted from their bicycles and stopped her.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"Half a mile from the frontier post of St. Laurent," one of the gendarmes answered.

"But what are you doing here?" asked the other one suspiciously.

She tried to explain to the mystified gendarmes what had happened to her, but her ramblings were so confused they could make nothing of her story. They did gather, however, that she had passed over the day

before, and through the very post they had just visited. "*Please to come with us, madame,*" they commanded. "We will take you *to the officer who allowed you to* cross."

She was too weary to notice that she was only a few hundred yards from the very spot she had passed through the morning before.

The two gendarmes conducted her back to the frontier post, and after a long wait, which seemed an eternity to the suffering woman, a raging, stamping officer appeared. The same officer, but a very different individual from the one who had smilingly allowed her to cross the frontier to meet Lieutenant George Prassek the day before.

"Where is your man? Your husband, woman, where is he?"

Utterly confused, the woman made feeble attempts to explain, and during her explanation she mentioned several times the name of Herr Prassek.

The furious officer seemed unable to control himself, and, purple with rage, he clenched his fists, shaking them over the cowering woman. "Don't mention his name with your foul mouth! All you say is lies. Damned lies. The lieutenant was found at the end of this road," and with a pointing finger trembling with rage he pointed down the St. Laurent road, "in the gutter, at the end of this road, only a few hours ago, terribly mutilated, almost unrecognizable. And your husband, woman, was the last person in his company. What devil's business have you two been up to, you two murderers? But I can tell you this. You will never get back to Holland unless we find that dog of a husband of yours."

His ravings finished, for the woman had lost consciousness.

Paul Servaes was buried with military honours as Lieutenant George Prassek, for that officer's identity-card and papers were found on the body discovered in the St. Laurent road.

CHAPTER V

STEPHAN, THE POLE

STEPHAN, THE POLE, was always a complete mystery to me. Though Alphonse placed implicit trust in him (and, of course, I was forced to), I could never bring myself to display the confidence in the Pole that I did in the intrepid Alphonse.

There were several reasons for this attitude—I suppose mostly psychological, for my sex is prone to judge with the heart, and not the head.

Stephan Piltowitz was a tall, handsome-looking young man with a slight, very dark moustache. His large eyes were set wide apart, and they seemed to look out on a strange world in complete wonder. There was no doubting his great courage, for when not smiling, as he usually was, his mouth set in unusually firm lines, and then he had the appearance of being much older than he really was. Stephan was a marvellous linguist; not only in the main languages, but the dialects of the various countries were an open book to him. Without a fault I have heard him speak in two totally different Flemish dialects which have as much difference as one speaking an Irish brogue and one speaking a Yorkshire dialect. In German and French he was just as perfect.

Just the opposite to the usual run of his countrymen,

who mostly appeared to take life in the German Army with tremendous seriousness, his disposition was light-hearted. When I first began to work with him I made the mistake of thinking that he might be easily led, but when I got to know him better I discovered so much in his make-up was pose that in the end I was at a loss to define which was genuine and which was assumed.

The fact that Alphonse and Stephan were such direct opposites probably accounted for them being such wonderful comrades. At all times they had the utmost confidence in each other, and never once did I hear a hasty remark from one to the other.

The Pole's parents were extremely rich, I understood, and Stephan always appeared to have an abundance of ready cash, with which he was most lavish. But a big fault in his character, I thought at the time, was that he was a great drinker, who always required a crowd of companions for his carousals. But there was method in his lavishness. As a boon companion, he learned much.

Naturally, being a Pole, he was debarred from attaining commissioned rank, but he managed to have as much freedom as an officer did. Shortly after arriving in Roulers he was promoted to corporal, and from that day he seemed to have the whole of the brigade orderly staff literally in his pocket.

Furthermore, he was very susceptible to the fairer sex, and it may have been principally for this reason that I could not bring myself to placè complete confidence in him.

It would be tedious to relate the hundred and one incidents whereby Stephan handed information over

to me for dispatch over the frontier. From small, usual, soldiers' gossip to the information gathered in the orderly-room from censored letters, and his painstaking work in secretly copying plans and gun emplacements and lay-outs, all must be taken for granted, for they were almost everyday occurrences. Now and again we fell across a *coup*, or, which seldom happened with Stephan, we just missed one.

I had a cousin in Lille who had married in that town and settled there. She had two children, a boy and a girl, and for several years before the War the youngsters were wont to spend their holidays at my home in Westroosebeke. In return I, accompanied by one or other of my brothers, usually spent a vacation in Lille, improving our French. Between the two families was a deep affection. Shortly after the occupation of Lille, the Manchester of Northern France, conditions quickly became tragic.

In the beginning of 1915, when the Wurtemburg army were heavily involved in the Ypres salient, medical and ammunition stores were requisitioned from the Prince of Bavaria's army lying in the Lille area. Indeed, for a considerable period army rations and the like had to be drawn from the Lille area.

It was owing to this that both Alphonse and Stephan made frequent trips to the French town.

On one of his first visits I had asked Alphonse to look up my relations, giving him a short note of introduction. Without much difficulty he found them, and my cousin, Lucy Jouret, was delighted to hear from us. She gave Alphonse a very cordial reception.

On his return, however, he related to mother and

myself the terrible straits the civilian population were forced to endure. So for his next journey to Lille my mother promptly secured butter and eggs from my uncle's farm at Staden. At that period the food shortage in Flanders was not so acute.

With two loaves of bread, we had made up the provisions in small, neat parcels, and I was somewhat surprised when, instead of Alphonse, it was Stephan who called for the parcels. "I am going with that Alsatian," he told my mother, "just to see he comes to no harm." Mother and I gave many messages for the Lille folk to the irrepressible Stephan. "I shall kiss them all for you," he told us.

From this innocent beginning developed an adventure which was to give us many anxious days of terrible doubt, and was to terminate in the tragic love-story of Stephan Piltowitz.

During one of his visits to Lille, at the house of my cousin, Stephan met Renée Avallo, a beautiful young French girl.

It was only natural that at first she would be distant with the Pole. He who was not only dressed in the uniform of an enemy of her fair country, but, in addition, was looked upon as one of the invaders and oppressors of her land. So in the beginning Stephan's siege of the French girl's heart did not prosper.

I knew that Stephan made frequent journeys to Lille, for invariably before starting out on his rumble-down motor-bicycle, which he had christened the "Rattlesnake", he would drop into my home and ask, "Any post for Paris to-day?"

His visits became so frequent that I was caused a

considerable amount of misgiving and worry, so in the end, at that time not knowing his reason for running over to Lille so often, I warned him. "Stephan," I said, "you must be careful, and not get the Jouret family into trouble with the military authorities. And not only that, too many visits to the house will not only draw suspicion from the authorities, but from the civilians too. You know how people can suffer by having the reputation and odium of being too friendly with the Germans."

"My name, sister, is Stephan Discretion," he answered. "I do not go near your excellent cousin's house unless it is absolutely necessary, such as when I deliver your letters and provisions."

"Whatever do you do over there?" I asked. "I know you often go at night-time. What is the magnet?"

"Ha, sister!" he evaded. "Perhaps one day I will tell you, and maybe ask your help."

During this period Alphonse and myself received very little help from the Pole, and later I became alarmed, for once or twice I encountered him in the vicinity of the hospital, but hardly received any recognition from him. This was strange from one who was usually so polite. Although we had agreed not to speak or appear too friendly in the open, some instinct told me that Stephan, for some reason, was deliberately avoiding me.

I spoke to Alphonse about the matter, and Alphonse tried to reassure me by saying, "Leave him to himself. He is quite safe. I myself do not know what is wrong with him, but he'll come to earth, never fear."

One beautiful evening in late spring, after I had finished at the hospital, where we had had an extremely

"Sister, your cousin, Madame Jouret, has been kindness itself to me, but I know it's because of your friendship for me that I am tolerated there. I have never, of course, breathed a word regarding our activities, although at times I have been sorely tempted to take the good folk into my confidence, and to disclose to them that I am not an enemy of their country. I am glad now that I did not do so, for I am vain enough to think that Renée Avallo, much against her will and every reason, returns my feelings. At first I despaired of ever seeing her again. I journeyed to Lille many times, only to be disappointed; but at last one day I saw her again at your cousin's house, and in conversation I told her I was a Pole, one who was distrusted and despised by our German masters. I think I managed to convey to her, without actually saying it, that my sympathies were with her country. We have met often since, but, as you can imagine, my difficulties only commence. There are her parents. To them, of course, proud and patriotic French people, it would be unthinkable for their daughter to marry a German soldier. Even if I were to disclose to them my real position, and that, as you know, I dare not, the odium of their daughter married to a German would still remain for them to face with the civilians."

"But, Stephan," I interposed, "why not wait? The War won't last for ever, and you are both very, very young."

"Ha, sister," he asked, "in such times, who can wait? Wait for what? You speak the advice of the aged, the totterers on the graveside, and those old ones who have led us into this shambles," he said fiercely.

"Neither she nor I are of the race that wait, and, further, I have a suspicion that there is an understanding with another. Of this you will hear and judge."

I saw that Stephan was deadly serious as he continued his story of love's thorny path. Brushing aside my advice as though I had never voiced it, he went on:

"I have discovered something in common with Renée. She does not know that I am aware of what she considers is her secret, although I have seen often enough that she has been on the point of taking me into her confidence. Some finer instinct holds her back, and I cannot help but admire her the more for it. It all happened this way. She asked one day if I would do her the favour of delivering a letter to a lady in Ledeghem. The lady was Renée's late music-teacher, Madame Brise. I gladly consented. The letter which I was to hand over told of the safety of the Lille people, and also enquired after the welfare of Madame Brise and her son.

"You can imagine how elated I was, for in this seemingly innocent intrigue I would certainly be given more opportunities of meeting Renée, because Madame Brise was sure to want to answer. I delivered the letter, and in return Madame Brise asked if I would kindly hand a reply to Renée, together with a small package. The prospect of now seeing Renée oftener made me supremely happy. My work as postman occurred almost as often as I went to Lille, and always the small package from Madame Brise to Renée. But once, quite by accident, I discovered what I was carrying," and Stephan was forced to pause and laugh at himself and the bizarre idea. "I, Stephan the Pole, was innocently—innocently,

mind you—carrying and delivering fifty copies of *La Libre Belgique*, that Belgian newspaper-sheet our Army Intelligence Headquarters dislikes so intensely. Since the great flood, Sister, have you heard a better one than that?" he asked in something like his usual light-hearted manner.

But the turn of events was getting serious for us, and I could not look on the affair with the same feeling that Stephan was trying to evince. In addition to our own work, this, I thought, should we be implicated in the newspaper, would bring in its train far too many complications and unnecessary risks. I knew of the sheet, and had nothing but the greatest admiration for the devoted patriots who were prepared to give their all in its cause. But the toil, the risks, and the penalties involved were far too great, and not commensurate with the meagre returns.

Even at this early stage I could immediately sum up clearly the would-be returns for the risks incurred. If the results of our efforts for the Allies, fighting a hopeless battle in the sodden marshes of the salient, were to materially help them in their deathless stand, then no risk was too great for us to undertake. But if we were to be inveigled into some side-line which would be of no immediate benefit for the fighting forces, then any risk, no matter how small, was not only useless, it was stupid. Rightly or wrongly, I judged that the publication of the sheet gave the minimum of return for the maximum of risk, and very seriously I pointed this out to Stephan, finishing by saying:

"The work we are doing is too vital for us to get involved in any side issues, and I warn you that it's

usually some simple undertaking of no moment which leads to the destruction of very useful combinations such as ours."

Quietly he answered, "Yes, I see your point, sister, but, believe me, the idea of actively helping or of asking help from here for the publication of the sheet never entered my calculations. I see now, however, how we might have got innocently involved in the affair. That I would ask you to dismiss from your mind, for it's not on that matter I ask your assistance. Let me finish, and we will then see if you approve of my plan. During one of my visits to Ledeghem, the package was handed to me by the capable-looking son of Madame Brise, and since I discovered what my freight was I have kept my eyes open, for all our sakes. The son Robert is the editor, printer and distributor of the sheet, and I have come to the conclusion that the young man is too reckless for such work. Furthermore, I believe that there is some understanding between Renée's family and Madame Brise and her son regarding an ultimate betrothal, and Renée is not happy about the matter. How does a lover know these things? I don't know, I don't know. A look, a shrug of the shoulder by the loved one—by a hundred signs we know." And Stephen paused.

I let him think, glad that we were not to be called upon in some scheme of the newspaper.

"This is my plan, sister," he went on briskly. "I am sure that my errands to Ledeghem are not the only reason why Renée enjoys my presence. To-morrow I visit Lille, and I'm going to put the matter to the test. From her I am due to receive the letter for Madame

Brise, and I shall flatly refuse to deliver it, giving no reason for my refusal. This will force her to explain. I am confident, then, that I shall find out my real position with Renée."

"And if she refuses to explain, and allows the matter to pass, what then?" I asked.

His face very pale and serious, Stephan replied:

"Sister, it will be the last time I shall go to Lille. The only thing I ask of you is to pen a line to your cousin, which I will give to her only if Renée explains. I would like you to say, short of divulging my activities, that you know me and of me, and that Renée's family can place complete trust in me, and with that I am confident Madame Jouret will intercede with Renée's parents on my behalf."

"I, personally, will be only too pleased to say nothing but nice things about you, Stephan," I answered, "and I agree it will be far better to get to know what Renée and the all-important parents think about the matter before you devise any plans. If she's agreeable, we've all got to put on our thinking-caps." I spoke light-heartedly, glad, I suppose, of the respite, but I prayed earnestly that Renée Avallo would not explain to Stephan.

Next morning, along with a letter from mother and myself, I handed him a note to my cousin explaining Stephan. He was in great spirits, better than I had seen him for a considerable time. He thanked me, and I said, "Do be careful, Stephan. So much depends on us in this area."

"Listen, sister," he said cheerfully, "I'll whisper a secret. I'll be satisfied if I can arrange a secret marriage here in Roulers. I can manage to keep the whole thing

as quiet as the grave, for I have good friends at Brigade Headquarters. No one outside her parents and ourselves need know."

"For my part," I answered, "I am willing to give all the help I can in reason. You know you can count on me. But for heaven's sake do disentangle yourselves from the newspaper," was my parting counsel.

But Stephen's high hopes were to be quickly dashed into the depths of despair, and for many weary weeks he lived in a nightmare of anxiety, only in the end to give up all hopes of his happiness. From a happy-go-lucky being playing at the dangerous game of espionage from motives probably actuated by the sense of his down-trodden race, he was in a few weeks to develop into a ferocious enemy of the military Junkers who, he believed, were the murderers of beautiful Renée Avallo.

By great good luck Stephan decided to deliver my letter to my cousin first. On arrival there, he found the Jouret family in terrible distress. The good-hearted Lucy Jouret had evidently already guessed at the state of Stephan's feelings for the French girl. She at once took him alone into another room, and there tearfully told him the news of the disaster. During the night Renée Avallo had been arrested and flung into prison as a dangerous spy!

Stephan was too stunned to make any remarks, as my cousin, her heart almost breaking in sympathy with the stricken Pole, told him what had happened.

The whole incident had happened close to the home of the Avallos on the outskirts of Lille, but the pity of the whole affair was that none of the Avallo family had anything to do with the actual occurrence. As happened

in countless cases, Renée was caught by the repercussion.

Three weeks before, a British airman, whilst attempting to bomb the Lille military headquarters, was forced to descend on the outskirts of the town. He promptly destroyed the machine, and the German authorities came to the conclusion that the airman had perished in the flames. The authorities were wrong, for two civilians had hidden the airman for some days. They procured a disguise for him and passed him over the frontier.

Then shortly afterwards had occurred the imprudent mistake which was to cause a terrible amount of suffering.

The airman again flew over Lille, but instead of dropping a load of bombs on the military headquarters, he dropped a shower of leaflets, giving his greetings to the Military Governor and apologizing for not making the acquaintance of the General during his enforced stay in Lille. The airman assured the General that the lack of politeness was solely due to pressure and shortness of time; but he hoped at a future date to make the General's better acquaintance, when that august person was on the run back to Berlin!

In the British temperament such high spirits certainly do not mean bravado. It was just the schoolboyish expression of "playing the game". But what the airman did fail to understand, however, was the mentality of the Teutonic military caste of those days. The military Junkers had simply no conception of such humour, for such pranks were either regarded as beneath contempt or were taken as a deadly insult. It was sad, but no less a characteristic of the Junker temperament, not to play at chivalry in war. War was to be waged in the Zabern

tradition, wholeheartedly. The gesture of shaking hands after a fight, practised for generations by the English-speaking races, was simply not understood by the invaders. The matter was taken as a deadly insult.

A reign of terror immediately started in Lille. Huge fines and levies were laid on the town, and house-to-house raids were the order of the day, especially in the district where the airman had fallen. It was in one of these raids that in the room of Renée Avallo was found several copies of the proscribed newspaper. One copy meant a receiver, a heinous crime in itself, but several copies meant a distributor, and in the proclamations placarded all over the town this offence had been proscribed as a capital offence, and such persons were to be treated as dangerous spies.

Stephan shuddered, and his heart nearly failed him as he imagined the indignities and methods the beautiful girl would be subject to in prison. But, to his eternal honour, in those first terrible moments he remembered others first. For the time being he could do nothing useful for the unfortunate Renée Avallo. The fortitude of the French girl might hold out, but under pressure she might divulge the source of the journal. Madame Brise and her son must be warned with all possible speed if, indeed, it was not too late already.

Stephan begged of my cousin to gather all the information she could about the girl of his dreams, so that if any possibility of escape presented itself later he would be on hand. "I am going immediately to Ledeghem, but I shall return here to-morrow."

In two hours Stephan was with Madame Brise. He had carefully searched the street for Secret Service agents

before he ventured to knock on the door of the house.

For obvious reasons he could not give the message as a direct warning, but he said:

"Madame, I was in Lille this morning, and I gather from a trusted friend of mine that Mademoiselle Avallo was arrested last night and cast into prison as a spy. I understand several copies of some journal were found in her possession. I came to tell you, madame, as I thought it would be only decent on my part to let you know the reason why, at any rate for some time, you will not be able to hear from her."

Madame Brise, with startled eyes, thanked the Pole for his kindly thought, little knowing the danger he was running by his act.

Stephan quickly took his leave, for he saw that the woman was on tenterhooks to warn her son of the disaster. Stephan well knew that the pair would disappear immediately, and he was certain that the capable-looking son would undoubtedly have made arrangements for such an emergency.

Stephan returned to Roulers, but it was Alphonse who came to me and told the distressing news of the arrest of the unfortunate young French girl. My heart went out in sympathy to her and the suffering Stephan.

During the ensuing days Alphonse was a tower of strength to his stricken comrade. It was the Alsatian who made frequent journeys to Lille, in an endeavour to discover the whereabouts or fate of Mademoiselle Avallo. But he could discover very little. By my cousin he was told the prison she lay in, but no one was allowed to see her. Alphonse had also discovered the ominous fact that

the house in Ledeghem had been raided by German Secret Service agents twenty-four hours after the flight of Madame Brise and her son.

"If Renée has been forced to implicate me, I care not," Stephan had said dully to me during one of his rare visits.

"But, Stephan," I had answered, "the agents may easily have found a clue other than out of the mouth of Renée. There is no doubt you would have been questioned long ago if she had been forced to implicate you."

The Pole agreed, but we both knew in our hearts that Renée Avallo was shielding her late runner.

The shells were falling with a regular crump, crump ! into the town when one night Stephan hurried into our home.

"Sister," he began, "a house in the Rue Carré is being watched day and night by Secret Service agents. I have discovered that, under an assumed name, Madame Brise lives there. Her papers must apparently be in order, otherwise she would never be allowed to remain there. Without being too indiscreet, I have watched myself, but I have never caught sight of the son. Now I am convinced the police are leaving her there, keeping the house under constant observation, in the hope that the son will visit his mother sooner or later. We must get into touch with her some way, because we cannot leave the poor woman without making some effort to warn and help her."

I instantly agreed, and was relieved to see that this new turn was taking Stephan's thoughts away from the Lille disaster.

I thought of several plans to speak to Madame Brise

without raising suspicion, but most were too obvious and had to be rejected, for anyone evincing interest in a total stranger under such conditions would be suspect immediately.

But brave old Canteen Ma solved the riddle. We had spoken to the bluff hawker, and she had undertaken to pass a letter prepared by Alphonse and me.

At irregular intervals on various days she passed down the Rue Carré with her vegetable-and-fruit cart. After several futile attempts, Canteen Ma was gratified to see Madame Brise walk out of her door and ask the price of some vegetables. As Canteen Ma stopped, three soldiers who were passing surrounded the vehicle. "Now, mother, no thieving. How much are these apples?" one asked as he held up a rosy-looking apple.

She turned to the soldier, and with the remark, "An apple a day keeps the 'tommies' away", she went on jesting and joking and served the laughing trio.

Meanwhile Canteen Ma had noticed two things. One was that the slinking form of the watching Secret Service agent was approaching her cart. The other was that Madame Brise, even though placed in such distressing circumstances, could not forget her natural instinct. She was a fussy buyer, and Canteen Ma was thankful for it.

The agent strolled up and handled some apples, and in Flemish enquired the price. She bestowed a smile and a meaning look on the agent, drawing his attention to the fussy manner in which the would-be purchaser was examining the wares.

"Give me men, or the military, for buying, all the time," exclaimed Canteen Ma, for the benefit of the

agent. "Some people give me a pain under the apron the way they fiddle about with my stuff."

The man paid, and as he walked slowly away he heard Canteen Ma in a frigid voice saying. "Now, madame, those two cabbages are two marks. You may take it from me, to-morrow they'll be four." But the agent did not see the meaning look the rosy-cheeked hawker threw at Madame Brise. The cabbages were purchased, and the letter was passed under the very eyes of the agent, for, as Madame Brise paid, he re-passed the cart.

The letter assured Madame of the writer's *bona fides*. It warned her that her house was watched night and day, evidently in the hope of capturing her son. It finished by asking for complete trust in the writer, and that it would be to the advantage of all concerned if Madame would disclose the whereabouts of her son Robert, so that a plan could be devised for passing him over the frontier. When a favourable opportunity presented itself, the answer was to be passed to Canteen Ma, by the same means that the letter she was reading had been smuggled to her.

Three days afterwards Canteen Ma handed to me Madame Brise's answer. She wrote that she would take the risk of confiding in the unknown writer. If the intentions were genuine, then it was help sent from heaven itself. She thanked us for the warning, but said she already had a suspicion that the house was being watched, and she knew the object must be the capture of her son. Robert Brise had struck on the ingenious idea of getting himself imprisoned for some venial offence, under the false name of Hector van Callwyn, a

Flemish workman. Both mother and son possessed false passports. Robert was at that moment actually in one of the many civilian prisons of Roulers, but up to the moment she had no means of warning her son against attempting to visit her in the house of the Rue Carré.

As soon as possible I told Stephan and Alphonse the answer I had received from Madame Brise, and the false name and the prison Robert was in. We arranged on the spot that I was to get word through to him, Stephan was to organize the escape, and Alphonse was to ask Canteen Ma to provide a runner as guide to the frontier.

I was in great luck from the first, for a stroke of good fortune occurred when I spoke to a civilian youth, Arthur Devos. He was the high-spirited son of a local banker, and was always in trouble with the German authorities. He had just been released from prison, and quite by chance I enquired which prison he had been in. My heart gave a sudden leap when he said "Sergeant Stekkel's." This was the prison Robert Brise was hiding in. The sergeant had the reputation amongst the civilians of being humane and easy, and he was known amongst them by the nickname of "Tiny". He was a Bavarian, and at one time must have been a splendid figure of a man, but in some early battle he was badly wounded, and he was now but a shadow of his pristine glorious self.

Casually I asked the young Arthur, "Did you by any chance come across a prisoner, Hector van Callwyn?"

"Yes, Marthe," he answered eagerly. "We were chums slept in bunks side by side, and we struck up a great friendship. But that's not his real name he told me, for

he has asked me to visit his mother, who is living in the Rue Carré. I am to tell her that all's well with him, and I'm to ask her not to worry about him. He thinks that if any search is being made for him the hunt will have died down by the time he is due for release."

There and then I decided to take Arthur Devos into my confidence as far as Robert Brise was concerned.

"Listen, Arthur," I said. "Don't go near the house in the Rue Carré. It's under constant observation, so, you see, if you went there you would do infinitely more harm than good. I promise you to get the message into her hands that all is well with Robert. Meanwhile, good friends are working for both, as they are in great danger by staying in this district. Now tell me, what is the routine of the prison, and leave no detail out of what you and the supposed Hector van Callwyn did."

"Well, Martha," he answered with a laugh, "for anyone with the ready marks in his pocket, there is no routine. Tiny is one of the easiest gaolers it's possible for 'hardened criminals' like us to get hold of. I'll tell you"—and with great gusto Arthur related an ordinary day under Sergeant Stekkel. "There were ten of us in our squad and all fellows with a bit of ready money. Tiny sees to *that*, for he's got a wonderful nose for those that are free at buying Schnapps. We are the *élite*, and the sergeant takes personal charge of us. Our bunch is the roadmenders' squad, and Tiny's special pet.

"Seven-thirty in the morning we are all assembled in the yard, and Stekkel, as the senior N.C.O., details the other squads off. They are for unloading, one at the canal, another at the railway; and there's a third, the street-sweepers. Tiny sees them off the premises under the guard. Then he

turns to us. With loud, fierce commands, but with a wink to the nearest roadmender, he marches us to the prison-dump, and there we are handed out our implements of toil—pickaxes, shovels and the like. And away we go marching through the town, with Tiny taking up the rear. When we are well away in the country, Tiny selects some likely-looking road, hopelessly in disrepair. A job for weeks. We tear up the road as Tiny solemnly walks off a distance of a hundred yards and planks down a signboard in the middle of the roadway, ROAD UP. NO THOROUGHFARE. The 'road-up' sign is placed at both ends. This is a great idea of the sergeant's; it keeps prying gendarmes away, and there's no chance of us being surprised by dashing motor-cars with staff-officers in them.

"Tiny returns and sits him down on a cobble-stone, whistling softly to himself. Now is the time for one of us to say, 'It's dry work to-day, Sergeant, road-making. How would a drop of Schnapps go down?' Tiny's interest in road-mending is at once forgotten.

"Looking at the trees and examining the hedges minutely, he ejaculates, 'I haven't seen no blasted Schnapps growing on the branches round here, and not being a Prussian general myself, I don't carry bloody Schnapps around with me, either.'

"We all laugh at Tiny's joke. 'Come on, Sergeant,' one will say, 'I've got a spare mark or two, and I see a likely-looking café just a little way down the road.'

"As I was the youngest member of the road-mending aspirants, he usually turned to me. 'Here, my young cock-roach, keep your eyes skinned for those rotten Prussian gendarmes, and if any of those staff-generals, dashing around here, winning the War, passes that barrier there'—

pointing to the road-up notice—'and asks for me, tell them the Bavarian is within.'

"And Tiny, with his squad, repairs to the café, and that's all the repairing that'll be done that day. With a grin, I take up the look-out for gendarmes, and after a while I am relieved by one of the squad, and that goes on the whole time, until three-thirty in the afternoon; for, once in the café, one of the toilers is sure to produce a pack of cards, and as Tiny is a decent soul, he's allowed to win a mark or two; but towards the end he gets a bit shaky, so the madame of the café brings him a bucket of water, and, puffing and blowing like a grampus, he swills himself sober. There's been many a day we've almost carried him back to the prison. Those days we take a short cut over the fields. On returning, Tiny takes the roll-call of the whole prison.

"And that's the day routine. There's about one hundred yards of the road up, in front of the Café Paradise, on the Beveran-Ardoyle route, and that job is going to last until the end of the War, believe me. Now at night——"

"That's enough, that's enough, Arthur," I said, laughing away at his description of Tiny and his idea of work for the prisoners. "I've heard enough. Now do you think you could speak to Hector?" I asked.

"Why, of course. I'll go to-morrow morning on the job, as if by accident. Tiny is very friendly with me, having drunk numberless glasses of Schnapps at my expense. I'll offer him one as a free agent this time; he'll be pleased. Then leave it to me to speak to Hector."

Very much relieved at how things were shaping, I explained to the young Arthur as much of the plan as I thought necessary.

"Arthur," I said, "tell the supposed Hector it is absolutely necessary to make his escape over the frontier immediately, for any moment now the authorities may divine his whereabouts. They must have already deduced that he is somewhere in the district, or will come shortly to visit his mother, otherwise the house would not be watched so carefully. Ask him to manœuvre his look-out for the later part of the day. When he sees the coast is clear, he is to strike across the fields and make for Van Root's farm. You know the Van Roots, Arthur, don't you?" I questioned.

"Yes." The youth nodded. "On the Thourout Road."

"Well, please give him his directions. On arrival at Van Root's, he is to say to Madame he is from the *Carillon*. She will see him well hidden for the few hours until his time comes to depart for the frontier. If it can be managed, tell him his mother will be at Van Root's to wish him Godspeed."

"Trust me, Martha; he'll have the instructions to-morrow morning, and, if I know anything of our man, he'll go like a bird, for he's eating his heart away in that hole."

I managed to get hold of Stephan and tell him of my good fortune and the arrangements I had made. The Pole promised, if possible, to get into touch with Madame Brise. Canteen Ma would not be available in the time, so Stephan would go to the house himself if all other means failed. He would ask the woman to leave the house somewhere around dusk, and to try and get away without drawing the attention of the watching Secret Service agent. If she saw she was followed, she was to pretend to do some ordinary shopping in the Market Square, and in this event

she was not to attempt to make the Van Roots. Meanwhile Stephan would go to Van Root's and arrange with the runner supplied by Canteen Ma to take Robert Brise over the frontier.

One of my most nerve-racking ordeals was the fact that I could only participate just so far in an undertaking and no farther. For me the waiting on the outcome was far more trying than if I was in the thick of it. In the commencement of my dangerous rôle a thousand and one doubts would assail me, causing almost a nervous breakdown. But now, as soon as my necessary part was finished, I was gradually and successfully schooling myself to put the matter completely from my mind, and concentrated on the work on hand. So, although the thought of Robert Brise often came to me during the next few days, I had become quite adept at dismissing the matter from my calculations.

But, in any case, there was an abundance of work to distract my thoughts.

The Allies were battering at the gates. The wounded, all kinds of tortured humanity, streamed in a never-ending procession. The town and neighbourhood were subject to constant day and night raids, and during the day heavy shelling. German troops, reinforcements, were flooding the area. The air was electric, and the civilians went about their daily tasks with high hopes. Rumours swept the town: the "knubs" were getting it hot; they were losing; and the Grey Invaders would be rolled back. The civilians became insolent, and the authorities tightened the rein. Not yet was deliverance to come. Many weary, heart-breaking months were to pass before the invaders were finally driven out.

But quietly I went about my tasks, hopeless, tiring labour in the hospital, and always the reports for the frontier; movements of troops, guns, new units, reinforcements, troops leaving for the East, and troops just arrived for the West. Every detail, no matter how small, flashed over to the Allied agents for them to unravel and make a complete whole.

It was thus more than a week later I heard from Stephan how nearly the escape of Robert Brise ended in complete disaster.

Without drawing suspicion on himself, Stephan had managed to give Madame Brise her instructions. Troops were pouring into the area, so additional billets had to be found. On the morning of the day arranged for the escape of Robert Brise, Stephan, on reaching the orderly-room, noticed that several streets had been added to the town's billeting area, and one of the streets named was the Rue Carré.

The billeting N.C.O. was an old drinking crony of the Pole's, so, approaching the N.C.O. with a knowing look, Stephan asked: "Sergeant, will you let me do the Rue Carré? There's a little 'chicken' I'd like to get talking to."

Knowing the gallant Stephan's little weakness, and also the Pole's fluent Flemish, the sergeant gladly pushed the papers over to Stephan and said, "There's the particulars of the families that already live in the street. I want one hundred and fifty billets from that crowd, and no protests."

"Very good, sergeant," answered Stephan.

He worked his way the opposite end from the house of Madame Brise. This would give the watching agent time to understand the uncongenial work Stephan was engaged

in. Carrying his bundle of papers and affecting to whistle a popular tune unconcernedly as he passed from door to door, the Pole walked boldly into each house, took account of the number of family residing there, and gruffly told the inhabitants how many soldiers they could expect to be billeted on them. At last he came to Madame Brise's house.

He pushed open the door and walked up the narrow hall. The woman was standing in a bare kitchen, and on catching sight of Stephan she could hardly suppress a scream of surprise. He was at once forced to disclose to the woman that he was an active enemy of the invaders. Hurriedly he told her of the plans for her son's escape and what she had to do. "I cannot stay longer than a moment," he said urgently. "I've heard nothing from Lille, but I'm going there in a day or two. Now, don't forget, at dusk this evening I shall precede you on the Thourout Road and lead you to the farm, where Robert will be waiting. But if you value your son's life, on no account come if you see you are followed. Go shopping in the Market Square as if nothing was afoot."

Fearfully Madame Brise promised to follow the instructions of the Pole. On leaving, he said, "Twenty soldiers will be billeted in this house, madame." Outside in the street he marked his billeting-card, and commenced to whistle the popular tune again.

The town and neighbourhood were being heavily shelled, but, notwithstanding this, Stephan strolled out to the Thourout Road in the gathering dusk. As he reached the open country he saw, some distance behind him, the hurrying figure which he easily recognized as Madame Brise.

He stopped and, under some pretence, examined the

road back towards Roulers. Satisfied that apparently no one was shadowing the woman, he walked quickly on, and after nearly an hour arrived at the winding pathway leading to Van Root's farm. Not far behind hurried Madame Brise. He turned into the pathway, waiting in the shadow of the hedges until the woman joined him.

"This is the farm, and if you will walk on until you come to an outhouse at the end of the pathway, I will join you there. I don't think anyone has followed you, but it's safest to make sure."

"For pity's sake, don't leave me!" pleaded Madame Brise. "I'm in a state of collapse. Please don't go!"

And Stephan understood. The poor woman's nerve, after so many weeks of terrific strain, had given out, and it was only in the hope of seeing her son that she had been able to bear up so long. After the distressing exertions of the day, the ominous purr of the aeroplanes overhead, the stabbing searchlight beams as they sought the skies for the raiders, and the whining shriek and roar of the dropping bombs turned the young night into a hideous and fantastic ordeal for the overwrought woman.

"Take my hand," said Stephan kindly. "There is no need to worry. Now is the time to show your courage. Your son will be here already."

He felt the woman tremble as she grasped his hand, and then her whole being stiffen as she made a supreme effort to obey his bidding. As they walked forward, hand-in-hand, the Pole said reassuringly, "The aeroplanes are seeking the Army Headquarters at Thielt; we need not fear them."

As Stephan spoke he was sure he saw a lurking shadow at a gap in the hedge, which vanished like a ghost as they

approached. Not to alarm the trembling woman further, he said nothing, but he fervently wished that his companion had been in a different state. He resolved that as soon as he had guided her to her son he would investigate. Had it been anyone from the farm they would have spoken. It passed through his mind the terrific penalties the Van Roots would be subject to should this night's work be discovered by the police. This was no time for half-measures, and Stephan felt for his automatic.

A form glided up to them, and Madame Brise held a hand to her mouth to smother a scream. It was a lanky son of the Van Roots. "Who are you?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"From the *Carillon*," answered the Pole.

"Come, follow me. I will show you where your man is," said the youth. They were guided to one of the empty cattle-sheds, and in the flickering rays of a candle mother and son met.

Stephan stood outside the door with the boy by his side. For the moment he was undecided what to do. He turned to the boy as he was about to leave, and asked, "Has the runner arrived yet?"

"Yes, long ago. More than two hours they've been in the kitchen, smoking a pipe. There's two of them."

Stephan was sure that the slinking shadow could not have been one of the runners nor the boy. The youth would have challenged immediately. If it was the agent who had shadowed the woman, he must have kept to the fields. The Pole cursed the nervousness of Madame Brise. But in any case, he thought, I have only one fellow to deal with, as he would have had no time to ask for help. And Stephan hoped with all his heart that the agent, if agent

it was who was on their track, would attempt to make the arrest single-handed.

The boy scudded back to the main building as the door of the shed opened, and the woman, now considerably more reassured, whispered, "Please come in. My son wishes to thank you."

On catching sight of Stephan, Robert Brise was struck dumb with astonishment. In the fitful gleam of the candle-light the woman was saying, "This is the man we owe so much to, Robert, and——" But her voice trailed off as she caught sight of the terrible glare in her son's eyes.

"Beware, Mother! That is the man who betrayed Renée, and we are led into a trap."

As he spoke, the door flung open, and a grating, guttural voice ordered: "Hands up, in the name of the law!"

Stephan was standing near the candle. As quick as thought he swept the light on to the floor, and with the same movement he made a crouching leap, automatic in hand, for the figure in the doorway. The agent was as quick as the Pole. From two automatics two spits of flame rent the interior of the shed, and as Stephan leapt, the agent, like a streak, backed out of the door, crashing it closed.

The agent stood a few paces from the door, revolver in hand, waiting. Suddenly he heard a commotion from the main building behind him. It was the runners in the kitchen, who had heard the uproar and were hurrying to investigate. The agent probably thought discretion the better part of valour. He sent several shots crashing through the door of the shed and vanished like a shadow.

Meanwhile it was well for Stephan that the catch of the

door had caught. He found it impossible to open the door, but on entering the shed he had noticed at the farthest end a window with sacks hung over it. Hastily flinging open the window, he vaulted through. But the agent had a moment's start, and at night, for one used to such work, it was enough. Too excited to notice the purr of the aeroplanes just overhead, Stephan shouted to the two forms hurrying towards him, "A 'knub' agent! You take the fields; I'll take the road!"

As the Pole ran towards the pathway leading to the main road, a whistling scream and deafening roaring crash, which shook the whole farmstead, flung him to the ground, covering him with mud and filth. One of the raiders had hurled its missile of death. Half-unconscious, he rose and staggered blindly forward down the pathway, totally unaware of the reason for his urge. At the end of the pathway, as he was turning into the main road, he stumbled over a prostrate form. He remembered he had just passed a gaping hole which gave out a strange stench. He sat by the form for a moment, and then, with a deep sigh, rose and staggered back to the farm. He asked for a lamp, and as he walked out of the door the two runners returned.

"He's at the bottom of the pathway, dead," he told the runners.

Madame Van Root crossed herself piously, and one of the men said, "Better leave him there, and let the police find him. You'll only bring trouble on yourself if you bring him here."

Madame van Root and Stephan walked over to the shed, and after a little trouble the door was opened. Robert was kneeling by his mother. She had fainted. The buxom

Madame van Root called the runners and had the unconscious woman carried to her own bed.

"You must go," she said to Robert. "The parting will be harder when she comes to, and there is no time to lose now." And she added, "I will look after her and see her safely back to Roulers before the morning."

Stephan was standing talking to the two runners as Robert Brise entered the kitchen again after taking his last look at his mother. He walked frankly up to the Pole, took him by the hand and said, "Forgive me, comrade."

Stephan said simply, "That's all right. Get away as quickly as you can. We will look after your mother." And then, softly, he added, "If I hear any news from Lille I will try and let you know. Good-bye, comrade, and good luck."

A few hurried words of thanks to Madame van Root, and the three men left on their perilous journey.

Although several incidents happened between times, and Stephan made frequent journeys to the French town without learning the fate of the young French girl, I am obliged to give the ending of Stephan's tragic love-story.

On a night of terror when the raiders appeared to be bombing in relays, the Pole crept in and found mother and me alone in the cellar of the café. Father had always refused to use a cellar after his terrible experience in Westroosebeke æons ago. Nothing could induce him to use anything else but his usual bedroom.

I immediately sensed something unusual in the tense figure of Stephan as he stood there without uttering one word as he handed to me a report.

I bent down and read it by the small flame of a covered

lamp. It was written out in Stephan's neat handwriting, and was a copy of Army Orders, marked "Lille Area Command". It said:

To relieve the pressure the British are putting on the Ypres salient sector, a grand attack is about to be launched along the sector in front of Lille, the Armentières-La Bassée-Lens front. But in support of this movement it is urgently requested that resolute demonstrations and feints should be made in the sector of the Army of Wurtemburg.

This was our sector, and I saw immediately that this would be important and very useful news to the British Command, for if they were definitely aware only to expect local holding attacks, then there would be no need for the Allies to rush up reinforcements to the salient, thinning the line in some other direction, obviously the hope and intention of the Lille Command.

Whilst these thoughts were running through my mind I turned over to the next sheet. A name immediately caught my eye, as it must have done Stephan's when for a few moments he had purloined the original in the Brigade orderly-room. Usually with Army Orders came statistics and information dealing with numberless things, disciplinary action amongst the troops for crime and desertion and, less frequently, action amongst civilians. Such information we usually took no notice of. But it was this that Stephan had copied in addition to the vital information, and which had caught my attention:

Avallo, Renée—French maiden—espionage—self-murder.

And then had come the date and map reference where the body had been interred.

I jumped up and cried, "Oh, Stephan, how awful! What a lie!"

"Suicide," gritted Stephan. "Such a step was not in her nature. Those damned swine have murdered her. I swear to you to-night, sister, that for every tear she has shed I shall have life." And with this terrible oath ringing in my ears, the distracted Stephan left me.

Although I had never seen the unfortunate young French girl, as I fingered the report she seemed to stand by my side in the cellar, and a grating voice was ringing through my head:

"For every tear . . . For every tear . . ."

CHAPTER VI

CANTEEN MA

ROMANY RONDEEL
NO. "3"

Who shall find a valiant woman ?—*Book of Wisdom.*

A WELL-KNOWN Flemish saying has it, "You cannot fit a square peg into a round hole". But the advent of the World War was responsible for "rounding the peg" in countless instances.

Sucked in by the maelstrom, the meek, soft-voiced youth was found to be a born leader of men. The timid miss fainting at sight of a cut finger developed into the efficient operating-theatre nurse. The gaol-bird, his hand against every man's, and every man's hand against his became the hero of a dozen desperate battles and the idol of his battalion. A respectable navvy was made out of the Duke's son, and a mining engineer became a legendary figure for astonishing exploits in the air.

But it would be difficult to find a more seemingly incongruous figure than Romany Rondeel, "Canteen Ma", who for four years, amid ferocious drives on the part of counter-espionage agents, filled the rôle of super-spy.

A little more than a year before the outbreak of War, Jules Rondeel, the husband of Romany, fell sick with an

incurable disease. He had laboured as a "voerman" (a carrier). At dawn every day from his native village of Swevezeele, with his horses shackled up to the long carrier cart, he commenced his rounds to the town of Roulers and its environs, collecting and delivering all kinds of merchandise for the small traders and the farmers. The work was hard, but to live on the meagre returns was harder, for Jules had a large, hungry family. This was the pair's second venture into matrimony. Jules from his first venture contributed three children, and Romany from her first brought two to the pool. And then regularly Romany presented the ever-complacent Jules with additions. In speaking of her large brood she was wont to say, "mine", "his", and "ours"!—three different kinds. For nearly twenty years the great-hearted Romany did financial juggling with the family budget which would turn some of our present-day European chancellors green with envy.

They were a good-natured, happy couple, and thought the world of each other. So the collapse of her Jules was a sore blow to Romany. For the rest of his life he would be reduced to sitting by the stove and sucking his everlasting pipe. At a time in life when most women of her class are completely worn out, Romany cheerfully and without a word of complaint shouldered this fresh burden. The roof must be kept over the Rondeel family, so the lumbering "voerman's" cart continued to rumble over the roads, and Romany's white elfin locks and rosy cheeks became a familiar sight on market days in the towns and villages on the north and north-eastern sides of Roulers. Dawn saw her on her way, dusk saw her return.

By the time the Grey Wave had reached her village two of Romany's sons had joined the Belgian Army, and she at once found means to communicate with her two boys. Had it not been for this fortunate chance the Allies might not have discovered a dangerous and clever spy for their cause.

The Rondeel house stood alone on the outskirts of Swevezeele, within a score yards of the broad highway from Bruges to Courtrai. The building was low and rambling, with the usual cart and store sheds. The large kitchen itself opened direct on to the roadway.

The passing and constant tramp, tramp, of countless feet and the rumble of transport past his door strangely excited the invalided Jules. On the approach of troops he would painfully rise from his seat by the stove and shuffle across to the door, standing in the opening, supporting himself with two sticks as he watched the passing hordes.

First it was the Allied troops going back—for ever going back. Then later came the invaders, a never-ending stream of singing, victorious men. The pageant was all the same to Jules, they were all alike, objects of interest, for on the slightest sound he was drawn to the doorway as if drawn by a magnet.

The younger children became so accustomed to his habit that in the end no attempt was made to stop him. Over by Ypres the invaders were being held as if in a vice, so immediate back-area commands became somewhat panic-stricken, and local commandants gave strict orders that after dusk all doors must be closed and windows shuttered.

One evening in early October old Jules heard the now

familiar sounds of the rumble-rumble of gun carriages in the distance. He rose from his seat near the stove, shuffled over to the door and stood in the opening awaiting the passing of the oncoming troops. Two of the youngest children were playing in the kitchen, and it may have been that one of them moved the lid for a moment from the stove, or it may have been the glow of the stove itself which shone out into the thickening gloom, for no light was burning in the room—but be it what it may, some moments before the head of the column drew level with the door a shot rang out and Jules, with a gentle sigh, sagged slowly to the ground and lay still by his own doorstep.

As the troops were passing a guttural voice called over from the other side of the roadway in Flemish, "Close that door!" One of the children hurriedly tried to shut the door, but the form of their prostrate father would only allow it to be half closed. This must have been sufficient to hide the glow from the roadway, as the owner of the guttural voice passed on.

When Romany returned shortly afterwards she discovered one of the children trying to close the door and the other trying to "waken" father.

Times became very hard for Romany and her family after the demise of her Jules. Freight got exceedingly scarce, and, worse still, the two beautiful cart-horses which had been the pride of Jules' life were "requisitioned" by the invaders, and Romany was reduced to a rickety-looking pony and a light cart.

Then she took the plunge. Food of every description was getting very scarce in the towns, and prices were for ever rising. Romany would buy vegetables and fruit

from the local farmers and retail the merchandise in the towns and villages. From the first days her happy change was crowned with success. Not only the civilians welcomed the bluff, rosy-cheeked vendor but the invading troops bought from her. The soldiers laughed at her rough and ready wit and atrocious German. She gave them the impression of being just an ordinary ignorant hawker of fruit and vegetables. But at this early stage she was the centre and live wire of a remarkable "postage" system. Letters were collected and delivered not only locally but to and fro over the frontier. She had chosen her runners with the same care and insight that a general chooses his staff. Indeed, she had many bold and daring spirits to draw upon, but she only took those on whom she could place implicit trust, and when it is remembered that never once was she "let down" it will be seen that behind the cheery and seemingly illiterate exterior there lay a shrewd and calculating brain. To the invaders she could neither read nor write, going so far as to pretend that she could not reckon, leaving the soldiers to add up the amount they had to pay. But it must be put on record that no attempt was ever made to swindle Canteen Ma.

Then a soldier in Roulers came in contact with Romany, and from the first he must have divined the cleverness of the vegetable vendor. He was the Q.M.S. of the Roulers canteen. Naturally, he was forced to make the first overtures. He wormed his way into the good graces of Romany by ordering whole consignments of merchandise, *and promptly paying for it.* In the commencement there was a considerable amount of fencing between the pair, in which honours were evenly divided, but the astute Q.M.S. in a joking manner belittled the

methods of his supposed fellow "knubs", and managed to convey to Romany his contempt for the invaders. Furthermore, he sympathized deeply with the difficulties she was experiencing in purchasing and collecting supplies from the farmers, for this profitable venture was becoming hedged in by all manner of restrictions—restrictions placed there by the invaders. When he had come to the conclusion that Romany had sufficient trust in him, he said, "Romany, I'm going to ask you something. I've a friend in Holland and I want to communicate with her. I don't want those prying fellows in the orderly room reading what *I'm* writing. As a special favour to me, could you get the letter sent 'over'?"

The mask dropped from the face of Romany, and a searching, penetrating look swept over the smart-looking Q.M.S. Satisfied by the open look on his face, she answered slowly: "Well, I might try, but, remember, I'm not responsible if it's found during its passage."

"It's nothing important," he said; "just an ordinary enquiry. You can read it, if you care."

"Read it," said Canteen Ma with twinkling eyes. "You ought to know I can't read a line."

"And Romany," he said, "don't forget to arrange for the answer. I'm rather anxious to know how my friend is faring, as I have not heard from her since I joined the regiment."

Romany nodded as the letter was handed to her.

Within four days the Q.M.S. received his answer, and Romany remarked as she gave it to him: "She seems almost as anxious about you as you are about her. Oh, these young folk! All full of fire!"

The Q.M.S. at once took Romany into his complete

confidence. He disclosed that he was an officer in the British Intelligence, and the innocent-worded letter he had handed to Romany was a "feeler" to his headquarters, and the answer had approved of the method of transmission. At the same time the note urgently requested precise data on the forces in the area. He told Canteen Ma that his next communication would be of the utmost importance, as it would comprise probably the first authentic account, from a trained observer, of the real numbers the German Army had in that sector, and, he added, "This will be the first time my headquarters will know for certain that the numbers opposed to the Allies in this sector are something like seven to one. They'll have a few sleepless night over there, believe me."

Romany said, "Put it in duplicate, and I'll send two of my best men. They'll have it over there inside twenty-four hours."

The astute British officer found in Romany Rondeel his ideal intermediary, and from henceforth he built around the shrewd Canteen Ma an elastic "organization" which was to give untold trouble to the invaders.

He at once took her to the town commandant's office and explained that Madame Rondeel was the chief medium whereby the canteen obtained the supplies of vegetables and fruit so necessary for the officers' messes. A pass was made out giving great freedom of movement to the erstwhile carrier.

Sure now of a ready market in Roulers, Romany launched out, and her cart was loaded almost every day until it groaned. Swevezeele was in the vicinity of Thielt, the headquarters of the Wurtemberg Army, so

the Q.M.S. at Roulers lost no time in making known Canteen Ma to the Q.M.S. at Thielt. Canteen Ma used to boast to the grinning troops surrounding her cart that she had sold vegetables and fruit to most of the crowned heads of Germany. Even the All Highest himself had eaten of her wares. And because of her frequent visits to the two canteens the troops nicknamed her "Canteen Ma".

Again I must claim the indulgence of the reader to take for granted the minor items of information and orders which Canteen Ma passed to me for transmission and action. Her activities were constant and never for one day flagged, and the help and information she gave in her inimitable manner was incalculable.

September 1915 was a hot, dry end of the summer months. Troops were flooding back from the Russian Front. The Muscovite, though not definitely crushed, was beaten to his knees. A discredited and disorderly rabble, he was driven well back into the marshes of his own forlorn country, and now had arrived the precise moment for "Shining Michael" to deliver the *coup-de-grâce* to the Allies on the West Front. If not for all time, the Muscovite was done with for at least two years, so endless guns, flaunting the notices of a hundred different battles won on the Eastern Front, and hordes of victorious troops flooded our sector. The great advance against the Russians was regarded as a resounding victory for the Fatherland, and hardly had the bells in Germany been stilled and the children returned to school, when we received the victorious staff-officers from the crumbling Eastern front dashing hither and thither and showing the real importance. Perhaps the godlike figure of the Victor

of Tannenburg would himself come to the West. Then Heaven help the stubborn Allies—he would show them what was what!

Great preparations were afoot. In a few short days pygmy ammunition dumps and forage stores were transformed into huge stores spreadeagled over the countryside. Rough roads and light-gauge railroads were run across fields ready for the plough and through waving corn. Wherever a contour of ground or a clump of trees gave cover, there ammunition dumps, forage stores, and transport lines were formed. The districts of Thielt and Roulers became a veritable beehive of industry and activity.

Hurry and rush! Make ready for the advance. *Nach Paris! Nach London!* again became the familiar cry. The hooters on the cars carrying the important-looking staff officers called out the musical prophesy, Ber-lin–Par-is!

Nach Paris, before the Russian bear had time to regain his breath, before the Muscovite could return with his millions.

These were the conditions and rumours going the rounds in our sector, and, indeed, the morale uplift on the German Armies owing to the successes on the Eastern Front might bode ill for the Allies.

Notwithstanding the restrictions placed on every description of merchandise, Canteen Ma still managed to secure her cartload of fruit and vegetables, and every other day saw her take her usual route to the Roulers canteen, and in the town soldiers would stop her to buy.

"It's a pity you don't have a victory like that every day," she said to the grinning soldiers. "We could all do

with it," she went on cheerfully; "loosens the purse-strings and makes everybody happy. Why, I've sold out every day this week, and they're still shouting for more."

"Ha, old one, you'll have to come a long journey to sell us apples next week. We're booked for Ypres," said a young, serious-faced soldier.

"And the week after, old one, we're for Paris," spoke up another with his mouth full of apple.

"Ho, ho," smiled Canteen Ma. "Paris you might get, with a little bit of fighting and a lot of luck, but Ypres, my son, you'll never see the inside of. Our Lady of the Palisades sits there."

Now this was a firm and unshakable belief of Romany's.

An old legend spoken of by the Flemish peasants tells that no invader can capture Ypres, because of the Lady of the Palisades. "You can capture all the Russian generals that exist, but don't count on Ypres, you won't get *there*."

"Well, mother," one called out as she was moving off, "we'll see if your 'old woman' can stop us."

But Romany shook her head, muttering, "There you'll never get, only as a prisoner."

Canteen Ma turned down a side street which would bring her to the rear of the canteen building. Outside the door Fritz Thamlow was eagerly looking out for Canteen Ma. Fritz was a stout, bespectacled being with a great moon face. His forage cap seemed to fit on a small corner of his large head.

"Whoa!" called the woman as she drew level with the door. "Whoa, Bill!" The tired-looking pony halted.

"*Guten tag*, Fritz," said Canteen Ma; "how are the troops eating to-day?"

Fritz dismally shook his great head. "I want all you've got, Romany! Officers' messes are springing up like mushrooms in a night, and the canteen is nearly empty. No smokes, no sauerkraut, no nothing."

"Never mind, cheer up, my cherub. Wait until you get all the good things that are coming from Russia. They say there's a line of 'spack' (bacon) that would reach from here to Berlin arriving. You'll get back all the fat you've lost in the good days coming."

Again Fritz shook his head dismally. "It's a long way from Russia, and those Prussian swine will swipe the lot up before it has a chance to get here. What do they care about the fighting troops?" asked Fritz, who had never seen the Front. "What do they care if we lose six kilos in a few months? Why, nothing!" And almost with tears in his eyes he bent towards Romany and whispered, "Couldn't you get me just a half-kilo of farm sausages, Romany?" he pleaded, smacking his watery lips.

Romany looked at the soldier with great surprise and no little doubt. "Sausages, Fritz! What *are* you thinking of? Sausages! Why, in the whole of Flanders I don't think you could find 'em." But, seeing the pleading look on the fat, good-humoured face of the German, she melted. "I'll try. I'll do my best. But don't you count too much on my getting them. You Wurtemburgers are all the same. You'd get any poor creature into the most awful trouble to satisfy your own greed. Sausages and Kaiser, that's all you ever think of."

The face of the German beamed. "The day after to-morrow, Romany?" he asked eagerly.

"Just listen to him. He thinks I've a factory turning nothing but pigs! Come along, help me throw these things off," she said as she commenced to unload the few remaining articles.

As Fritz was unloading two sacks of potatoes, Canteen Ma casually asked, "And where's his highness to-day?"

"His highness" alluded to the smart-looking Q.M.S. of the canteen. Nodding his head backwards, Fritz indicated that "his highness" was in the building, and then he remembered: "Oh yes, he wants to see you about getting more stuff. We indent and indent and requisition for tons of stuff, but it's all the same. Instead of lorry loads all we get is a few cases. And, Romany, we're warned to be careful with the lousy bit they send us," he finished disgustedly.

"Well, tell him I'm here, my cherub, if he wants to see me, and I hope he doesn't want me to do the impossible, like sausages! . . . Gar-r," she mocked, as the grinning soldier disappeared into the building.

The Q.M.S. came out into the street. He was immaculately dressed, and was bareheaded, his hair cut in the approved German Army fashion.

"Good day, Frau," he said in German. "I would like you to get as many provisions as possible. Here are the requisition notes." He handed two coloured sheets of paper to the woman, and continued in Flemish: "I don't seem to be able to secure the quantities I require from headquarters, so I depend upon you to help. It's

very important that you do your utmost to deliver the command in those notes."

Romany nodded, well knowing that his meaning was not alluding to the provisions. "Very well, Herr," she answered, "I'll do my best, but the farmers are very close, and the prices they're asking would turn anyone green."

He understood the hidden meaning. The bluff hawker was conveying the fact that information was getting increasingly difficult to pass.

He bent down to flick off a speck of dust from his shiny field boots. "The under note is the important order. Take great care," he murmured.

Canteen Ma manœuvred the pony round in the narrow street, nodded, and commenced her journey home.

Before she arrived at the end of the street a breathless voice called, "Hi, Romany!" Looking round, she saw the stout figure of Fritz ambling hurriedly after her, and she slowed down the gait of the pony, who, knowing that his nose was turned homewards, had commenced a jogtrot. Fritz drew alongside and in a pleading voice said, "Don't forget, Romany, and the day after tomorrow, eh?"

Romany threw her eyes towards heaven. "Good lord, what's the matter with the man?"

"The sausages, Romany, my dear, the sausages. Try and make it a kilo, Romany, you won't regret it," said the breathless Fritz as he trotted by the side of the cart.

"Ha, the sausages. Oh, it's that, is it, that's worrying you?" asked the rosy-cheeked hawker, pretending to have forgotten Fritz's request. "Don't count 'em before they're made, my cherub, but I'll do my best."

"Listen, Romany," he pleaded, "if you get them for me I promise you something fine."

As Romany made progress over the dreadful roadways she received curt nods and, in some cases, laughing winks from feld-gendarme patrols, and occasionally she singled out a secret service man bent on his difficult mission of spy-catching. Canteen Ma knew all the detectives well by sight, and that secret body would have been truly amazed had they known that their every movement and counter-espionage activities were as an open book to the twinkling eyes of the illiterate hawker. She was only on distant nodding acquaintance with one or two, and she thought and was thankful for the fact that the system of retaining the personnel of the intelligence bureau almost unchanged made her dangerous activities all the easier.

During the period of the occupation very little change happened with the staff stationed at Thielt. Units might come and divisional headquarters might go, but the intelligence unit stayed on. And as she trotted homewards she thanked whichever war lord was responsible for that fortunate chance. With the exception of the secret service agents, for these men she considered beyond the pale, she was on nodding acquaintance with most of the staff. She was well aware that constant changes and fresh faces made for zeal, and zealous police were dangerous. Once she had been held up and searched by a new and young agent, one whom she had not marked down as a hunter, but luckily that day she was carrying nothing that mattered. The incident, however, demonstrated that any changes were to be carefully noted in the future. So when she heard of a newcomer

she made it her business to get under his notice as quickly as possible. The result was that she was very seldom stopped for search, and she roamed the area practically free and unmolested, picking up all manner of vital information.

Arriving at home, her youngest son Pierre unshackled the pony and led him to his stable. Pierre was a precocious youth of fourteen, the result of being left fatherless and living at the hub of the world's frightful struggle. Fortunately his energies were all directed to helping his mother, and he had long ago elected himself as the "man" of the house, and he was intensely loyal.

Canteen Ma would reign now for two hours in her own kingdom. There was the cooking to be done and the children to be sent to bed. When this had been successfully and rapidly accomplished, Romany sat down by a covered lamp and slowly and with knitted brows she read the important message handed to her by the Q.M.S.

These orders, she thought, were no doubt the result of an urgent message she had handed to the Q.M.S. the day before. It had come from Holland, and Romany had made a special journey to Roulers to deliver it.

Her face became grave and set as she slowly read on. The request amounted to this. The British Intelligence were somewhat alarmed at the heavy German preparations in the district, and something must be done, and done quickly, to delay any threatened German attack. If the weather held, such an attack was almost certain to be attempted, and a serious German advance now might spoil altogether the contemplated Allied offensive planned for the spring. To assist in any attempts which might be

made to harass the invader in the area, a proved and determined British agent would be dropped by aeroplane, conditions permitting, at dusk the very next evening. Minute details of the proposed landing-spot were given, but the Q.M.S. had translated the map references and in simple language had indicated the place as the meadow of Mayer's farm, and at the same time he had requested Canteen Ma to be on hand and render what aid she could to the British agent.

Romany knew the landing-place well. It was in the grounds of an extensive farmstead, and was a place where she purchased most of her potatoes. For secrecy, a better spot could not have been chosen. The owner, with his family, had fled the country on the approach of the invaders, and the farm was run by one of his old employees, a man most friendly to Romany, and one who, if asked for help, would readily give it. Romany, however, decided to let events unravel before approaching the farmer. In any case, she could easily make it her business to be on hand should the aeroplane land in the vicinity of the meadow. From prowling patrols she had no fear, for her well-known figure and pass to purchase from the farmers in the district was sufficient excuse should she be stopped and questioned. To be passing a lonely spot at such a time, even if seen, would not create suspicion, as her search for merchandise to supply the hungry and grumbling messes took her to the most out-of-the-way places.

The next morning Canteen Ma made all preparations for the reception of the British agent. The house and outbuildings had been constantly used as a sanctuary for passing fugitives, and at times German troops had been

billeted in the sheds. She knew that the agent would be provided with passport and papers all "in order", no matter what disguise he came in, but she had no idea what form his activities would develop into. However, with a grim smile to herself, she thought, "He'll find plenty of trouble in the district wherever he goes." Romany was all set, and then complications quickly developed, buther sang-froid never deserted her. Just after the children had been sent off to school a wizened old man, carrying a bundle of umbrellas stuck into a hemp bag slung across his shoulders, shuffled into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Phil," greeted Canteen Ma. "How is it with the covers?"

The man shook his head despondently. "Awful, awful, Romany; no rain, no people. It wouldn't be so bad if the soldiers would use 'em. I *have* heard as how the Chinks use 'em going into a fight, but here, Romany, they're using the silk for sandbags, and the girls strip the covers for making blouses. I allus told 'em an umbrella would come in handy like for all manner of things. Who'd 'a thought it, Romany? Who'd 'a thought it?"

This innocent passage was indulged in for the benefit of Pierre, who was at the table finishing his breakfast, but as the boy left the kitchen the sharp eyes of the old vendor in umbrellas threw Canteen Ma a meaning look.

"All right, Phil, pass it over quickly." The man had pulled out a dilapidated umbrella and was fumbling with the catch. Giving the handle a sudden twist he pulled forth a thin cylindrical piece of paper and quickly handed

it to the woman. "It's for 'Q' Roulers, and it's urgent," he whispered.

"Well, Phil, it will have to wait until to-morrow, I'm busy to-day," she returned, as she folded away the missive and hid it in her voluminous dress.

Phil, with great care, filled and lighted a pipe. The woman set a cup before him, and as she commenced to pour out the coffee a loud rap came on the door, and without a by-your-leave a dusty and tired-looking Feldwebel strode into the kitchen.

Glancing at Canteen Ma, the soldier asked, "You the Frau here?"

She nodded.

"Well, old one, a platoon will be billeted here. Thirty men, and they're coming in this morning."

Canteen Ma violently protested. "You can't bring them here," she returned. "The house is full with young children, and I want my sheds for the stuff that I supply the officers' messes with, and no thieving troops are going to hang around my place, Feldwebel."

Mention of the officers' messes somewhat impressed the Feldwebel, but he replied, "You can talk all day, mother, but it won't alter the fact that thirty men will stay here in your outhouses, for I see there's tons of room."

"Now look, Feldwebel," said Canteen Ma in a voice of finality, "you're only wasting your time. All I have to do is to walk into Thielt and the town major will give me an order for your removal. Don't bring them here, for it's more than likely you'll have to find them another billet to-morrow."

The Feldwebel shrugged his shoulders. "Can't help

that, mother. If I have to move them to-morrow, why, I'll move 'em, but to-night here they'll stay."

Romany, for once, was at a loss what to say as she looked with disgust at the umbrella merchant, who went on smoking rank-smelling tobacco without venturing a word.

Before the Feldwebel left he said, evidently trying to placate the irate woman: "They won't give you much trouble, mother. They're men from a labour battalion, and they'll be away most of the day working at the forage stores and the ammunition dump on the Wynghene Road."

This information did placate Canteen Ma, as she knew the soldiers would be marched away early in the morning, returning fairly late in the evening, mostly tired men. They would be very unlike the blustering machine-gunners she had to contend with at one time. Even the town major of Thielt appeared powerless to move the privileged machine-gun company, but Canteen Ma took matters into her own hands. She had a few words with a German military doctor friend of hers in Thielt. Pierre was wrapped up with many shawls. The doctor friend was hurriedly sent for and he diagnosed the illness as scarlet fever. When the machine-gun company had departed it was remarkable how swiftly Pierre recovered.

"So you're going to have visitors," said Phil with twinkling eyes. "I'd let 'em stay. There's nothing like a few nice fat inoffensive German 'knubs' around the house, Romany. Takes away suspicion when they're not too inquisitive."

Romany looked into the shrewd eyes of Phil and

smiled. "Yes, you're right, and I had thought of that, and I think there's something in it. Might have been worse. Labour 'knubs' are not so bad."

She immediately busied herself and the young Pierre helped in preparing one of the sheds for the labour platoon. The preparation consisted of removing everything from the shed and leaving the building completely bare.

"Now, Pierre, my lad, put 'Bill' in the cart. I'm late already"; but before she left on her purchasing rounds the tired platoon marched into the yard.

"Pierre," she admonished that willing youth, "keep your eyes well skinned, and don't let those 'knubs' roam about the house."

As Canteen Ma trudged along the road old Phil had quietly joined her. "I've nothing to go back, Phil. Where are you making for now?" she asked.

"Thourout," answered Phil.

"Well, go to Manton Devany and tell him I've work for him"; and as they strode along she whispered, "Dangerous work, Phil."

The old man hitched up his bundle of umbrellas by a sudden jerk of his shoulders, and with a "God be with you, Romany," left the woman as she turned into the entrance to a farmstead. Fortified with a large bundle of dirty mark-notes hidden well away in her dress, Romany had commenced her purchasing rounds. The tour was carefully mapped out. It would take her, besides to numberless farms, into village and hamlet where artillery units, machine-gun companies, storm troops, and all the panoply of attack preparations revealed themselves to the ever alert Canteen Ma. All

changes and additions were immediately noted and reported upon. Nothing escaped her watchful eyes. And in practically every case it was the troops themselves who supplied the information.

A joking enquiry to a would-be buyer, asking about the welfare of some German wag, and the bluff hawker had the answer: "Oh, him, he's gone to throw a few of his jokes to the 'Tommies' at Passchendaele."

Romany knew, then, that a crack machine-gun company had moved up the line.

The farm which Romany had turned into was one which she approached with much distaste. Farmer Bestoen was a taciturn being, who sided with no one. His own countryfolk and the invader were alike to him. His was a type worse than selfish: absolutely indifferent to the sufferings and trials of his suppressed countrymen. He attempted the impossible in the circumstances, the pose of a silent neutral. Romany had long been aware that his indifference was caused by craven fear, so she had decided to keep a close eye on his actions. Afraid to help his own people, he was as yet afraid to appear too friendly with the invader, because of the almost certain vengeance of his neighbours. Had it not been for the official permit to purchase, Canteen Ma was certain that he would have refused to supply her with as much as a potato. His fears had made him a hard man, and the bluff patriot despised him.

That was Romany's routine. A cheerful conversation here, a sympathetic talk there, buying and gathering what little she could; but it was getting more difficult to stock the cart. Many were the new farmsteads she had to call upon, and thus her area widened and widened.

At last, an hour before dusk, she arrived at the Mayers' farmstead.

Here was a cheerful welcome, and Canteen Ma always received everything that could be spared. "Sit down, Romany, and drink a cup of coffee," was the hearty invitation of Odil Vreak. Odil was working the farm for farmer Mayer, the owner, and was a genuine friend to Romany, although he had not the slightest suspicion of the rosy-cheeked hawker's activities.

Romany settled herself comfortably in a chair, tired from the heat and the dust. She had still more than an hour to wait before the dusk came creeping over the countryside.

"Well, Romany, what good news to-day?" asked Odil.

"Nothing much, but I hear that the 'knubs' expect thousands of tons of foodstuff from the East. But I think it's only a hope," returned Canteen Ma doubtfully.

"Well, the sooner it comes down here the better I will like it," said the farmer, "for on the last requisition the 'knubs' sent in I'm forced to deliver them seventy per cent. of my total produce. It's heartbreaking. I'm to deliver it without any draft horses, and when I ask for payment the prices I'm given don't cover the labour. It would be a godsend if what they get from Russia alters that state of things."

Without any comment Romany sipped her coffee, and Odil continued his tale of woe.

"Engineers came two days ago, surveyed one of the best crop fields, and now they have informed me they are going to run a light railway straight across the farm, to link up with the ammunition dump on the

Wynghene Road. Yes, yes, Romany, they'll have us out of it in another few months."

Then suddenly he asked her, "Romany, would you deliver fifty bags of potatoes to the forage stores on the Wynghene Road for me? You know how I'm pressed since the draft horses have been commandeered.

"Certainly I will," answered Romany, glad to render a service to one who was always kind to her. "The first day I'm free I'll either come myself or send a man to deliver the stuff to the 'knubs'."

When the price for the transport had been satisfactorily arranged, Canteen Ma gently broached the subject of the sausages. In addition, she asked for butter for her own use. It was with great reluctance that the farmer parted with such precious eatables, but he could not refuse Romany.

The shadows were deepening as Canteen Ma took her leave of the kind-hearted Odil. Placidly jolting along the quiet country lane, Romany was nervous. Instinctively she could not bring herself to trust these new-fangled air ideas, and this would be the first time she had come in close contact with an air machine. She almost hoped that the thing would not appear. In the haze of a sinking sun she heard the rumbling roar of the guns, but suddenly another noise, the distant purr of an aeroplane, made every nerve in her body tense. She halted the docile pony and anxiously gazed around the landscape. She could only see two workers in the distance, toilers of the fields. The distant purr had become a roar, and as the haze and deepening dusk enveloped the countryside in secrecy the hastening noise of the aeroplane engine stopped, and the listening

woman, every faculty now taut, heard the whistling swish of the propeller and one startling burst of the engine, and then silence again as the small aeroplane swooped and landed with the swiftness and precision of a bird. For a distance it glided along the ground, and Canteen Ma, with a gasp of horror, saw its rear end heave up and almost topple over on the occupants. But by some miracle it righted itself again.

A dark form, which she rightly took for the pilot, hurriedly scrambled from the cockpit and gave a vigorous swing to the propeller. A roar, which Canteen Ma thought would bring the whole of the countryside running to investigate, and the engine restarted. The dark form hastily rushed back into the machine and then, with an increased startling roar, it swung round towards the hedge where the excited woman was waiting. Gradually lift, lift, and with a sweeping turn it climbed towards the skies. A deafening vibration and it had passed just above the fascinated Romany. Although she saw it not, Canteen Ma knew that immediately the aeroplane had landed an additional figure to the pilot had left the machine and was now lying flat in the open field, every nerve alert, anxiously watching out for any inquisitive enemy or if any civilian had observed the secret landing. Canteen Ma herself just as anxiously glanced around for a few tense seconds; then, seeing that the coast was clear, in a loud voice she called out to the startled Bill—"There, my beauty, get along." Moving down the country lane the rackety cart made a considerable noise on the hard, dry, bumpy surface, and at the same time, much to the astonishment of the docile "Bill", she commenced to complain loudly of

his laziness. The pony with his ears pricked back, and a little hurt at his owner's ungratefulness, broke into a jogtrot and, on suddenly rounding a bend in the lane, nearly ran over a man who had just scrambled through the wayside hedges.

Canteen Ma hurriedly pulled at the reins and slowed down, and as she came abreast of the lone figure she exclaimed: "Fine evening for a stroll, mister."

"And not so bad for a drive either, mother," replied the stranger composedly in perfect Flemish, for all the world, thought the excited woman, as if dropping out of aeroplanes were a daily business. Silently and quickly he walked by the side of the cart, putting as much distance behind him and the meadow as possible for fear anyone had noticed the secret landing. They had turned into the main Bruges road before another word was spoken, and meanwhile Romany, out of the corner of her eye, endeavoured carefully to examine the well-knit stranger. She could not see much of his face owing to the falling darkness and a cap pulled well over his eyes, but she saw that he was dressed as a labourer, a black muffler round his neck, and he was carrying a small bundle.

Although both were certain of each other, precautions had to be observed.

"Which direction are you taking, my cherub?" asked Canteen Ma.

"Courtrai way," he answered, "but I've a call to make on a relative of mine who lives in these parts."

"Yes," said Romany, as if only polite curiosity urged her.

"Yes," continued the stranger; "unfortunately I

don't know the house very well, for I was a toddler when I last visited my aunt."

"Your aunt, eh?" encouraged Romany, beginning to enjoy herself.

"Perhaps you might happen to know the people, mother? The name is Rondeel—Romany Rondeel!" he exclaimed brightly.

"Well, of all the coincidences!" returned Canteen Ma with such a degree of surprise that the stranger laughed aloud. "That beats sticking pins and flying labourers! Why, that's my name."

The new-found relative was suitably surprised and gratified.

"Are you young Pierre, my sister Marie's boy? You know, I have a boy myself named after you."

"No, I'm not Pierre, I'm the eldest, Jean," corrected the stranger.

"Well, well, and how is poor Marie Houpline now, Jean?"

"Oh, so so," answered Jean; "but her name, aunt, is not Houpline, it's Nestor."

"Ha, Nestor? My memory, Jean, plays stupid tricks with me in my old age. So Jean Nestor, my nephew, has dropped in on a surprise visit to his old aunt Romany. Little Jean that I haven't seen for over twenty years!"

Troops and army wagons and motors were passing the pair as they rapidly strode along the highway. In the darkness Canteen Ma suddenly dropped her bantering manner and her keen young-looking eyes seemed to bore through the stranger.

"Show me," she curtly commanded.

The man stopped and muttered, "Just a moment,

mother." He rapidly took from his pocket a pipe and a box of matches. He struck a match, leaned towards Canteen Ma, shielding the tiny glare to light his pipe. As his cupped hands went up to his face his thumb for a fleeting moment lifted the flap of his rough coat and Romany glimpsed two shining safety pins. "That's the name, is it? Jean Nestor, and you're to be my nephew. But I'm afraid it's going to be awkward to put you up. I've just had a platoon of labour soldiers foisted on to me. They're harmless, Jean, and a domesticated soldier or two around the house does away with a world of suspicion."

"Hum," ventured the stranger; "complicates matters a little, but, as you say, aunt, there's safety in numbers sometimes."

"Yes, but where am I going to put you, nephew?"

"Oh, any old nook will suit me for a few days. I knew Aunt Romany was good-natured, and I was almost certain she would put up with me for a while just until I had a look around. I hope it doesn't worry you, Aunt Romany."

"Not at all, not at all, my dear Jean, but you'd better tell me all about my poor sister Marie and her dear children, as I've something like one hundred and fifty relations living and I get mixed up in our family tree!"

Jean laughed heartily at the manner in which Canteen Ma was entering into the grim adventure. The old woman's courage warmed his heart, and a glow of admiration swept his being. "Tell me quickly: we're nearly home, and I've a very inquisitive son," urged Romany.

"Your sister Marie, my mother, fled to France when the Germans entered Belgium, taking most of her family with her. Unwisely I stayed in Courtrai, but I've earned good money on the Lys wretting flax, and, being a careful kind of a fellow, I've saved up a bit, so I've come along to pay a short visit to my old Aunt Romany, and to stay with her a few days before I return to Courtrai to, eh—wret some more flax. Quite simple. To the ultra-inquisitive I possess a perfectly good permit 'signed' by the commandant of Courtrai himself."

In the darkness Canteen Ma smiled. "You'll be a great help to your old aunt during your stay, nephew Jean, a great help. Your little cousin Pierre is willing, but he's young and not too strong, so I keep him out of the work."

"Oh, aunt, I'm strong enough. Wretting flax on the River Lys develops the muscles. Keep young Pierre out of it."

This conversation and necessary explanation brought the pair outside the home. Canteen Ma expertly piloted the tired pony into the open yard, and halted him by one of the sheds.

Pierre came out and his mother said to him, "Put 'Bill' in his stall. There's nothing to unload to-night. All the stuff has to go to Roulers first thing to-morrow morning."

She turned to the stranger and asked: "Jean, will you help me push the cart into that shed?" The shed was a lean-to built on to the side of the house. She unlocked the door, and as Pierre led away the pony Canteen Ma and the stranger pushed the loaded cart into the shed. Two soldiers idly standing in the yard,

their cigarette-ends glowing in the darkness, were interested spectators of the arrival. No lights were allowed, so Jean Nestor had small opportunity to observe his surroundings. But he had noticed that behind the two soldiers a faint light was allowed to shine dimly into the yard.

That's the platoon's shed, thought Jean.

"Come through here," whispered Romany.

Jean found himself in the lean-to, which had a powerful smell of vegetables. As Romany fumbled with a heavy wooden crossbar on the door she said, "Strike a match, Jean. You'll find a lamp near the wall. I'm fixing up this door. Those thieves have seen us come in with this load of stuff, but they're not going to get a chance at it. It's all right, Jean. You can turn up the light, the holes are well covered."

Jean looked around, and Canteen Ma pointed to a door let into the side wall of the house. "That leads into my kitchen. Come, I'm tired and hungry."

Jean followed the woman through the door into the kitchen.

A lamp burnt low on the kitchen table. Three small girls were sitting near a long Flemish stove, for the night had turned chilly. One girl, older than the rest, was washing up after the evening meal. "Ha, you've eaten, then. What hungry wolves I've got. Look, children, I've brought a new cousin for you. That's your cousin Jean from Courtrai," explained Canteen Ma.

"Cousin Jean from Courtrai" gravely shook hands with the wide-eyed sisters, and said, "If I'd known I was to meet so many pretty cousins I'd have certainly brought something with me."

"Tut, tut!" returned Romany. "You must not spoil them, Cousin Jean. They're too conceited already. Now, children, off you go to bed."

And obediently the four went up to the woman, pecked at her cheek and, with shy glances at their new-found cousin, disappeared up a short flight of rough wooden stairs.

The front door opened carefully and Pierre, anxious not to let the feeble beam of the lamp throw a light on to the roadway, slid into the kitchen.

"This is your cousin Jean from Courtrai," said Canteen Ma to Pierre, who was standing awkwardly staring at the British agent.

Jean immediately won the boy's heart by asking, "man-to-man", for a cigarette. Pierre proudly produced a highly coloured packet of German cigarettes, gave one to his new-found cousin, lit a match, applied the light to Jean's cigarette and then manfully lit his own. Canteen Ma had meanwhile prepared supper for the stranger and herself.

"How many times have I told you not to smoke?" asked Canteen Ma as she caught sight of the boy puffing away with great enjoyment.

Pierre looked at Jean and shrugged his shoulders, as if saying, "These women, they're the plague of a man's life."

"Come, nephew, the supper is ready."

Nothing loth, Jean sat at the table.

"What are the 'knubs' like?" she asked Pierre.

"They're all old 'uns," returned the boy in disgust. "One tried to talk to me, but I couldn't get what he meant. Treasa knows their jargon, and he wanted boiling

water, and I gave it him. He gave me a packet of cigarettes. They're all right, but they had to go and work this afternoon, and when they came back you should have heard the language. They were all dead beat. But swear—oh!" Pierre took another puff. "Twenty of 'em go to the ammunition dump and ten go to the forage stores."

"Ha," exclaimed Canteen Ma with interest, glancing at Jean, "working at the dump?"

Jean thought, "Smart lad this, keeps his eyes open."

"Now, Pierre, off you go to bed," commanded his mother.

The boy quietly went up to his mother, gave her a hug, turned and shook hands gravely with his new-found cousin. "Till to-morrow, Cousin Jean," said the boy.

"Till to-morrow, Cousin Pierre," answered Jean solemnly. "Pleasant dreams!"

Romany thoughtfully cleared the supper things from the table. Afterwards she sat down and gazed at the agent. She saw a fresh-complexioned, clean-shaven man with a keen stern face when in repose, but when he smiled the corners of his mouth disclosed quiet humour. He spoke with an extraordinary soft voice, to which Romany thought she could listen for hours without getting tired. To help his disguise as a labourer he had several days' growth on his chin, but the remarkable thing was that he did not appear in any way untidy.

"What line are you taking?" asked Canteen Ma in a low voice.

"Don't know yet, but the ammunition dump seems indicated, if I can get into it," he answered.

"Forget it," returned the woman, shaking her head. "You might get in by a trick, but you'll never get out. It's guarded closely night and day, and, although there's a deal of loose stuff lying about, the 'knubs' are pretty methodical. As one compound is finished they run tons of barbed wire around it so as to keep out inquisitive, eh—agents."

"In any case, I'll have a look round," he said; and then, after a pause, "The dump and nothing but that seems indicated to me. I suppose it's constructed as all ammunition depots are. The high-explosive material in the centre compounds with the other stuff in the outside compounds." Striking out into another train of thought, the Englishman asked: "Cousin P. seems a bright, capable youth, aunt. Does he know anything of what goes on?"

"If he does," was the answer, "he says nothing. He keeps his own counsel, but now and again he has surprised me with little bits of information which have turned out to be more than useful."

"Hum, mark my words, aunt, Cousin P. and I will become great comrades," said Jean.

During the conversation the man had several times taken an old metal watch from his pocket, and Canteen Ma noticed—for nothing escaped the sharp eyes of the bluff hawker—that his attitude became tense, as if listening for something or someone. She looked at the set face of the agent and asked, "Where did you pick up your perfect Flemish?"

"Quite simple," he answered, with a smile. "My father, an Englishman of course, was a large buyer of your Lys flax. He bought for several large textile houses

in Scotland and the North of Ireland. Eight months in the year he spent in Courtrai. For some years before the War I stayed with him picking up the rudiments of the business, which, strange to say, I took a great fancy to. Not knowing your delightful language himself very well, he was always at a big disadvantage with your hard-bargaining countrymen. So the first thing he did was to get his son and hopeful successor a good grounding in Flemish by installing me in the office of a friend of his. Hence my Flemish. I took over the business in June 1914, and I was in Courtrai when the Germans entered the town. I managed to get away, and when I went to join up in London a quiet-spoken gentleman, well known in another walk of life in England, happened to get into conversation with me. So instead of pigging it in the trenches here I am on my third secret visit to good old Flanders. I've got away twice through Holland, and once I returned to England by the route you saw to-day. Herewith endeth the life-story of 'Nestor, Jean', aunt." He finished his amazing experiences in a bantering tone.

"Now that we have the opportunity, I would like to ask you one or two questions. Where do I sleep, aunt?"

"You'll have to take the vegetable-shed loft. You'll soon get used to the vegetable smells; but," she continued, "the shed has many advantages. You can hear anyone who comes into the kitchen, and if you find it necessary to get away quickly, there is a window let into the roof. You've only to lift your arm and the window opens without noise. You can climb on to the roof, slide down into the yard, and in a few strides your road to Courtrai is there."

"Is the shed far from the platoon's billet?" he questioned further.

"No; if you crawl to the farther end of the roof I think you could hear the 'knubs' whispering. But do you understand German?" she asked.

"I don't speak it too well, but I understand pretty well every word," he returned. "Now the last enquiry before I go up to the roof to investigate. Can I get messages and reports away quickly from this quarter?"

"Well, that depends. I've a few good dependable runners, but sometimes you can't get them just when you want 'em, so when there's something special I take the message into Roulers. There, at the moment, we have a fine system," answered Canteen Ma.

"Ha, Roulers!" said Jean. "I've been told, should I find it necessary, to get into touch with 'Laura'. Do you know who she is?"

"Yes, I do," answered Romany slowly, "but there is one thing I must impress upon you. Whatever you do, don't make it too obvious that the upheaval appears to come from this area. There are ways and means of throwing dust in the eyes of the 'knubs'. You understand me? If anything is attempted around here or in these parts I don't want the affair pointing with ten fingers to the civilians here, for we've had enough of spy scares and drives, and don't forget I've got small ones depending upon me, beside big ones."

"I wouldn't dream of attempting to do anything without consulting you first," Jean returned seriously, "and anything which may react on your safety and usefulness would certainly not get my vote."

As Jean finished he stood up, for suddenly both

heard the purring noise of cruising night-raiders. Jean quickly took his bundle from underneath the table and extracted a powerful-looking electric torch. He fitted a cardboard cover on to the globe end. The cover was in the form of a cup, and would shield the side gleams from any chance passer-by, and the momentary flash could be seen only from the air. "I'm going to the roof to investigate, and at the same time I shall give the 'All's Well' signal to a friend of mine who is nosing around above. Just three, so." He held the flash-lamp towards the ground and Canteen Ma saw a powerful dot-dash-dot of light leap out of the cardboard cup.

Jean walked into the shed and the stench of vegetables was almost overpowering. In the darkness he smiled grimly to himself, as he thought, "This time existence amongst the cabbages; last time life amongst the palaces. Next time, what?" he asked himself as he discovered the ladder leading to the loft. On gaining the roof, besides the noise of the aeroplanes, to which he listened with intense attention, he became conscious of the sound of a powerful motor-car being driven with great speed from the direction of Bruges on the Bruges-Courtrai road. This last worried him, as he could not distinguish to a nicety the engine sound of the cruising aeroplanes.

"Anyway, here goes," he said, as he shot out his single message to the aviators above. "If they're Germans they won't understand, and if it's my fellows they'll be away in a few seconds. With that confounded car it's impossible to make out who's up there."

The hum of the hurrying car had developed into a roar, and as it reached the Swevezeele road it swung the

"Come in, soldier," said Canteen Ma; "we'll see what can be done."

The soldier entered the kitchen, and in the darkness he stumbled against a chair. He sat down heavily, and Jean, who had just relit the lamp, saw a smartly dressed Army chauffeur gazing before him with a vacant expression.

Jean looked at Canteen Ma and remarked: "It will be absolutely useless to question him. I'm going over the road to see if the officer's still alive."

"Just a moment," warned Canteen Ma. She crossed to the door, opened it, looked anxiously up and down the road and muttered, "Be quick, Jean; the police might happen to pass."

Jean hurried over the road and found the wrecked car in a broad, deep ditch. Striking a match, he could discern a form lying in the interior of the car. With great difficulty he wrenched open one of the saloon doors and dragged the form of an officer on to the roadway. A rapid examination showed the Englishman that the officer was still breathing. Careless of any complications, knowing only that a fellow human being was *hors de combat*, Jean lifted the unconscious officer and staggered across the road into the house.

A closer examination disclosed that the officer had received a nasty deep gash on his forehead over his left eye. At first Jean thought that his shoulder was dislocated. Canteen Ma, now satisfied that both would recover, was more amenable to them staying, so she helped the deft Jean as he worked on the two unwelcome Germans. In a surprisingly short space of time the two men sat looking at each other with stupid stares. The

officer, with a strange glance, looked first at Canteen Ma, then at Jean. His gaze for a few seconds fell on the low-burning lamp. Lastly his eyes rested on the white-faced driver.

"What has happened, Hans?" he grated.

Hans shook his head. "I think a burst tyre."

"I think a burst fat-headed driver," growled the officer. "You've landed us in a fine mess."

Now immediately the Englishman heard the German officer speak something familiar struck a chord of memory in the agent. Somehow, somewhere, it came to the Englishman he had met this officer before, and his subconscious feeling was that the encounter had unpleasant memories. But, try as he would, he could not recollect the circumstances. Jean put it down to the fact that he had had a fairly exciting day, and to-morrow, when fresh and bright, he might remember the manner of the encounter, so during the ensuing exchange of words Jean kept his face in the shadows and watched closely, and one thing he became sure of in this strange meeting was that the driver did not fit the rôle. Whilst Jean was analysing his doubts and impressions the officer, who wore the uniform of a lieutenant-colonel, was speaking to Canteen Ma, addressing her in the arrogant manner adopted by German officers to those of supposed inferior rank.

"Frau, traffic passes this house early in the morning, *hein*?" he asked. Canteen Ma nodded assent. "Perhaps I could get a car going as far as Roulers?"

At the mention of Roulers the keen-witted woman was all attention, and she suggested, "There is a platoon billeted here, Herr. Perhaps if I roused one of the

soldiers you could send him into Lichtervelde. There he would get a car at once to take you to Roulers."

"No, no, Frau, don't trouble. I warn you nothing must be said of my visit here. It will be the best for you and yours," he said fiercely. "I am on a secret and special mission." And, stretching out his long legs, he added wearily, "That's the reason I'll stay here to-night and trust to getting a motor into Roulers to-morrow morning."

Canteen Ma stood perfectly still.

"Secret and special mission." Was he one of the dreaded hunters? An eye must be kept on this man, she thought.

After a long silence he asked again, "Frau, would it be possible to direct me to some place where I can get this"—pointing to his forehead—"dressed without being questioned and without being noticed?" Romany was thinking with lightning speed, and then, her mind made up, she answered readily: "Yes, Herr, I know a place. When you mention my name, saying I have sent you, you'll be looked after and your wishes will be respected. Further, the Fräulein is a nurse in the military hospital. Go to the Café Carillon in the Grand Place in Roulers and ask for Fräulein Marthe."

Looking with great disfavour at the driver he barked, "Hans, you will remain by the car until I send someone to collect what's left of it."

Hans staggered to his feet, stiffly saluted, and muttered, "Very good, Herr Kolonel."

He walked over to the door and disappeared into the night, and as Jean silently left the kitchen for his loft the Colonel said to Canteen Ma in a more agreeable

tone of voice, "You can leave me here, Frau. I will rest until the passing motors waken me."

Romany had thoughtfully provided bedding for the Englishman, who, throwing himself on the rough shake-down, racked his brains trying to discover the manner of his encounter with the German. There were many things that did not fit, but, too weary to worry, Jean dropped off to sleep.

Canteen Ma was astir early next morning, but she found the officer had gone. One or two soldiers of the platoon were idly inspecting the wreckage of the car, and Hans was explaining to the interested audience how the accident had happened. Two feld-gendarmes stopped, took particulars, and passed on. Young Pierre had been an interested listener to all that had passed, for, although his German was of the *gamin* kind, when it suited him he could understand most that was said.

After the hurried morning meal Canteen Ma asked Jean, "Have you thought of any plan?"

Jean shook his head and answered, "Not yet, but my idea is to spy out the district in the vicinity of the dump with the aid of Pierre, for that bright youngster seems to be on very friendly terms with the platoon."

Romany paused and then said, "Yes, that's a good idea. The platoon, besides helping in the work, take turns at sentry-go"; and she further explained that, as fodder was extremely scarce, young Pierre periodically roamed the countryside in search of the succulent hedge grass and clover to reinforce the meagre rations of the pony, so, should they be seen by the platoon sentries, it was more than likely nothing would be said. Then, in a few hurried sentences, Canteen Ma unfolded

a daring plan which she had thought of during the night.

"Now listen, Jean. I have a trustworthy man coming, Manton Devany, and, as I have promised farmer Vreak to deliver a load of potatoes to the forage dump, Manton will be the man who will deliver the goods. Whilst there he must find a way to get into the stores at night. This is my idea. You would never be able to slip into the ammunition dump unless something extraordinary happens to distract the attention of the guard. Devany, to-morrow night at seven o'clock, will fire the forage stores. There is a standing order that all units within call must help in case of a dangerous fire, and as there are a great many horses near the forage stores the ammunition guard are certain to send every man that can be spared. Then, in the general confusion, you must find a road into the dump. To make it appear that the affair is the result of other hands than ours, I will arrange with Roulers to get the 'Seven Sisters' to bomb the district, particularly the stores and the dump, at the same time to-morrow night. So if you will give me the map reference of this district, together with the two dumps, I will hand in the message to-day."

The Englishman was full of admiration and enthusiasm for the daring plan, but before he could enlarge on it Pierre entered the kitchen.

"The driver seems to be in better spirits this morning than he was last night, Cousin Pierre," said Jean to the boy.

"Yes, two of the platoon are off duty to-day sick. He's gone to the shed to play skat with them. The officer and him came from Eecloo, he told the gendarmes,

and they were making for Roulers, for the Colonel to inspect the troops. His name is Colonel Rothbann, and the driver expects to get the wreck removed to-day. He's a rum 'un, all right," finished the boy; "speaks like a schoolmaster."

"Now, Pierre," ordered his mother, "get 'Bill' out. I'm going into Roulers to-day, and while I'm away go out and cut a bit of grass for the pony." Before she left the house she added, "I'll be back early."

CHAPTER VII

BLOW UP THE DUMP!

DURING that morning I was anxiously on the look-out for Canteen Ma, and it was with great relief I saw her familiar figure turn down a side street off the Grand Place. She had caught sight of me and was waiting. Events were of sufficient moment to depart from our usual custom and caution, which was to speak and be seen as little as possible together. Under the guise of examining some fruit I told her rapidly of my adventures with the German colonel early that morning. He had entered the café and had asked for me. When I confronted him he asked, "Are you Fräulein Marthe?"

I answered, "Yes, Herr."

"A good friend of yours, the Swevezeele vegetable woman, has sent me to you."

He explained that he had had an accident, and asked me to dress his head. It came to my mind to refuse and send him off to the hospital, but his mention of Canteen Ma decided me. There must be something behind it all, so I took him to my room and thoroughly cleansed and dressed his wound, but whilst I was busy I had the feeling that he was watching closely every movement I made, and some instinct warned me that the strange visitor was speculating in some manner on me. At

that time my intuition was extraordinarily sensitive to suspect strangers, so I was completely on my guard. Yet I can recall that I had no misgivings or fear.

He took me completely by surprise by asking, "I suppose you are a patriot, Fräulein?"

Guardedly I replied, "I should hope so, Herr. You cannot expect us to be exactly overjoyed with the invasion."

"That is so, Fräulein, and I expect your people do not love the Prussian."

He had abandoned the personal, a clever move, and adapted the general. "Your people" was subtle, but I saw the invitation immediately. The wider scope would present a larger opportunity for airing my views.

"Well, Herr," I asked, "how could anyone in his right senses expect the population to be friendly under our revolting circumstances? We obey the laws, but as we see it there are no laws devised by man which can prevent us thinking and believing what we will."

"Yes, Fräulein, it is very dangerous to work actively against the invader, as you call us."

"That, Herr, does not come within my province," I hastened to assure him. "I do my best to aid the stricken, but my opinions I keep strictly to myself."

Who was he? A hunter of spies? I fought to make myself believe it, but, try as I would, the feeling persisted (a feeling which I told myself was false) that I would be safe with this strange visitor. But why had Canteen Ma sent him to me? Then the truth struck me, for only the shrewd hawker would think of such a plan. She herself was uncertain, and she had avoided the greater of two evils by sending him direct to me. She

had probably decided, "Better keep him in sight than allow him to work in the dark," until we discovered the nature of his mission.

"Fräulein, would it surprise you to know that there are many of my countrymen who think with the same mind as you civilians?"

"It would not surprise me, Herr, for I have met many high-minded gentlemen amongst your people, but to think does not require much effort. To put that decision into working actively against the military caste, however, has a very nasty name amongst your countrymen and, to use your own words, is very dangerous work."

Then he put a point-blank question which nearly caused a betrayal. "Do you know of a Belgian from Eecloo who is a very active worker against the invader?"

Fortunately my back was turned towards him as he asked the question, and I had time to still the trembling of my hands. I gave a short natural laugh as I replied, "No, Herr. As distances go nowadays Eecloo might be in the wilds of the Congo for all we learn of the town and its inhabitants."

As though making up his mind, he casually remarked (too casual to be natural): "The main reason for my visit to Roulers was to see this man. His friends told me in Eecloo that he had come to Roulers with the excuse of visiting an Army specialist."

I decided that the conversation was getting out of my depths. Was the mysterious stranger trying to tell me the amazing news that Brut Verhagen, the ingenious brain of the Intelligence Service, was in Roulers? I made up my mind to try the mysterious officer at once.

I had almost completed the head bandages, which I had made as inconspicuous as possible, when the idea came. I would discover quickly whether he was a friend or that rarity a very subtle German Secret Service officer.

"Herr," I said carelessly, "I shall stitch the fastening of the bandage. It's neater, and you will be better able to wear your cap than if I stuck *safety pins* in the dressing."

I waited. No answering movement came to disclose the shining emblems of that desperate branch of the Allied Intelligence, the Safety Pin Men.

Somewhat disappointed, I heard him say, "Just please yourself, Fräulein."

From that moment I was coldly guarded in my answers to the amazing propositions he made. I was dumbfounded with his frankness, and I accounted for it either as stupid recklessness or as a clumsy attempt on his part to get me to commit myself. At no time did this last theory fit to my satisfaction, and the ensuing talk with Romany only deepened the mystery.

"Listen, Fräulein," he exclaimed, "we'll get nowhere fencing. I've come to Roulers hoping to meet the man, with whom I'm on most friendly terms. I possess authentic and vital information which, if the Allies could get hold of it, would be well paid for. I've come to the conclusion you know more than you will admit. Find the Eecloo man, bring him here, and we'll talk business. I can assure you he'll be pleased to treat. But you can tell him from me that my information this time is worth ten thousand marks."

"Herr," I said seriously, "I simply do not understand the language you speak. The man from Eecloo, I assure *you*, I do not know, and if you are indirectly offering me

the information, even if I could do anything with it, ten thousand marks or even ten marks mean the same to me—nothing."

He gazed at me for some time and then said resignedly: "Well, Fräulein, I think I can trust you not to attempt to denounce me, for even if you tried you would not be believed."

"Herr," I assured him, relieved that the strange interview would be soon over, "I have already forgotten your offer."

"I suppose you could put me up for the night, Fräulein?" he asked.

Again I was on the point of refusing, but, remembering who had sent him, I answered, "Yes, Herr, I believe two officers left yesterday. You are obliged, however, to obtain the commandant's permission if you have not already a permit."

"That I will arrange this afternoon, Fräulein," he said as he left.

As rapidly as I could I told Canteen Ma of my encounter with the strange officer, and in return she gave me brief details of the accident which had brought the colonel to her house, and the mistrust she had when he mentioned his secret mission.

She shook her head. "He's beyond me. We can only wait and watch closely." She broke off. "Nice apples these, sister," she said, as a Secret Service man walked past us. I bought some apples, and whilst I was fumbling in my purse Canteen Ma told me of the British Secret Service man, and the importance of sending the request for the "Seven Sisters" to bomb the dumps. She told me the hour, and as she passed me the change I received

the map reference. With the apples in my arms I left Canteen Ma.

During the afternoon Stephan the Pole walked into the café, and during a moment of quietness he signalled to me that he had news. I motioned him into the kitchen.

"Sister, there'll be no further shows in this sector for this year. Two divisions are to leave immediately for pastures new, and they are to be accompanied by several heavy mortar batteries from the Passchendaele region. I haven't got the numbers or particulars as yet, but they'll be in the Brigade Orderly Room in a day or so. When the Prussian sees fit to move his 12-inch howitzers to another part of the Front it is always very interesting to discover where exactly that part of the line is, for there's going to be a heap of trouble for that sector. At first it was rumoured they were for Bavaria's* front, but it didn't take me very long to find the real destination. The whole crowd, bag and baggage, with an extra two divisions ready at a moment's notice, are to be sent to the hopeful son and heir of the All Highest himself.† As he's sitting in front of Verdun, I think this news will more than interest our Alsatian. Verdun is the place that will receive the next great crack, Sister, and not Ypres!"

This was indeed vital news for the French, and whether I saw Alphonse or not during the day I determined to send off the information that night along with the request for the bombers.

I always wrote out messages in my bedroom, and

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* The Duke of Bavaria's Army was holding the Lille sector.

† The German Crown Prince. His army was holding the lines at Verdun.

that day I decided to compile the information and request before Bertha, our Flemish maid, came in to tell me of the day's happenings. The gas works in Roulers had been destroyed by shell-fire, so we were reduced to candles and lamps. My light was a candle covered by a small lamp-glass which I had shaded with a cardboard lampshade in such a manner that the light shone only on the paper I was writing on. The light could not show underneath the door crack. I was busy wording the messages as brief as possible, when I heard a scraping noise on the landing. It could not be mother or Bertha, as we had arranged to signal each other by humming a tune.

With a beating heart I waited, and a peculiar thought crossed my mind. I had completely forgotten the advent of the Colonel, but on hearing the first stealthy creak the morning encounter with the officer returned to me. I heard the latch lifted with extreme care, but the bedroom door was locked. A stab of light momentarily flashed through the keyhole. The key was in the door, but this did not seem to deter the unknown intruder, for a second or two afterwards I heard the noise of the dropping key on the door carpet. I had pressed my fingers on the candle-wick and kept them there, for a blown-out candle-wick gives off a betraying odour. I had already decided not to attempt to stop the intruder from entering, but to wait and try to discover who the person was and the reason for such stealthy inquisitiveness, so I hid the papers in my dress, lay my head on my arms, and feigned utter weariness, but left sufficient space for my eyes to watch the door.

An almost imperceptible click and the door began

to creak open cautiously. A light for a second or two swung round the room, and to my unutterable surprise I saw the silent visitor was the Colonel! The sweep of the light had missed me as I was crouched against the table, and I would be almost invisible from the door. With the quickness and noiselessness of a foraging cat he searched the apartment, until the light fell on my tired-looking form. Then, like a breath of wind, I felt him come to the table where I was sprawled, bend over and with expert touches examine everything lying by my arms. I heard the door click, and discovered that with the same cat-like noiselessness he was gone. I remained still, thinking that perhaps he might be waiting outside for a false move on my part, but a creak from the lower landing reassured me. I rose, relit the candle and examined the room, but could find nothing missing or even disturbed. Now why in heaven's name had the Colonel visited my room? I asked myself. Within the next few days the riddle was to be answered, but in a tragic manner.

A few moments afterwards Bertha came to my room and I enquired if the officer who had arrived that morning had given her a permit from the town commandant. She replied that she had a note from the commandant's office, and that the officer had passed through the café and gone to his room. Whilst Bertha was making her usual comments on the café gossip, the startling events of the day were crowding through my mind. The advent of the Colonel and his reference to the Eecloo man, who undoubtedly was Brut Verhagen. And what important development had brought Verhagen to Roulers, assuming the strange

officer's story was correct? Then the Colonel's stealthy search of my room. What was it he hoped to find?

I endeavoured to dismiss the whole incident. I had yet to finish making out my reports: the all-important request of Canteen Ma and the vital information from Stephan the Pole. Furthermore, the reports must be delivered that night to the little chemist's shop which, since the killing of No. 63, I had been instructed to use. The chemist's shop was not nearly so dangerous as my trips to the house of No. 63 had been, for to account for my visits to the drug stores I did have the semblance of an excuse in my need for drugs, as my help to sick civilians was fairly well known amongst the troops. But would the Colonel be on the watch for a move on my part? If caught with such terribly incriminating evidence the end would of a certainty be a firing squad. I thought of a simple ruse to discover whether he had gone to bed or not. Since early morning I had no doubt that he had been busy, and the shock of the accident must have made him a very weary man.

I broke in on Bertha's tirade by saying, "Bertha, I don't trust that Colonel, for somehow he gives me the creeps. I'd like to know whether he's gone to bed or not."

Now Bertha was of a romantic disposition, and on the word "creeps" she was full of sympathy for me. She fondly imagined that my distrust was actuated by reasons which her hectic imagination conjured up. As she did not share the secret of my activities it was precisely this meaning I intended to convey to the highly imaginative girl.

"I'll go and look," she said stoutly, bristling up in her indignation.

"Will you, Bertha?" I asked, feeling like the down-trodden heroine in a melodrama. "It would relieve me greatly if I was certain that he was safe in bed. Now listen, Bertha. Just go and ask nicely if he requires coffee in the morning. I know how diplomatic you can be when you try, so don't be too brusque. Enquire if he requires coffee or water, or whatever you like."

"I'll coffee him. Perhaps he'd prefer some nice fat Wurtzberger with stoved cabbage," she said sarcastically, "but I'll be ever so nice to him, Martha, for your sake."

"Go now, Bertha. I've got to slip out in a few moments to get some drugs at the stores."

Bertha quickly disappeared, and whilst she was away I hurriedly finished the reports.

A few moments afterwards Bertha reappeared all smiles. "I had to knock and knock something terrible before I could get an answer. He was asleep all right. I asked him, 'Herr, what time would you like your coffee in the morning?' In a sleepy voice he called, 'Go away, Fräulein, or I'll set the dog on you,' and really, Martha, I couldn't help it, I had to answer, 'Herr, dogs are not allowed in the café, only Prussians." He just growled, 'Himmel,' and I waited a moment, but I could only hear his deep breathing. Clean sheets seem to have a soothing effect on some 'knubs'," she added.

I smiled and gratefully thanked the girl before I wished her good night. Shortly afterwards I crossed the square and delivered the reports.

. . . . .

Canteen Ma, when I had left her that morning, ignoring the civilians and soldiers alike who indicated that they would purchase from her, made direct for the canteen. Fritz stood on the watch near the back door, all eyes on the look-out for the familiar figure, and as she turned into the street he ran to meet her. On catching sight of the stout German, Romany could not refrain from smiling broadly as she noticed the expressions of doubt and hope which alternately crossed his fat, good-humoured face.

Forgetting his manners, for he read on the face of the bluff hawker "Good news", he blurted out: "It's the business, then, Romany, eh?"

Romany cast her eyes heavenwards and addressed some invisible being with mock dismay, "Now can you beat these Wurtemburgers? They'd rush anyone off their feet to satisfy their greed." Then, looking severely at the expectant soldier, she said, "But I can tell you, my cherub, this is the last. It's like drawing blood from a stone to get the farmers to part with a few eatables."

"Come, Romany," he pleaded, as they pulled up at the canteen door, "hand 'em over. I've got something fine for you."

Romany handed the precious parcel to the soldier, and his eyes shone.

"A full kilo, eh, Romany?" he asked, gratified as he weighed the parcel in his hand.

"Yes, and they're of the best, Fritz," answered Canteen Ma.

As Fritz was disappearing into the building, she called after him, "Tell his highness I'm here." Fritz

nodded. She hurriedly searched her dress and discovered the message which had been given to her by the umbrella vendor, Phil. The Q.M.S. strode to the door and Canteen Ma handed over the message together with another scrap of paper.

"Here is the account," she explained.

"I have nothing to go back," he informed the woman. "You can enter after the goods have been unloaded, and I'll settle your account."

"Very good, Herr," she answered, as the Q.M.S. turned back into the canteen.

Fritz, with a gratified air, came shuffling along with a neatly tied parcel in his arms. He drew close to Canteen Ma and whispered: "Listen, Romany, I've a Fräulein in Tulingen. She's a fine piece"—there was a far-away look in his eyes as he conjured up the figure of his sweetheart—"but she won't wed me until we have marched into Paris. Now what would *you* do with a girl like that? I was saving up these nice pieces of parachute silk for her. She'd have looked grand in such blouses, but there, Romany, Paris is a long way off and Schnapps is Schnapps and sausages is sausages." And with this infinite truth Fritz resignedly handed the parcel to Romany. He continued: "If there isn't enough for your little girls I can get some more, Romany, but will you try to get hold of a nice piece of bacon for the next time, my dear?"

Romany was saved the explosion she was about to throw at the head of the persistent Fritz by the Q.M.S. calling down the corridor: "Frau, please to come. I will settle your account."

"Coming, Herr," answered Canteen Ma, as she threw

a look carrying a world of disgust at the soldier, but all she said was, "Get those things off the cart, Fritz. I've got to be away early to-day."

When she entered the sanctum of the Q.M.S. he wore a mystified air. "The note you brought to-day informs me that the Eecloo chief is in Roulers. Have you seen him?"

"No, Herr," answered Canteen Ma.

"He expects to be here two or three days," explained the Q.M.S.

"I don't know him by sight," said Canteen Ma, "but if it will help, I'll pass the word as I go home. And, Herr, everything is set for to-morrow night seven o'clock."

He nodded approval, settled the account for the merchandise without question, and the woman left.

Fritz had succeeded in unloading the cart, and as his back for the moment was turned to Romany she drove off quickly. "Hi, Romany!" she heard before the pony had progressed very far, "Hi, Romany!" but Romany took no notice as the breathless Fritz ambled after the cart. She only turned as the pony broke into a smart trot and mocked, "Bacon, garrr."

On her way back home she called at three houses and informed her friends that the Eecloo chief was in the vicinity and if help was asked they were to give it without question on his disclosing his identity.

Romany had not been home long when the tired Pierre and the Englishman arrived, carrying each a bulging sack of grass and clover.

"You've had a busy day, I see," welcomed Canteen Ma.

"Yes," said Jean, "and cousin P. certainly knows his way about this part of the country."

Jean recounted the day's adventures. When Canteen Ma that morning had departed for Roulers, Jean asked the boy, "What time are you starting out to gather the fodder, cousin Pierre?"

"Now," answered Pierre.

"Could I help?" asked the Englishman seriously.

"Well, you could," answered the boy readily enough, "but then, we'll wait until those sick 'knubs' are away. They're for a medical inspection in Thielt. Mother asked me to keep an eye on things while they're around, but while we're away I don't suppose Hans would mind keeping watch.

"Do you know where this food is to be found, cousin Pierre? You know, in abundance?"

"Rather," was the reply. "There's a part over by the ammunition dump packed with lovely grass and clover, and we'll be able to cut as much as we can carry."

"Good," returned Jean, well satisfied; "the dump fodder it will be, then."

But the Englishman looked after the lithe figure of the boy as he entered a shed to get the sacks. Did he know that it was the vicinity of the dump that both Canteen Ma and himself were so deeply interested in? Jean asked himself. Not till the sick soldiers had departed and Hans had been enjoined to keep a close eye on things did the two start out. Each carried a hand sickle and a sack. On the journey across country Jean carefully noted the route the boy took. It led down country lanes and by-paths, and not once did they fall in with passing

patrols. The boy knew every inch of the country, and, on being cleverly pumped by the Englishman, he pointed out the landmarks leading from the Rondeel house to the dump. Jean decided he would take a trial trip alone that night to test his knowledge of the route in the darkness. Along a heavily hedged lane, on either side of the roadway, they both commenced to cut the grass. The boy noticed that Jean was unaccustomed to handling a sickle, so he walked over and demonstrated how it was done.

"Look, cousin Jean," explained the boy; "take the grass so with your left hand, slip the sickle in with your right hand, bend the grass outwards with the left and a sharp even cut along the ground with the sickle, and there."

The boy held up a neatly cut bunch of grass. After a while Jean became more used to the automatic speed of the boy. The narrow lane rose in a gentle slope towards the sky-line, and Pierre, who had worked more rapidly than the Englishman, reached the crown of the slope some distance ahead of his companion. Hearing a low chuckle, Jean looked up and saw Pierre sitting on his bundle, looking over the hedge with a broad grin on his face. He waved to Jean to come. Jean left his bundle by the wayside and joined the boy. He looked cautiously over the hedge and saw that the ammunition dump lay bare below them, a great scattered confused store, spread over what once was a smiling valley. But what had attracted the attention of the boy was the figure of a sentry who was marching up and down on the outside of the wire. He was a large flat-footed man and cut a comic figure.

"That's Emile Fugden of the platoon. Doesn't he walk funny?" asked Pierre with boyish glee.

But Jean was interested in other things. The whole plan of the dump below lay bare before him. Pulling out a pencil and a piece of paper he drew a rough sketch of the layout. He noticed that his only chance of getting in the dump, a slender one at best, would be by the railway siding, which for a few yards was left unprotected for the run-in of the ammunition trucks. He also noticed that there were six sentries, three patrolling the outside and three patrolling the inner compounds.

By an ingenious timing arrangement, although the sentries were always on the move, they never crossed each other in their march round the dump, so that only a few seconds elapsed before a sentry passed any given spot. But should the fire in the forage stores get dangerous Jean had no doubt that every man that could be spared from the ammunition dump would be hurried over. A relief came out as the pair watched the unsuspecting sentries, and Jean looked at his watch. Keeping carefully out of sight, they continued to cut grass, and by the time the next relief had arrived they were ready for the return journey. It was as Jean had surmised. The sentries were relieved every two hours.

"Ha, well. Come, I suppose you are both hungry," said Canteen Ma when the result of the expedition had been told, and, nothing loth, the two grass-gatherers fell to.

A burly, heavy-moustached individual walked into the kitchen next morning as Canteen Ma was preparing the morning coffee.

"Mornin', Romany," greeted the stranger gruffly.

"Good morning, Manton," returned Canteen Ma. "I'm glad to see you. Sit down and take some coffee."

From the recesses of a deep cupboard she extracted a bottle of Schnapps and placed it beside the burly Manton, afterwards filling his cup with freshly made coffee. Manton took the bottle and poured a liberal dose of the Schnapps into the coffee and commenced to sip the strong beverage.

"As the children might be here at any moment, I'll tell you now why I sent for you, Manton," Canteen Ma explained. "I've got to deliver a load of stuff to the 'knubs' on the Wynghene road stores. It's fifty bags of potatoes, and they're to be lifted from Farmer Vreak. You know his farm, eh?"

Manton nodded assent.

"Well, while you're in the stores, keep your eyes open, because you've got to steal in to-night, to fire it," she whispered. "I don't think you will have any trouble to get in, as they've had no time to fix wire around the place. It grows and grows, and there's enormous stacks of hay and straw lying unprotected. The idea is, Manton, when the fire is started—and the attempt must be made about seven o'clock—a try is going to be made to blow up the ammunition dump, which is about two kilometres away on the other side of the road. Aeroplanes will be over to bomb the district at the same time, so get away as quick as you can."

"Back here?" asked Manton.

"No," said Romany. "Too many people mustn't be seen around here. You make for some other place. You know best where to go."

He looked lovingly at the bottle again, but Canteen Ma quickly removed it as first Pierre and then Jean came into the kitchen.

"This is a nephew of mine, Jean Nestor, from Courtrai," said Romany to Devany, waving towards Jean. The Englishman took the cue and understood. No matter how trustworthy the friend, the shrewd woman would say nothing where nothing could be gained. In front of the boy further details could not be discussed, so Manton stood up and asked, "Where's the horse's stall, Romany? I'll be moving over to Vreak's place."

Romany signed to Pierre, and the boy walked out with Devany to help shackle the pony.

"That's Manton Devany, one of my best runners. He's afraid of nothing on earth," explained Canteen Ma hurriedly to the Englishman.

Jean looked at the keen-eyed woman, whose whole being seemed concentrated energy when working some destruction on the invader. His was a nature retiring, and naturally incurious where his fellow beings were concerned, unless such knowledge forwarded his activities. Even now he was shy of asking point-blank the question that had been many times on his lips since coming in contact with this remarkable woman.

"You seem to attract wonderful workers," he said.

"Wonderful haters," returned Romany after a pause. "If you knew what Manton Devany suffered you wouldn't be surprised at anything."

And Jean, seeing an easy opening, asked softly, "And you?"

Her face turned deathly pale, and, except for the

gleam in her eyes like living coals, it was as the face of one dead. She turned a haggard, tortured look on the Englishman and muttered: "Me, ah, they shot a cripple on his own doorstep—my husband."

Then she heard the cart rattling off. She hurried to the door and called in her usual voice, "Manton, if the load is too heavy, make two trips. It'll be better for you, see?"

Jean left the kitchen quietly and, catching sight of the driver Hans, asked: "Your officer seems to have lost you. Where are you eating?"

Hans answered civilly enough, "Oh, I get along all right with the platoon. I expect my Colonel will be back to-day."

Jean tried hard to pump the driver, but Hans would simply not be drawn to discuss his Colonel. No matter how cleverly and innocently the line was baited, Jean found that the subject of the officer was evaded. Jean had met in the adroit Hans a past master in the art of artifice. Considerably puzzled, he gave up the unequal battle of wits, but more convinced than ever that there was a mystery somewhere.

Accompanied by Manton Devany, Canteen Ma departed on her purchasing rounds, for nothing must arrest this necessary adjunct to living. The Englishman and the boy were in the kitchen when, with a rattle and screech of brakes, a motor-car pulled up at the door. The tall form of Colonel Rothbann jumped out and the car, with protesting jars, moved rapidly away. Without knocking, the officer entered the room, and, casting his eyes around, he addressed the boy, enquiring for his driver. Hans, some little time before, had settled himself

down in the platoon hut to play a game of skat with the two invalids. Pierre, grasping the purport of the officer's enquiry, ran to the hut and indicated to Hans that his officer had returned. The driver hurriedly followed the boy back to the kitchen. Glancing at the two civilians, the officer peremptorily ordered them out of the room.

Pierre departed to escort the children from school, Jean repaired to the loft, and he heard the officer informing his driver that in a few hours another car would arrive along with a breakdown truck for the wreckage. Their voices became low and confidential, so low that Jean could hear nothing further.

At last, as if to clinch some argument, the officer said impatiently: "I do correct business, Hans. No sly work about me, so I don't want anything slim happening, either!"

The voice and the manner of the statement suddenly dawned on the amazed Jean, and while the officer was saying in a voice of finality, "I'm tired, I'm going to doze here until the car arrives," Jean had to suppress a shout of laughter, for he had remembered the place and manner of his encounter with the Colonel.

The Englishman recalled his first breathless adventurous escape over the Dutch frontier. In company with four other men, hiding by day and guided by night by a devoted guide, they arrived a few hundred yards from a frontier post. The Englishman was disguised as a labourer, posing as one anxious to escape for some menial offence against the invader. The others were genuine refugees. After a few hours out in an open field they learned that they were to be passed through a German post, the Feldewbel of which was to receive

twenty marks for each refugee allowed through. They were to be part of a contingent of twenty souls bent on flying from the wrath of the invader. At last came the whispered command from the guide. "There'll be no moon to-night. Forward; everything is arranged, and all is well."

They shuffled forward in the inky darkness, and the Englishman, who took up the rear, heard a guttural voice muttering in German: "Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty!" and then, with a curse, a revolver was thrust under his chin and a voice hissed: "Hi, you're twenty-one. Hi, comrade, *I do correct business*, no sly work about me. What slim show is this? You're twenty-one!"

The Englishman's heart almost stopped beating, but a dark form hurried forward. "Sorry, Feldwebel, it's an oversight. Here is the extra twenty marks."

A muttered curse and a growling protest that the owner of the voice "did correct business" and the Englishman, greatly to his relief, was pushed over the border. The Feldwebel of the Frontier Guard and the Colonel were one and the same person! For the moment, however, Jean deemed it more prudent to await events and not attempt to make the "Colonel's" better acquaintance. Hans had said to the "officer", as that individual sat down in a chair: "Very good, I'll go and keep a look-out for the car, and I'll let you know when it comes."

The dusk had fallen into deepening blackness. A wind from the south-west had brought over scurrying clouds which the first time for many days promised rain. The officer sat with his chin buried in his breast, his long

legs sprawled out. He was suddenly aroused into keen alertness by the sound of a spluttering motor-car stopping outside the door, and a voice, enquiring from Hans, the driver, where the officer could be found. In the darkness the Colonel's face blanched, and he drew in his breath with a curious indrawn noise, for the voice he heard outside was the voice of "authority". The request rang out not as a servile enquiry, but as a demand. No saluting menial this, but one come to do—what? . . .

As a hunted animal his eyes cast round the room. He caught the calm answer of Hans as he replied to the owner of the harsh commanding voice, "Wait there, Herr. I will bring the Colonel to you."

Hans slipped into the kitchen, silently locked the door and, catching sight of the dark bulk of the officer, hissed, "Quick! It's a Secret Service officer with two feld-gendarmes. Quick, through here!" he commanded as he flung open the door of the vegetable shed. They hurried through into the yard, and, glancing down, they saw the dark figure of a feld-gendarme posted in the entrance to the yard, at the road end.

"Make for the platoon hut," commanded the transformed driver, and as they crept along the walls to the hut, he added: "Order the two soldiers out. The platoon is due back in a moment or two now. Perhaps we can get away in the confusion."

The hunted pair entered the hut just as one of the soldiers was preparing to light a candle. "Go help the men with the car wreckage!" barked the officer fiercely. They saluted, and with a bad grace shuffled off down the yard into the road. Hans glanced outside the hut and to his dismay found that they were in a cul-de-sac: at

the end of the yard was a high blank wall. "Over the hut," called Hans. "We might get away across the fields."

They were both preparing to scramble over the hut, when a voice barked out, "Halt!" The two hurried back into the hut and the Colonel hurriedly struck a match, shielding the flame. He discovered two rifles stacked against the wall, and beside them, flung carelessly on the ground, was the soldiers' equipment. As the match flickered out the Colonel bent down, extracted the cartridges from the pouches, grasped a rifle and, click, click, it was loaded!

A loud knock came on the hut door, but no answer was given by the two fugitives. A fruitless rattle on the latch and a voice grated out from the darkness, "I give you two seconds to come out, otherwise you take the consequences." A pause, and then the voice ordered: "Feldwebel, smash down the door and arrest that officer, dead or alive!"

Crack! spoke one of the rifles from the interior of the hut. A bullet whizzed past the ear of the speaker. He hurriedly jumped to one side and warned, "Cover, they're armed!"

A random fusillade of revolver shots from the feld-gendarmes swept through the small window of the hut.

"Tear up the boards at the end there, Hans. See if it's earth or not outside."

With a bayonet and the butt of a rifle Hans quickly did as he was bid, for in such moments a man has the strength of ten. He tore open the floor and knocked a hole into the plaster and wood side of the hut, but as

he worked feverishly a shot ripped through the thin wall just above his head.

"We're surrounded," he gasped to the officer; "they're shooting from the back."

Again came the voice from the yard, "Surrender, you swinehounds, or I will give the order to squad fire into you!"

The only answer from the Colonel was a bullet fired in the direction from whence the voice came, which again narrowly missed the speaker and scattered the platoon, which had just arrived, to hasty cover.

An ominous purr-r-r vibrated the skies, and stabbing searchlights, long wavering fingers, began the quest of the night-raiders. The purr developed into a persistent drone as the wheezing scream of dropping bombs hurried through space. Crash after crash rent the heavens. The Rondeel buildings trembled and shook, while shattered glass from the windows tinkled to the ground. A sudden red glare lit up the countryside. The forage stores had apparently been hit. Anti-aircraft guns, shooting blind, took up the tale as the searchlights swept the heaven in a vain endeavour to spot the raiders. Purr-r-r, purr-r-r, they were advancing in relays and were getting perilously near the ammunition dump. Searchlights and anti-aircraft guns formed a fruitless barrage in space. Through the white beams a gleaming living speck dived, and a single ribbon of light swept after him. It failed to hold the hawklike diver as he dropped his death-dealing missile and zoomed upwards. Transcending the vicious bark of the aircraft guns came the clanging alarm of "Dangerous Fire!" It rang out from methodically

hammered shell-cases, as a steady wind fanned the flames into a huge beacon, turning the surrounding night into glaring day.

Above the din the Secret Service officer called to the Gefreiter of the platoon: "Detail four men to remain here, and you double up with the rest to the fire." He also recalled the men from behind the hut with the exception of one, whom he left on watch. Facing the yard entrance behind a road hedge he formed his squad, and in a loud voice, as if on parade, he ordered, "Load for rapid fire! Squad, fire!" As one vicious ping the rifles spoke. Again came the order, "Squad, fire!"

The pair in the hut returned volley after volley, but suddenly the fire ceased, the hut door was flung open, the tall figure of the Colonel appeared in the dim shadows cast by the flames over the hut. Thinking that the fugitive was about to surrender, the officer called, "Cease fire!" But the Colonel came out into the full glare, his face distorted and his eyes gleaming; he raised his hand above his head and shook his fist in defiance at the invisible squad. By a superhuman effort, as shots ripped towards him, he scrambled to the roof of the hut, slid down into the fields behind and was away.

"Quick!" ordered the officer, springing into the road. "Scatter in twos, but bring him back, dead or alive."

As the command rang out, Canteen Ma arrived. She heard the dread words, certain that the order alluded to the Englishman. Commencing late on her purchasing rounds, she had been caught out of doors in the air-raid, and the noise of this, coupled with the fantastic dancing shadows cast by the glare from the store fire,

had made the pony terribly nervous and almost unmanageable.

Almost the last straw came as the tired and overwrought woman turned into the road leading to her home. From that direction came the crackle of rifle shots. She immediately feared the worst—that the Englishman had been discovered, and was even now at bay. The knowledge and its certain consequences almost overwhelmed the woman. For a fleeting moment she paused to summon up her courage, and then she pressed forward to face whatever disaster might be waiting.

Turning into the yard, the officer, whom she at once recognized as an active spy-hunter, said to her ominously, "Frau, I would speak with you."

The din overhead had reached to a continuous roar, and Canteen Ma signed to the officer to enter the kitchen. The pony, more tractable finding himself at home, allowed himself to be tied securely to the shed door. Romany followed the officer into the room. He faced the woman and, almost forced to shout his words, demanded threateningly, "What were those two men doing here?"

"Two men. What do you mean, Herr?" asked the mystified woman. A faint glimmer of hope entered the breast of the quick-witted Romany. Two men. He could not mean the English agent.

"Why, that pretentious swine aping a Colonel, and that other."

With infinite relief the truth dawned on Romany. The Englishman was not the object of pursuit, but the strange Colonel and driver were the two hunted ones.

But before she could explain deafening explosions

split the heavens. The quaking sounds reverberated across the countryside. Stunned and bewildered, the officer and Canteen Ma were flung to the ground. After a few seconds, considerably bruised and shaken, the woman staggered to her feet and unsteadily reached the cellar door. She pressed it open and called down the gaping hole, "Pierre, are you and the others down there?"

Through a whiff of cigarette-smoke the reassuring answer came, "Yes, Mother. I brought them down here when the shooting started in the road."

Greatly relieved that her charges were safe, Romany turned her attention on to the officer. In his fall he had struck his head against the table. He lay stunned and bleeding, and Canteen Ma, with the aid of a plentiful supply of cold water, soon saw him recover. She poured out a glass of Schnapps and the dazed officer gratefully sipped the spirits. By the light of the lurid glow which shone through the smashed windows of the kitchen he saw the woman moving about, straightening the disturbed furniture. And now, except for the never-ceasing rumble of guns in the West, the night was once more silent and calm.

A knock came to the door and Romany called, "Enter." A feld-gendarme entered and, catching sight of his officer, he stiffly saluted.

Before he could speak the officer asked, "Did you get your man?"

"No, Herr, we had no luck, but there are two couples yet to return. But I fear all were forced to take cover, for the raiders got the ammunition dump."

Canteen Ma's heart beat wildly. Had the Englishman sacrificed himself in the destruction of the ammunition

dump? To still her nervous trembling, she crossed to the door and looked over the country, and she beheld the smouldering flames of the two stores with dense volumes of smoke curling into the air. In thinking of "Jean Nestor" she comforted herself with the thought that it was too early as yet to expect him back. And he would certainly keep clear while the gendarmes were about. The officer, somewhat placated, commenced his questioning of Romany. But she, now completely sure of herself, on her guard, was easily able to offer an explanation which satisfied the Secret Service officer.

He gave orders to the Feldwebel that, as he must return to his headquarters at once, should either of the patrols capture the fugitive a runner must be sent post-haste to him. Then suddenly he exclaimed: "But only one got away, and there were two."

He strode out of the room, intent on examining the platoon hut, but one of the soldiers of the platoon met him in the yard and said, "Herr Hauptman, the Colonel's driver is in the hut, dead."

As the stealthy pair crept from the vegetable shed, the Englishman, scenting immediate trouble, hurriedly descended from the loft, and as he entered the kitchen there came a thunderous impatient knocking on the front door. Swiftly Jean unlocked and opened it. He was confronted by a feld-gendarme, revolver in hand, who demanded in a gruff voice, "Where is the officer?"

In Flemish, Jean explained where the two had fled, and simultaneously the invalids from the hut arrived in the road, confirming Jean's story. The Secret Service officer, who had joined the feld-gendarme, at once

grasped the situation, but still he regarded the Englishman with considerable suspicion. As the officer was stridently calling his orders, Pierre, with his frightened-looking sisters, entered the room. At that moment Jean would have cheerfully given his hopes of the hereafter for the presence of Canteen Ma.

Gripping the boy by the arm, in an insistent whisper the Englishman asked, "Cousin Pierre, can I trust you to look after the little ones?"

The boy nodded assent calmly.

"Well now, obey to the letter what I say, for there's going to be big trouble here. Take them into the cellar and stay there. You won't fail me, will you?" urged the Englishman. "I would stay, but I must be away."

Emphatically the boy nodded again. A few precious moments were lost as Jean saw the meagre supper collected and the children safely bundled down into the cellar.

A soldier of the platoon was outside the front door on guard, and Jean risked all by saying, "Comrade, children are in the cellar. Will you see them safe if anything happens? I am forced to go to work."

"Certainly, comrade, I'm a family man myself and I'll do what I can," was the good-natured answer.

Without question, he allowed Jean to move off. "That's one turn I owe them. I won't forget that," mentally registered the Englishman. Once he found himself well clear of the house he broke into a quick run, for already the distant purr of aeroplanes warned him that his time was perilously short. At a steady pace he moved rapidly over the open country, confident that he had direction clear. But he had reckoned without the

fire. As the raiders commenced to drop their death-dealing missiles, the glare from the stores fire, far from helping him on the route, cast confusing shadows, and twice in quick succession he lost direction. Now it became a heartbreaking race against time.

Blindly he rushed forward, all thought of landmarks to guide him forgotten, trusting to luck and instinct to lead him to the dump-rail siding. From his bursting lungs the breath came in short, sharp, whistling gasps. The glare, the vicious bark of the anti-aircraft guns, and the shrieking wail of dropping bombs turned the race into a nightmare. But at last his surroundings became familiar. His leaden feet were on the pathway where, with the boy, he had cut the fodder. For a precious moment a pause to fill his grateful lungs with icy cold air, making ready for the cruel climb up the pathway which would lead him to his goal, the siding.

He braced himself for the desperate headlong dash, but in the split fraction of a second he instinctively obeyed a primitive urge. He flung himself flat to the ground for the roar of an aeroplane diving in full throttle earthwards. A stabbing, wheezing scream, and to Jean the end of the world seemed to come. The earth heaved and quaked to the concussion of repeated explosions. Missiles and debris flew skywards and fell with dull thuds in all directions. A sharp excruciating pain gripped his leg and he felt himself being suffocated with the debris and consciousness leaving him.

"Fight it, fight it!" he gasped as he struggled with frantic strength. He fought and struggled with his arms, for his legs were numbed and useless, and he managed to free the upper part of his body. At last he was able

to feel what the dead weight was lying across his legs. A twisted piece of railway line had embedded itself in the ground and had imprisoned the lower part of his body.

After what seemed an eternity to the suffering man he somehow managed to remove the obstacle, but the effort wrung a low moan of agony from his lips. He could hear the crackling noise of a raging fire, and presently he could actually feel the heat. The acrid pungent vapour of explosives almost choked him, and a burning thirst clove his tongue in his mouth. Gradually the pain became bearable, and his first thoughts were of thankfulness, for dimly the knowledge came to him that the night raiders, by a fortunate chance, had accomplished what he had failed to do. Then on his pain-racked consciousness came the urge of self-preservation, for should he be found thus in the vicinity of the dump, and with the incriminating evidence which he carried, not only himself but Romany Rondeel would have to face fearful consequences. For of a certainty he would be recognized as one who had stayed at her home and posed as her nephew.

He had an accurate idea of the part of the pathway he lay in. It was the hollow at the commencement of a sharp incline. Probably it was to this fact he owed his life. Another few steps higher up the path and most likely he would have been blown to atoms. A high, rough privet hedge ran along each side of the roadway, and behind the hedge, as the road was higher than the surrounding fields, a deep gully running parallel with the pathway drained the land in the winter. If he could summon sufficient strength to crawl through the hedge

and into the gully he would be safe, at any rate for a time. Already he heard guttural voices calling across the night. The fitful glare helped him now as, spurring himself on with the dire need of Romany, he painfully crawled, flat on his side, dragging his useless leg after him through a small opening in the bottom of the hedge. He allowed his whole body to roll down into the gully, which, fortunately, was thickly bedded with dry leaves. The terrible exertion left him numb, and great beads of perspiration trickled down his begrimed face.

Again urging himself with the need of others, he searched his pockets and removed everything incriminating, with the exception of his false passport. Another horribly painful movement and the explosives and tell-tale electric battery were all safely buried in the bottom of the ditch. This finished, he lay quiet, willing himself not to lose consciousness.

As in a dream he heard voices and stumbling footsteps approaching along the pathway. It was a patrol of German soldiers, evidently a search-party, for as they passed one grunted, "We'll never find him in this. I'm one for back to the hut."

Jean recognized the voice as belonging to one of the soldiers of the platoon billeted at the Rondeel house. But the Englishman checked a burning desire to call out. A half-formed hope had already dimly entered his brain. Perhaps Romany, with her far-reaching organization, would send a search-party in the forlorn hope of finding him. As his damaged leg lay in an easy position the Englishman felt his strength gradually returning. Slowly he pushed himself up into a sitting posture and to the

best of his ability examined the damage. He did not deceive himself. His left leg was shattered. Not for a moment did his courage fail, for as he chewed a mouthful of grass to allay his thirst the hope that Canteen Ma would try to discover him became a certainty.

Recalling the courage and methods of the indomitable woman, Jean knew that she would at least make a bid to know for certain his fate, and as he mused thus his eyes, now well accustomed to the fitful glare of the smouldering dump fire, saw a form creeping across the meadow towards the gully where he was sitting. At first the Englishman thought his eyes were deceiving him, and the creeping form but hallucination. The amazing hope had come to him that already Romany had sent out searchers to find him.

Again Jean suppressed a wild desire to call out, but something in the movements of the figure gave the staring man pause. Straining his eyes, he saw that it was a human, as himself, in sore distress, for many were the halts made before the figure reached the sheltered ditch. Jean calculated that the person, whoever it was, would arrive some twenty yards higher up the pathway. He heard the rustle of the leaves and then a painful gasping groan as the man, evidently misjudging the depth of the ditch, had fallen awkwardly into it. After breathlessly waiting what seemed to the Englishman æons of time, he saw a tiny flame flare in the ditch.

With every faculty now alert, his sufferings forgotten, Jean saw the flame carried and applied to a small bundle of papers. This in turn flared up and the light disclosed the haggard torn features of the masquerading Colonel!

The "Colonel", with a final definite gesture, carried a small black object to his temple. The horror-stricken Jean suddenly screamed out "Feldwebel!" Too late! A short, sharp crack and the form of the "Colonel" crumpled up as the flames of the tiny fire died out. The "Colonel" had cheated his pursuers. Merciful oblivion fell on the Englishman.

"Pierre, your cousin Jean has not returned yet."

Canteen Ma was at the bedside of her son. The steady drip of rain outside betokened a weeping dawn. The woman spoke the words anxiously to the boy in the semi-blackness. Instantly alert, he rose and descended to the kitchen behind his mother.

As Romany prepared the morning meal, she explained. "I think he had work to do last night near the ammunition stores."

The woman paused, at a loss how to put the matter to the intelligent youth, but Pierre broke in with a definite, "Don't worry, Mother, I'll go."

Hastily finishing his coffee, wrapping a hand sickle in a sack, the boy hugged his mother and set out on his search. Knowing that a guard would most likely be thrown round the destroyed dump, Pierre was extra careful. He hugged closely the hedges, and, approaching the area of his intended search as he worked cutting the grass, he emitted a continuous low whistle of about ten bars of a popular tune that he had learnt from cousin Jean. As a morning shadow he flitted from side to side of numberless pathways, seeking, seeking, and for appearance' sake he partly filled his sack with grass and clover. The pathway leading past the dump he found

strewn with debris, but in patches the grass was still long and succulent. Swish, swish, worked the sickle, accompanied by the low, insistent whistle.

Suddenly an agitated but thankful whisper came from the other side of the hedge, "Cousin Pierre; is that you, cousin Pierre?"

Dragging the sack after him, the boy impatiently pushed his way through the hedge and discovered the stricken, saturated Jean.

"I cannot walk, Pierre," gasped the Englishman, "my leg is a bit hurt."

The boy gazed with dismay on the drawn, blackened features of his companion. Then, brightening up, he scrambled to the pathway, took a keen survey of the landscape, and, seeing not a soul about, crept back and produced a highly coloured packet of cigarettes. Silently he offered the packet to Jean, who with a wry smile placed one of the cigarettes between his lips.

"There's no 'knubs' about. Smoke, cousin Jean; you'll feel better after." After a pause he said, "I'm going back now. Mother will arrange this all right, so don't fret. I'll be back here in two hours."

He spoke manfully as he himself puffed away at a cigarette. Supremely happy at the success of his search, he jumped up and repeated, "In two hours, cousin Jean, don't fret."

He struck off across the fields with the same stealthy caution. With suppressed excitement he was telling his mother the happy result, when Romany was gratified to see the figure of Manton Devany slouch into the kitchen.

"Well, speak of anyone but the evil one and he's sure

to appear. You're just the one I've been wishing most of all to set eyes on, Manton," said Romany, almost happily, as she produced the precious bottle of Schnapps and placed it before the expectant Manton.

"I couldn't keep away, Romany, until I saw everything was all right," muttered the man as Canteen Ma rapidly made up a small parcel of food and in a wrapped bottle poured hot coffee.

"Here, Pierre, run as fast as you can to poor Jean; and mind the 'knubs' don't get a sight of you," she cautioned as the boy darted away.

To Manton, Romany said, "Manton, my poor nephew, Jean Nestor, met with an accident last night—near the ammunition stores," she whispered meaningly. "We must get him away from there. You know as well as me that if the 'knubs' find him there so close they're bound to try to blame him for the damage."

"What time do we start, Romany?" was all Manton asked.

The pair understood each other perfectly, and where no particulars were volunteered no irrelevant questions were asked.

"Dusk this evening will be the best time. But I can't bring him back here after what happened last night. There'll be too many nosy 'knubs' smelling around for the next few days. What I'll do is this. Go you to Odil Vreak and tell him I'm bringing a relation of mine that's had a bad accident. Ask him to prepare a loft in one of his outhouses, as we'll come most likely to-night. While I'm in Roulers to-day I'll ask a good friend of mine to come and see him. It will depend on what she says what we'll do with Jean."

"Right, Romany, I'll go to Odil. He's a decent man and I know he won't refuse you anything."

When Romany called at my home I was at the hospital, but she left an urgent request with mother asking if at all possible to go to her house. Although the hospital was not busy, it was the usual practice to send for me at all hours should a sudden rush of work come. I returned to the hospital and had no difficulty in arranging with the Oberartz for a few extra hours off, giving the excuse that I wanted to visit a sick friend. Luckily I got a lift into Lichtervelde on an ambulance which was returning for repairs. I was therefore at the home of Romany before she had returned from rescuing the stricken Jean. When I arrived, Pierre and the children were in the kitchen. We were all old friends, and whilst Pierre was in the midst of relating the exciting details of the night before and the reasons for the smashed windows, Canteen Ma and Devany returned.

Canteen Ma warmly welcomed me, but, seeing I was impatient to learn the reason of her urgent call, she motioned me into the vegetable shed. There she explained the extremity of the Englishman and that she and Devany had succeeded in quietly removing him to the farm of Odil Vreak.

"I'll go at once," I said. "Can you send someone with me to show the way?"

She called Devany, and with the silent Manton I quickly found myself beside the rough bed of the Englishman. I immediately saw it was an urgent case for hospital. I did what little I could, and whilst I worked away I asked, "Where are your identity papers made out from?"

"Courtrai, sister," he answered. And, knowing the type of man I was speaking to, the rocklike courage and utter indifference to danger, I did not mince matters. I said, "Then it's Courtrai we must risk. Not a moment must be lost to get you into a clinic. Whilst there, Jean," I warned, "keep close your lips. Don't make friends with anyone, patients or staff. After all, the staff is too busy to worry about disabled strangers, and, believe me, your papers will be enough to satisfy them. So the only thing I tell you is to take care of the chatter of your fellow patients, and they can only tell what *you tell them.*"

"Sister," he answered, "I don't know how to thank you for your kindness, but I'll remember every word of your warning. Can I ask your name?"

I told him my name and where I was from. For a long moment he looked at me, and then said simply, "Thanks, sister."

I returned to Romany, and we arranged that she would approach her doctor friend in Thielt. With a note of admittance from him the clinic staff in Courtrai would raise very few questions. Within forty-eight hours Jean Nestor was comfortably housed in the Courtrai hospital. Through Canteen Ma I kept in touch with the Englishman, and many weeks later, on his release, with a pronounced limp, I arranged with Eecloo for him to be met outside the hospital.

Brut Verhagen sent his most trusted guide, Jan Van Candelaere. It was arranged that Jan would wear a large red kerchief round his neck, and the Englisman would follow him until outside the town. Without a hitch the great-hearted poacher safely delivered his charge to Verhagen's farm. Owing to the weakness of the English-

man it had taken them four days to do the journey from Courtrai to Eecloo. After a rest of a few days to recuperate his strength, Jean Nestor was passed safely over the frontier. When Romany had visited him with the German doctor at Vreak's farm he had managed to whisper to the bluff hawker, "Although she didn't tell me, I guessed the Sister was 'Laura'. Am I right?"

Romany nodded assent.

In the interests of continuity I must again digress, for it was many months later and only by accident that I learned the story of "Colonel Rothbann" from the lips of none other than Brut Verhagen himself. Whilst in "cold print" the action of Brut Verhagen may appear pitiless, it must be remembered that the slightest hesitation or slip on his part meant disaster, utter and complete, to a vitally useful organization. Under the frightful conditions of the occupation it was not only a necessary act of self-preservation (but I am certain Verhagen never for a moment considered himself), but the safety of hundreds of his trusting compatriots was at stake.

Feldwebel Rumel Smedt was brought into indirect contact with Verhagen through the passing of refugees over the frontier. Men and women in every walk of life fleeing from German justice,* and escaping prisoners of war, were for a price allowed to pass through the post of the Feldwebel. Later, the agents of Verhagen found in the Feldwebel a ruthless seller of secrets large and small, and he developed an appraising eye for the value

* It was computed by a Committee sitting shortly after the Armistice that, excluding refugees who left the country before the occupation, 35,000 souls were passed over the frontier.

of his wares. He once informed one of the agents that if the price was forthcoming he would undertake to deliver a flotilla of submarines! But the avaricious traitor is always suspect. All may have gone well but for the advent of Hans Weimer.

It is certain that the Feldwebel's excursions and masquerades as a high Staff official did not commence until he became associated with Hans, who was undoubtedly the brains of the pair. What their hatred of the Fatherland was is hard to determine, but in the case of the Feldwebel, when it suited the pose during their masquerades, Hans, the driver, hinted that his "Colonel" was the accidental offspring of a petty reigning monarch of the Fatherland. This may have been true, for many of the Feldwebel's wild escapades were mysteriously hushed up, and it is certain the Feldwebel believed the story himself. Hans was a "too clever" mechanic who had been released from prison to work out his "redemption", and he may have been suffering from a sense of oppression. Coup after coup the pair passed to the agents of Verhagen, but, as is invariably the case with such mediums, with ever-increasing demands for higher pay. Then by a ruse the clever Hans partly discovered the identity of Brut Verhagen and his status in the Allied Intelligence staff.

The pair dropped in the ears of Verhagen's agents hints which almost amounted to threats. The Eecloo chief came to the conclusion that it was time to act, for the traitor has always the preference of going to the highest bidder, and the information of Verhagen's activities would undoubtedly be worth a gold-mine to an informer who was bent on betraying the chief to the

German Intelligence. But the problem bristled with difficulties. A dead Feldwebel found in the district would bring dire penalties down on the heads of the civilians, and there would still be the clever Hans to deal with and counter.

Denounce the pair direct in the area and they were almost certain to put it as the work of Verhagen and his agents. Then would come the inevitable counter denouncement, and that the pair were prepared for all eventualities Verhagen did not doubt. Risks must be taken, but the trap must be baited innocently and cunningly. After a period of quietness, Verhagen's chance came, for he had already decided that the only safe method would be to lure them out on one of their masquerading expeditions on a plausible excuse. Hans approached the agent with the biggest piece of information, which the pair thought would be worth a small fortune. (As a matter of fact, the information was put into my hands by Stephan some forty-eight hours afterwards. It was the intended attack on Verdun.)

Verhagen rapidly laid the trap. Hans was met with a shrug of the shoulders and the information that the "chief" had gone away on a visit which would keep him from the area for several days. The excited Hans insisted, indicating that his news would be of small service at the end of a few days, and, incidentally, would therefore be useless as a money-maker. Reluctantly the agent hinted that the address of the "chief" would be given if Hans had the means of getting to Roulers in the next twenty-four hours. Hans quickly made up his mind.

"Give me the address," he demanded. The address

of a civilian in Roulers friendly to the Germans was handed to Hans. The ruthless and ceaseless activities of the German Intelligence staff at Thielt, and their undoubted ability, were known throughout the area of occupation, and it was to the Thielt authorities Brut Verhagen anonymously laid damaging and conclusive information of the pair's activities.

Bygone deals with civilians already out of the country, and daring coups, were lodged in such a way that suspicion of where the denouncement came from would point to anywhere but the right place. But the accident outside the house of Canteen Ma nearly upset all calculations, and was near to wrecking the whole carefully laid scheme. A trusted agent of Verhagen was to watch the house of the civilian. If the agent saw the house was under police observation he was to let events take their course. But if the place was not watched, then he was to approach the "Colonel" before he knocked at the house and, with a plausible tale, was to get the pair to return next morning, when the denouncement of Brut Verhagen lodged with the Thielt Intelligence would have the prescribed time to take effect. The non-appearance of the "Colonel" that night, owing to the accident, caused the agent to be off his guard when the "Colonel" did appear at the house after his visit to me.

The frightened civilians, of course, knew nothing, and the "officer's" enquiry for the Eecloo chief was Greek to them. In the afternoon, several hours too late, an officer of the Secret Service from Thielt arrived and questioned the civilians, but the bird had flown. He returned to Thielt, and next morning, when the report of the two feld-gendarmes who questioned Hans would

be handed in, would probably have given the officer on duty the right clue.

The "Colonel's" visit to my room was undoubtedly prompted by his certainty of being able to find that I was other than I posed, and Brut Verhagen went so far as to say that he believed the "Colonel" actually knew my identity.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CLOWN

HEARING excited voices coming through the door of our back kitchen, I stood to listen, for in my dual rôle of nurse in the German military hospital at Roulers and spy in the British Intelligence Service it was my business to be interested in everything that happened around me.

Two German soldiers were talking excitedly to Bertha, our Flemish maid-of-all-work. One of the soldiers I knew as the "Clown". He called himself "Frederick the Great", and I knew he had appeared before several crowned heads of Europe as a first-class ventriloquist. His companion was known as "Silent Willie", because of his almost dumb silence. They were two decent, simple soldiers and fast comrades.

Mud-soiled, and with the grey look of men just returned from the trenches, the Clown was saying:

"Guess what I have, Bertha."

"How should I know?" countered Bertha, woman-like, burning with curiosity.

"We were in an attack yesterday on the British line at St. Julien," returned the Clown. "For two days our heavies pounded the Tommies—crump, cr-rump!" The Clown imitated the sound of a bursting shell to perfection. "Then, with a rush, over we went!"

Throwing his voice to another part of the room, he asked, in an assumed girlish voice, "And what found you there, my hero?" In his normal voice he replied, "We found the trenches empty of Tommies, but full of —what?"

"Oh, please do tell me, Freddie! I'm all of a works!" came the assumed girlish voice.

With a look of supreme importance, shaking free his trench-soiled haversack, he slowly unbuckled the straps and disclosed to the astonished gaze of Bertha a pure-white loaf of bread and four small tins of beef.

Again came the assumed girlish voice:

"And what are your spoils of war, comrade of Frederick the Great?"

Silent Willie reluctantly uncovered his booty. Three tins of ragout, a large tin of mutton, and another white loaf of bread were laid on the table.

Bertha looked with amazement at the white bread.

"It's snow-white," she said in a breathless, incredulous voice.

"Yes, and the meat's from a real cow! We know; we have sampled two tins already," encouraged the Clown.

"Oh!" said Bertha in a yearning tone. "Oh, how lucky!"

There stood three children, caught in the fiery blizzard, staring down in unbelieving amazement at a few captured provisions which gave the lie to the German newspapers' apologies. The papers screamed, "Our plight may be bad, but the Allies' plight is infinitely worse!"

But Silent Willie stood there muttering, "The —— liars! The —— liars!" over and over again.

One day, I thought, the reckoning would come.

Striking his finest dramatic attitude, the Clown said to Bertha, in what I suppose was his best stage-voice:

"And, *mein Fräulein*, when the knights of old returned from the wars victorious they showered the spoils on the fair!" Saying which, he flashed out his bayonet, sliced his loaf in half, and handed one half to Bertha, together with two tins of beef.

I left my eavesdropping point of vantage and joined my mother in our private room.

A little while later a maddening smell of wholesome food, the like of which we had not experienced for many weary months, invaded our room.

Then a deep bass voice, coming apparently from under the door, asked:

"Mother, will you partake of the banquet? Real potatoes, real carrots, and real lamb. It is I, Frederick the Great, who swears it."

Laughingly mother and I gratefully accepted a portion of the Clown's loot.

Although I liked and knew I could trust our maid Bertha, I had never let her share my secret. She was just the type for a café—a bright, talkative girl, who unwittingly garnered vital information from the rank-and-file of the German troops in our important sector of the Front, and just as innocently passed it on to me. It was her custom to drop into my room after curfew and gossip about the day's happenings. Even when I finished late at the hospital, she would wait up so as to unburden herself. I usually let her wander on, taking mental notes

of any useful information imparted during the day by grumbling and protesting soldiers who were wont to pour their troubles into the ears of the ever sympathetic Bertha.

Moreover, she was one of those girls who had an extraordinary retentive memory for gossip. She could faithfully remember and recount small things discussed days before. In many ways she would have been an invaluable ally. The opportunities which came her way for gathering information were legion, but in such a dangerous rôle I had to be ultra-careful in my choice of workers. A small slip or laughing error would mean a firing-squad for both.

The unwitting gossiper who divulges a secret, no matter how innocently, is just as dangerous as the cleverest *agent provocateur*. So I contented myself with just pumping our maid.

When the Clown and Silent Willie had departed, Bertha lost no time in joining me in my room. She commenced with her usual running comments on the day's occurrences—her troubles with the neighbours, the enormous price of food and other trivial annoyances. It has always appeared remarkable to me that even under the most distressing and depressing circumstances people and things *will* revert back to the ordinary way of life. Petty jealousies and the usual functions of everyday life, I suppose, saved most of us civilians from going insane during those terrible days.

After this steam had been allowed to escape, Bertha arrived at the topic which most interested me.

"Isn't it a shame," she said indignantly: "the Clown's company has got to go back to the trenches in

two days. He told me," she continued, "that they have been in two small attacks during the last week, but that will be nothing to the great advance everyone is expecting next time the company moves up the line. Guns upon guns are moving up, too, and the Clown says the poor Tommies will be blown back to London."

London was the same as England to Bertha.

This information confirmed my own discoveries made during the day at the hospital. The orders had been given for all movable cases to be evacuated immediately to back areas. An empty hospital meant advance. Empty—ready to be refilled with the tortured humanity who would pay the price for the attack. Huge stores of hospital material had arrived in the yard of the hospital. Ammunition trains replaced ration trains, and everyone, soldier and civilian, would have to pull in their belts tighter still.

The signs were plain. Attack ! Attack !

I felt tired and discouraged, and Bertha was prattling on.

Suddenly I was listening with breathless interest. That which she was disclosing now, so innocently, went to my brain like the shock of an electric current. It was news, and the key to all this preparation.

In some wonderful way I had long ago learned how to separate the grain from the chaff of countless rumours.

With every nerve terribly awake, I sat back and listened, certain that the track was the right one.

That morning three soldiers, not of the Wurtemburg Army (the army holding our sector), had entered the café.

Their hats were worn with an air sufficiently out of regulation angle to draw an enquiring remark from the admiring Bertha.

Pointing to his perkily placed hat, one said:

"That, Fräulein, means Bavarian. When the Prussian has dirty work to do he sends for the Bavarian. These Wurtemburgers are no good at the game we have to play."

Bertha's eyes must have been wide open with questioning and admiration, for one of the trio took up the story:

"Yes, Fräulein, the Prussian knows what's what. Behind the Rumbeke aerodrome we've been taking the Kemmel Hill from the Tommy every day for the last three weeks. Only in practice," he laughed. "But next week we go over to take it in earnest." They explained to the puzzled Bertha that the Kemmel Berg was a very desirable point of vantage in the English lines, and their brigade had been practising its capture on an exact model behind the aerodrome.

On leaving, one spat out, showing his contempt of all other units, "Ach, the Wurtemburgers! Ach, the Prussian!"

So Kemmel Hill, one of the vital keys of the Ypres salient, was to be the goal of the forthcoming attack. The exact timing of the attack did not worry me much, but the knowledge of the definite objective would be wonderful news for the eagerly waiting agents over the Dutch frontier.

A feint from our part of the salient, the eastern side, but on the western side, the Kemmel Hill, would fall the crushing, smashing blow to open up the way to the

Channel ports. The principal artillery fire would come from our part of the salient.

Next morning Canteen Ma passed me a note:

Information urgently required regarding concentration of heavy artillery on eastern slopes of Passchendaele-Westroosebeke-Roulers Ridge. Allied observers unsighted.

Obviously the concentration of artillery and the rapid relief of line troops, I argued, appeared to point to one definite object: the complete capture of the Kemmel Hill position.

That night I duplicated my report, handed one in to the chemist's shop and another to an ordinary runner whom I knew I could also count upon. I added that I would do my best with regard to the gun positions.

As the reports were speeding to the frontier the Clown's company marched up to the trenches.

And now for the gun positions.

The Red Cross ambulance-driver Alphonse, my intrepid Alsatian confederate, practically every night drove his ambulance past the second line of trenches, almost up to Poelcappelle church, collecting the wounded from two posts, the Spriet post and Poelcappelle post. The route he had to follow from Roulers drove flush through the area where the heavy artillery were taking up fresh positions, and in addition he must pass through my old home village of Westroosebeke.

I was well acquainted with every square yard of the ground, for in carefree days, as a somewhat tomboyish young girl, I had bird's-nested with my brothers, and I knew every wood and coppice.

Some vague idea of accompanying Alphonse had entered my mind. Perhaps together, I thought, we could pick up some useful information. In the nature of things it could not be much, but every little would help, and, providing I could talk Alphonse round to my way of thinking, I could pay a visit to our old shattered homestead.

So to Alphonse I went.

He was tinkering with a battered, dilapidated ambulance.

"Alphonse," I said, "my relations over the frontier are very anxious to learn the new positions of the heavies on the Ridge." Sweeping my arm to indicate the ridge rising towards Passchendaele, I asked him, "Who is the medical officer at the Spriet post?"

Alphonse stopped his work and silently regarded me for about ten seconds. This was a precaution of his. It allowed talkative people to continue when he did not desire to speak, and also gave him time to consider his short, pointed answers.

"Officer Umbret," Alphonse informed me.

"That's good," I returned cheerfully, trying not to notice Alphonse's stony look. "Officer Umbret and I are old friends. We worked together in the early days in the Convent of Westroosebeke when that building was improvised as a hospital."

I felt I was making a bad start with Alphonse, so I continued hurriedly as I saw him regarding me with considerable doubt and disapproval. I blurted out the first excuse that came into my mind.

"My mother is yearning for several little things we were forced to leave behind in Westroosebeke, so if

your plundering countrymen have not already claimed them I would like to see what can be done about it."

Before his ten seconds were up I went on, "We didn't think much of them at the time, but they have become very valuable in these short times. So, Alphonse, when I'm as far as Westroosebeke, I'm sure you won't object to my going as far as the Spriet with you."

And I finished up with what I imagined was a bright voice, "If it's a fine, quiet night."

Flat refusal was on his set face.

"Sister," he said after his usual pause, "Westroosebeke is a ruin. Hardly a brick stands on a brick. You'll find nothing there. The Spriet post is near the second line, so you don't go with me. I've enough to do to look after this rotten wagon, without you coming and examining—er—houses. And I had enough the last time."

"Nevertheless, my dear Fritz," I answered, "I propose to foist myself on you to-night." I always called him Fritz to get him rattled. "Don't forget," I went on, "Westroosebeke was for months within a short distance of the first line, and I worked there night and day."

"It's different now, sister," he said earnestly. "Let me try and get you as much information as I can about the pop-guns."

I looked round, as our conversation had lasted longer than was prudent.

"Alphonse," I entreated, "I must come with you to-night. I know every inch of the countryside. Although you have travelled constantly up and down with your old machine, you don't know the district as I know it. Now, quick, Alphonse—do be reasonable. What time

are you starting? Look, the whole yard is gazing at us. What time do you leave?"

"Five-thirty," he returned with deep misgiving. "I've to load up a few medical stores for the Spriet post."

"It's going to be a dirty night," shouted Alphonse as we chug-chugged along the Roulers-Westroosebeke road, through a fine drizzle that had just started.

I was inclined to believe him, so I pulled my cape closer around my shoulders and fastened to the dash-board the steel helmet Alphonse had thoughtfully handed to me as we left.

At Oostnieuwkerke a rumbling, roaring bark nearly shook me from my seat beside Alphonse. He turned to me and yelled in my ear, "Heavy mortars."

I nodded. They did mean business!

We groaned along a familiar road now, the road leading to my old home. The beautiful, tall, swaying trees along the roadside that I had known and loved in happier days were shattered skeleton stumps. The long straight roadway was pock-marked with shell-holes, and broken ends of twisted steel marked where the trams had puffed along in peace-time with lazy sloth. Alphonse seemed to have an uncanny sense for steering clear of all obstacles. He seemed to have cat's eyes.

The guns, large and small, barked and spat from every piece of cover, cutting the sky in lightning flashes. We passed ammunition limbers and ration-wagons going up with food for the guns and food for the humans, and now and again we passed ghostly columns of troops, helmets gleaming in the flashes. Near a small wood just before we reached the village Alphonse stopped and

pretended to examine a back tyre. The guns in the wood barked with a frightening, crashing roar, the whole countryside seeming to quake. "Heavy howitzers," Alphonse explained as he jumped up to the steering-wheel again.

As we ran into Westroosebeke a strange silence seemed to fall on the Front.

The church, I saw, was a battered ruin of high piled rubble.

I touched Alphonse on the arm, and he stopped. The broad, open main street that I remembered so well was only wide enough to allow two wagons to pass with difficulty, and the rubble of the destroyed houses had piled up along each side of the street to such a height that I had the impression of standing in a deep ravine. I scrambled up the side, and barbed wire and grotesque iron stakes tore at my arms and face. It was heart-breaking to gaze on what was once our smiling home. I had been prepared to see damage, but not for this utter ruin and desolation. Here and there stood a stunted gable-end of wall, standing stark against a lowering sky. Giant battlefield rushes pushed up ugly-shaped heads from huge shell-holes which could hardly be distinguished from the wide, gaping cellars.

With a gasp I scrambled back to Alphonse, and in silence he drove on to the Passchendaele-Roulers cross-roads. The Ypres road leading to the Spriet post was camouflaged and was in a terrible state. After many protests from Alphonse's "wagon", we arrived on the top of a hump in the road. Alphonse stopped and pointed down into the valley at a dull red glow which lit up the sky. "Ypres," he said. We were looking down

on the Allies' lines! Star-rockets piercing the blackness mounted to the sky in graceful curves.

A rattle and we commenced the descent to the Spriet post.

We were both very silent and set. WE WERE BEFORE THE GUNS AND IN THE GRIP OF THE FRONT.

Arriving at our destination, Alphonse ran the ambulance as near as he could to the blind side of a much-scarred concrete dug-out. I followed him down three steps into a narrow, dirty trench, and as he lifted the matting flap of the dug-out doorway a burst of machine-gun fire rattled out from seemingly just across the roadway, and a vicious ping-ping flitted overhead.

Officer Umbret was busy examining a wounded soldier. Alphonse walked up, saluted the officer, and handed his stores to an orderly who was staring in amazement, mouth wide open, at me.

"How many to go back, Herr?" asked Alphonse.

"Six," answered the doctor.

The doctor looked round, stared at me for a second or two in surprise, then recognized an old and willing helper. He turned again to the stricken man and continued rapidly his work of mercy.

It crossed my mind, I remember, that the whole scene stood as a symbol to me.

Everything was etched out in stark primitiveness. The deft actions of the doctor's hands as he worked away on the torn piece of humanity. Economy of words. Economy of action. There in the dim medical dug-out was life shorn of all frills and falsehood. There was nakedness and truth; men might destroy the world but they cannot destroy truth. We were all the same

beings of yesterday, yet that strange "grip" made us creatures of another sphere, I thought.

My eyes becoming accustomed to the gloom of the dug-out, I looked round and saw lying in a corner on a stretcher someone I knew.

I walked over and bent down. "Hello, Frederick. You weren't long getting a pass for the Fatherland," I said.

"Ach, I'm dreaming—or is it really you, Fräulein?" Satisfying himself that it was really me, he continued: "Yes, they got me, but I don't think it's very much. As soon as the company arrived last night I was detailed for a small patrol in 'No Man's Land'. We met a patrol of Tommies and there was a fight. I've got it here," pointing to his hip. "I couldn't move, and I must have been very near the Tommies' trenches, because I could hear them speaking nearly the whole night. Just before dawn the Silent One found me and dragged me in, right under the Tommies' noses. He'd been out four times looking for me. He doesn't say much, but I've hopes for him yet."

I smiled and said, "You'll be sent back to the Fatherland this time."

He shook his head, replying, "What would the company do without me? I'm hoping they put me in your hospital, Fräulein. I'd like to hang around and see the Silent One again."

"In any case," I encouraged him, "you are coming down to-night with us."

During our conversation the crump, crump of heavy shells shook and reverberated through the dug-out, and whilst the wounded were being loaded I had a few words

with Officer Umbret. He looked very weary and said that as soon as his relief arrived he was going on leave. I wished him good luck and took my place beside Alphonse, who had started up his engine. I saw that the driver seemed very uneasy, for as we started off the Front commenced to boil up, the rattle of machine-guns and the sharp crack, crack of rifles swept along the trenches behind us. I felt very uneasy for the men in the ambulance, as the bumping on the awful apology for a road was terrible.

A bombardment suddenly fell on the cross-roads of the Ypres-Westroosebeke route—the road we must pass. From the bottom of the hill we could see the flashes and almost see the earth heaving up as crash after crash rent the heavens. Alphonse leaned towards me and shouted, "It's moving towards us! Put on the helmet!"

We were half-way up the incline, when we both heard a wailing cry for help from the ditch running along the exposed side of the roadway. A deafening roar and blinding crash just behind us, and I got the putrid smell of high-explosive. The ground shook and heaved, but Alphonse, with unerring instinct, drove his ambulance beside a large heap of rubble from a demolished farmhouse and stopped.

"We are just as well here," he shouted in the din, "until this passes!"

"Drive on! Drive on!" a screaming voice yelled from the ambulance, awful in its panic-stricken intensity.

Then again, in a lull, we heard the horrible cry for help just along the road.

With a muttered, "I'm going," Alphonse scrambled

down from his seat, and I hurriedly followed, both making for the sound of the cry.

Seeing I was with him, Alphonse pulled me down into the ditch on the lee side of the road, and we both crawled along, barbed wire tearing at us at every move.

"He's on the other side," called Alphonse; and, as a clearer cry came: "He's there."

The shells were bursting just across the road, but Alphonse, with the quickness of a panther, dashed over and, throwing himself flat beside the wounded man, called back:

"Stay where you are. We're all right here; we're in a freshly made shell-hole. Wait until this passes."

I waited, and the shelling appeared to die down.

"Can you come over?" Alphonse asked. "I can't manage him alone."

Bent double, I ran over the road, and found Alphonse bandaging a German officer's leg, which was covered with blood.

"Try to help him on to my back. He won't feel it; he's unconscious," commanded Alphonse.

I helped him, but as we started across the road the shelling came on with redoubled fury. I felt deadly faint and weary as I held the form of the officer on the back of the sturdy Alphonse.

How we scrambled back to the ambulance I never remember. All that I recollect is trying with a last effort to help Alphonse lift our added burden on to the floor of the ambulance. Then I collapsed.

A little while later I came to, and Alphonse informed me that the frightfulness was over. The road began to show signs of life again. Limbers and wagons passed,

so our driver, with a cheerful grin, left our heaven-sent heap of rubble, and we crawled back towards Roulers.

Just before we arrived in Roulers, Alphonse asked, "Sister, do you feel up to hearing good news?"

I nodded.

Jerking his thumb back towards the interior of the ambulance, he said, "The man we picked up to-night is an officer of artillery." He drove on for some moments in silence, and the full significance did not at first strike me. Then, like a cold shower, his meaning struck.

Without Alphonse saying, "I've got all his maps," I understood.

Alphonse leaned towards me and whispered, "He's from Army Headquarters Staff, and his two orderlies were killed up there by his side. You'll have every one of your gun-positions to-morrow afternoon. I'll have copies made before I hand in his effects."

I could only nod my thanks.

My mother was terribly upset at my distressed state, and I had to promise her faithfully not to repeat the trip.

True to his word, next day Alphonse handed me the copies, and I at once sent them "over" in sections.

I anxiously awaited the starting of the attack, but "Man proposes . . ." and the rain which came down in torrents delayed it for a more propitious occasion.

I visited the Clown once, and found that his wound was not at all serious. He was up to his usual pranks. His ward was always in an uproar with his ventriloquist tricks.

He came one day to the café with Silent Willie, whose company was out resting, waiting for the rain to finish for the attack on Kemmel.

Bertha and I were in the kitchen as the comrades stole in by the back entrance.

"Ha, Bertha! Now that we are in hospital, we have to be careful of the feld-gendarmes. I can disguise my voice but not myself," was the Clown's greeting.

Then, "How has the Silent One behaved himself while I've been away?"

Silent Willie looked glummer than usual, but the Clown, I saw, was bubbling over with excitement.

"Are you not going back to Germany?" asked Bertha.

"No," he answered, looking towards me.

An invisible force seemed to draw us together. We were blood-comrades now, for had we not suffered together "in front of the guns"? Before, I was just the ordinary civilian, he the despised "knub", but now the awful Front had placed us on a level.

The Clown and the Spy, I thought, with a shiver.

"A cushy Base job for Frederick the Great in future," he explained with glee. "No more trenches for me; I'm going to be clever. I'll tell you. There's an Army Circus coming to the town to give a couple of performances, and as soon as I heard about it I routed out the officer in charge of the advance party and asked him if he could place me in the show.

"'What can you do?' he asked, like a Prussian drill-sergeant.

"So I gave him the cat-and-dog fight underneath his feet." At this point the Clown gave such a realistic

display of his powers that Bertha caught hold of a broom, thinking the room was invaded.

"He jumped about three metres back," said the Clown, laughing. "I gave him a few other samples, and had his orderlies running on all kinds of stupid errands, until at last he had me escorted from the field. But not before I had his promise of a trial."

Looking at me appealingly, he asked: "You'll come, Fräulein, won't you? I, Frederick the Great, promise you the hour of your life! If the rain holds off, a performance is to be given to-morrow."

His eyes gleamed with excitement as he pictured himself again in the centre of the arena, the sawdust under his feet and a laughing, helpless audience in the palms of his hands.

Army concerts were held every quiet day in Roulers, but the civilian left them severely alone. I had heard of the coming of the circus, but it had never entered my head to go there. I knew a large tent had been erected some little distance from the town.

"Will you try to be there, Fräulein?" pleaded the Clown.

The idea of the circus certainly appealed to me more than the crude, obscene Army concert parties. What is it in the magic name of "circus" that draws mankind? I knew it would be a circus without animals; perhaps a few comic made-up beasts. But the tent, the arena circle, the sawdust and the beautiful horses with the tossing manes, all have an appeal older than time itself.

But this was *not* the reason why I promised the Clown.

Such a gathering of widely different units would present

a golden opportunity of discovering if any new reinforcements had arrived in the district. By keeping my eyes open I could obtain more information in half an hour than I could in days through the usual channels.

So I promised that if I heard of any other civilians going I would go too. He could hardly contain himself, saying over and over again, "A Base job in future for Freddie," and then, in the voice of his Company Commander, he went through all the drill instructions.

"No more of that for me," he said exultantly.

We laughed, and were glad for his sake, but Silent Willie looked on without saying a word.

The day broke fine and dry, and as things were rather quiet at the hospital I had no difficulty in obtaining a pass from the Oberartz.

Some kilometres from the town a large tent with the usual effects had been erected, and the only danger would come from chance Allied aeroplane raiders.

I walked up, so as not to make myself too conspicuous, and found that a few favoured civilians had been allowed in.

The Clown's Company were there to a man, to cheer and cheer their favourite on to the "Base job".

The "turns" were good. Trick-riding, comic donkey eating comic lion, acrobats, and then "Frederick the Great".

He jumped into the arena dressed as a clown, white-faced, red-nosed; the soldier forgotten, here was the Master. Frederick the Great had entered his kingdom.

A shrieking shell whined over the tent. Everyone ducked, including the General and his staff.

The Clown laughed. It's a favourite trick of his.

The famous cat-and-dog fight takes place between the legs of the stout bespectacled bandmaster.

In a few moments he has the audience helpless with laughter with his cheeky imitations.

Cheer after cheer, and Frederick the Great has made his mark.

In the evening Silent Willie and the Clown sat in the kitchen. The glum one regarded with doglike devotion his expansive comrade as he gloated over the Base job which had been offered to him by the officer commanding the circus. The Clown had asked for, and had already received, his discharge from the hospital.

"I'm going back now to the hospital to collect my kit, Bertha," the Clown said, but, with a puzzled air, added, "The show has orders to move off to-morrow. Why so soon I don't know. They speak of going as far back as Ghent."

"Ah!" I thought. "The attack. Such frivolous things as circuses are not required about the area when serious events are afoot."

Sitting in my room the same night, Bertha crept in and said:

"The Silent One is in the kitchen. He has only spoken once, and that was to tell me that his company are 'falling-in' in half an hour, to go up the line."

Here was confirmation of my suspicions!

I hurriedly wrote out a short report, warning the agent that an attack could be expected at any hour on the Kemmel Berg, adding that four new machine-gun battalions had moved into the district. I gave the

numbers and all particulars that I had been able to discover at the circus.

My hospital "late pass" would enable me to make the journey to the little chemists's shop across the square without much danger, enabling my precious news to "cross over" immediately.

I crept down the stairs to steal out at the back entrance, but as I reached the dark passage that led past the kitchen I heard a shuffling noise, and the latch of the back door lifted with a rattle. I stood flat up against the wall as a dark form entered the passage-way. It made straight for the kitchen, and with a gasp of relief I recognized the familiar form of the Clown.

Noiselessly I slipped up to the door and peeped in. Silent Willie was sitting near the long Flemish stove, looking, if possible, more despondent than ever. The Clown was standing with his back towards me. He had his full pack on his back, with rifle slung, and all his trench equipment, gas-mask and steel helmet.

"Ach," he was saying, "I can't go, Silent One. What would the company do without me? Without Frederick the Great? I'm coming up with you to-night." And he strode across to Silent Willie and gave the glum one a great slap across his back.

With a lump in my throat I almost turned back, but with a sob and a noiseless rush I was out of the house.

For the second time my warning "went over" as the Clown marched up the line.

One night two weeks afterwards I learned that the attack on Kemmel never got a chance. It never got farther than its own trenches, and as I lay tossing in

my bed, thinking, thinking, I bit my bedclothes in anguish.

Oh, God! Oh, God! I thought. How long the necessity?

For the Clown and Silent Willie never came back.

CHAPTER IX

BRUT VERHAGEN—THE CHIEF

DURING 1916 and towards its close the hammer blows of the Allies continued to fall with frightful effect on the bewildered German armies, and those of us who read the German inspired newspapers learned of the invader withdrawing everywhere. But always, it said, according to carefully laid plans. Each retreat, we were further told, inflicted terrible losses on the Allies. The invaders, during their stupendous advances, had made no secret of their intentions. Victory after victory had been flouted for the delight of a docile German nation, and each "conquest" had eagerly been parcelled out. Only a few months before this period the whole solid world would not have satisfied the all-conquering nation. But now, if not a change of heart, at least a change of reason crept into the screaming newspapers.

Knowing the type of news that had to be served up to satisfy the waning spirits of the German population, we civilians in the occupied areas were well content to observe in these "retreating victories" the coming of the dawn of hope. At one moment there was a strong rumour (and there is absolutely no doubt that it was more than a contemplation of the German General Staff)

of a grand retreat, a general withdrawal to the Liége line. This news, of course, I promptly flashed "over".

To be master in munitions, guns and every type of offensive and defensive weapon for twenty-four long months had given the invader a sense of "cocksureness" and superiority. But when the Allies not only caught up but surpassed him in the weight and numbers of weapons there came a corresponding wave of deep depression really out of proportion to the facts of the situation. The news of the terrible tanks sent a shivering wave of apprehension through the German armies. Not so much, be it said, from fear of the actual weapon, but amazement that they who up to then had possessed all the inventive genius for such trappings of warfare had not been the first in the field with so useful and formidable an attacking force.

That "Blood Bath", the Somme, was only spoken of with bated breath, and the very name of Verdun was avoided as the plague. The transition from conquering harbingers of a New Culture of 1914 to "defenders" of hearth and home of 1916 would have been laughable had not the tragedy for other nations been so colossal. The spectacle of "Shining Michael" turned apologetic defender, and a very hard-pressed defender at that, must have caused the God of Mirth to shake with thunders of ironic laughter the very foundations of the Junker's egotism.

The harder the Allies pressed the more frequent became the spy scares, and the sterner the reign of terror in the occupied areas. But the civilians' hopes were high, and sullen obedience had passed almost into open defiance. Was not deliverance near?

Again it was rumoured that all civilians would be forcibly evacuated to areas further back. Amongst other things, I was somewhat anxious about my parents, and I had long thought of trying to arrange a trip to Ghent. Should we be forced to leave Roulers hurriedly, I could arrange with friends in Ghent that my parents would have at least a friendly refuge to go to. And in addition I had a recent request from Intelligence asking if verification could be given that Ghent was an area being used as a base for the new monster aeroplane bombers. These bombers had commenced night-raiding back areas far behind the Allied lines, and were soon to make daring raids on London itself. Already the environs of Ghent were closely guarded and whole areas were placed out of bounds to civilians, more especially those upon which Zeppelin bases had already been established.

Giving as the reason my parents' pressing need, I had dropped a hint of my desires into the ears of a doctor friend at the hospital, and one morning my patience was rewarded. One of the doctors spoke to me. "Fräulein," he said, "I understand you would like a run into Ghent. I think I can arrange the matter with the town commandant's officer if you will be good enough to do me a favour."

Smiling, I replied: "I'll do anything in reason, Herr Doktor."

"Oh, the favour is quite harmless, Sister." He went on to explain. "I have made a fine collection of lace"—and, indeed, I knew that the doctor was an enthusiastic collector of old Flemish laces, who had paid fancy prices for pieces that he fancied—"and, you

know, we cannot trust the Army post with valuable parcels. So I will arrange it this way with your help. An old school friend of mine is leaving a Ghent hospital in a few days on sick leave. He's returning to my home town, so I'd take it as a real favour if you would call on him and hand him the parcel. In a separate note I will ask him to present the collection to my wife."

I gladly agreed to the doctor's plan.

On a breezy, raw morning, two days afterwards, I stood on the platform of the ruined Roulers station. The fussy station Hauptmann hurried over to me with a questioning look in his eyes. I told him of my visit to Ghent, and the excuse I held out was my parents.

"Fräulein, will you not come in out of the chill morning air?"

I refused, saying, "Thank you, Hauptmann. After the atmosphere of the hospital I'm enjoying every moment of the breeze."

The station platform was beginning to fill up with soldiers and officers going back to the Fatherland on leave. One or two sleepy-eyed civilians were standing at one side. They had been transferred from the Courtrai train to catch this connection to Ghent, and they had been standing since dawn on the windswept station.

The soldiers had the pleased expectant look of happy schoolboys about to break up for the holidays. Their uniforms bore that shabby creased look which denoted the delousing station. Besides Army packs all carried bundles or fat suitcases packed with rations and foodstuffs which no doubt would gladden the heart of their sorely tried kinsfolk at home. The officers, in a small group, stood haughtily apart, as rough jokes flew

from soldier to soldier. Discipline appeared to have been forgotten in the joy of leaving the shambles behind. A small ferrety-looking soldier, with several bundles almost as large as himself, said with a laugh that he was going on leave to Hanover and while there he would open a store and make his fortune, and come back an officer. His companion, a large man with great ham fists, smacked the side of his suitcase and told the station in general that he had enough rations to last him the whole of his leave, and, with a knowing laugh, he added, "And a few more leaves if necessary."

Several officers and soldiers looking very weak were men discharged from hospital, going home on sick leave. The station Hauptmann again approached me and in a mysterious whisper said: "Fräulein, the train is late, but, when you see it steaming into the station, follow me and I'll arrange your seat."

Shortly afterwards the train puffed into the station and with terrible screeching of brakes it came to a standstill with groaning protests. Oil was as scarce and as valuable as food. The soldiers made a sudden rush for places, and I followed the stationmaster. We travelled the whole length of the platform, and next to the engine he halted opposite a compartment labelled "For Civilians Only". We had passed two compartments marked "For Officers Only".

Placing my small parcel on the luggage rack I took my seat as the other civilians hastily entered. We examined one another in silence. One woman was accompanied by a little girl, and both looked very tired and bewildered. Another was a stout florid woman with a defiant air, and the last a small wizened old man. We

sat staring stupidly at one another as strangers do in such circumstances, each wondering how on earth the others had worked the miracle of a railway pass. Owing to the station Hauptmann's attention to me the women regarded me with a certain amount of suspicion, and I smiled to myself as the florid woman shrugged her shoulders bad-manneredly. The Hauptmann rushed up and locked our door with his pass-key. Two soldiers at the rear end of the train commenced to play a popular air on a mandolin and a concertina, and to the strains of this music and frantic waving on the part of the Hauptmann the train, with rasping protesting noises, began to move slowly forward.

The compartment we sat in was dirty and shabby in the extreme. Sitting opposite me was the little thin man. He suddenly looked over his glasses at me, decided I would do, and addressed me, saying impressively: "Fräulein, they say this train is due in Ghent at nine o'clock. You can take it from me if we are there at midday we shall be very lucky."

With this comforting information the old man sat back with a satisfied look, well knowing that this remark would let loose the floodgates of conversation. It did. In a very short while I knew all about the florid lady. She was a refugee who, with her husband and two children, had settled in Ghent. She had managed to secure a pass to visit her old home in the battle zone which had been badly damaged.

As I appeared to be the only attentive listener, her first suspicions of me quickly evaporated. The chief item of interest to me, however, was the fact that for ten months she had resided in Ghent, and from her loud

protests about conditions in that town I learned many things, information which might well come in useful during my stay there. After each story she would end up by saying, "And they know how to work on your purse, do those 'knubs'. The monkey tricks they are up to beats creation."

The florid lady drew the quiet woman into the conversation, at first somewhat against her will. She sat huddled up in a corner of the compartment tightly grasping the hand of her small daughter. Her large tragic eyes looked like the eyes of some poor wounded animal. At first she spoke reluctantly, and then, as though the telling of the tragic story relieved her, in a dull toneless voice the end came in a flood.

She was in Ghent when she learned in a mysterious manner that her husband, a Belgian officer, had been taken prisoner and was lying badly wounded in a Courtrai hospital. The news was authentic enough, for the same mysterious persons had given ample proof. Desperately she tried to obtain a pass, but could not. She was refused because she could not give the source of her information. Then, one morning, an envelope was pushed under her door. In it was a pass and railway voucher all complete for herself and daughter. The papers were signed by the Military Governor himself. She immediately travelled to Courtrai and was able to spend the last two hours of her husband's life by his bedside.

The train had been jerking and groaning over the worn metals, and as the woman finished her story it halted with a loud screech, and the soft strains of a haunting folk tune from the rear end of the train stole

into our compartment to mock our misery. Glancing out of the window, I saw we had stopped to allow a long hospital train with its burden of torn humanity to overtake us on its long journey to Germany. We were halted a considerable time whilst ammunition and troop trains loaded to capacity passed us on the way up to the Front. Jokes and rough banter were exchanged by the fortunate ones on our train with those who, for the first time probably, were about to get their view of the shambles.

As I looked out of the window I felt there was something troubling me. And for safety's sake, from the early days of my entering into my dangerous rôle I had schooled myself, no matter what the outcome might be, to minutely analyse my intuition. Many times I had found the result valuable. As we jerked forward again my eyes fell on the old man. And that was it. During the whole of the tragic widow's discourse he had evinced not the slightest interest. I immediately dismissed the matter as being of small interest, but I was to discover my intuition was strangely right. We had only travelled a short distance when again we were halted. We had stopped beside a large ammunition depot. A Feldwebel walked along the whole length of the train, closely examining each compartment. Arriving at ours, he unlocked the door, rudely entered and pulled down the window blinds, shutting out the daylight. He glanced at each one of us sternly and growled, "It's forbidden to lift those blinds," saying which he jumped down on the rough plank platform, slammed the door and locked it again. A few seconds later the train moved forward.

In despair the florid lady looked at me through the gloom, and the old man muttered, "Ah, those pigs would forbid the sunlight to us if they could." The child looked frightened, and her mother, to comfort her, laid an arm round her small shoulders. Immediately we had left the depot behind I stood up, saying, "Regulations are made to be broken," and I snapped up the window blinds.

The old gentleman looked at me approvingly, and he in turn stood up, extracted a thermos flask and a metal cup from a small valise. He said, offering the cup, "Fräulein, will you accept a cup of coffee? It's real."

Gratefully and sparingly I drank what I discovered to be excellent coffee. He proffered it round, and all drank until the flask was empty. On looking out of the window again I understood the reason of the blinds precaution. We were passing a huge Zeppelin plain, and the unwieldy monster was being manhandled out of its shed by hundreds of soldiers. Conversation had become exhausted, and it was in perfect quietness that the train once again stopped. Cat-calls and protesting yells from the soldiers on our train greeted this further halt. We were in a fairly large station, and the cat-calls were turned into yells of glee when it was discovered by the men on our train that a buffet stood in the station. Most of them descended and mingled with the troops that were already crowding the platform.

The blaring sound of martial music struck our ears as the old man opened our window and, addressing a soldier, evidently a station guard, in excellent German, asked: "Is it not possible to descend here, soldier? I should like to fill my water-flask."

The soldier shook his head. "Civilians are not allowed to descend here," he answered. "You're better where you are, old one. Just hang on to your seat like grim death."

As the music came closer the soldier guard left the side of the train and inquisitively strolled over to the station entrance. He quickly became an interested spectator of troops goose-stepping across the station square.

"This is awful!" exclaimed the old man. "I must get this flask filled. I cannot take my pills without water."

I had already noticed he was following some medical régime. I looked out of the window and saw a soldier whom I recognized as a Bavarian. I called him and asked, "Soldier, can you unlock this door? There are women and a small girl here, and we've been cooped up for hours."

"I'm sorry, I cannot, Fräulein, but I'll call the transport officer for you," he answered good-naturedly.

A few seconds later an officer strolled up to our compartment and without a word unlocked the door. We all descended, and the old man, flask in hand, promptly disappeared towards the station entrance. I returned to the compartment and thought that from the sounds of the music some big military review was taking place outside the station. Above the noise our engine screamed a warning, and the soldiers hurriedly scrambled for their places. The two women and the child entered the compartment, but I became anxious, as I could see no sign of the old man.

Suddenly sounds of a struggle and heated protests drew my attention to a narrow passage almost opposite

our compartment, and as the train took the strain for going forward there appeared a German soldier dragging by the collar of his coat our travelling companion. As the struggling pair arrived on the platform the soldier roughly pushed the old man forward. Loosening his hold of the coat collar, the soldier grabbed his rifle and with the butt end gave the old man a vicious jab in the small of the back. The frail form staggered forward and collapsed just outside our compartment.

Hurriedly jumping down, I gathered my strength to lift the form into the carriage, but before I could get a proper grip one of the soldiers travelling in our train sprang down, lifted the old man as if he had been a child, and deposited him into his seat. I thanked the man as he hastily left and regained his own compartment. As gradually the train moved forward I examined the stunned man. The thermos flask was tightly gripped in his right hand. As I commenced to loosen his collar my fingers accidently ran up inside the lapel of his coat. To my amazement I felt two safety pins!

Recovering quickly from my surprise, I released the flask from his fingers and poured water between his lips. After a while he opened his eyes, and immediately the indignant florid lady began to upbraid him for his carelessness, and, volunteering the exaggeration that if it had not been for me he would be lying crushed beneath the engine, ended with her opinion that old people, ay, and young ones too, should not be allowed out without their keepers! On the florid lady the old man turned such a fierce glare from two steely mesmeric grey eyes that she in turn nearly collapsed.

"Ah!" I gasped to myself. "Brut Verhagen!"

Completely ignoring the stout woman, he turned to me and asked, "Can you tell me what happened, Fräulein?"

I told him I only saw a sentry somewhat roughly escort him back to the train, and at the finish the soldier had struck him with the butt end of his rifle. Gradually the whole adventure returned to his mind. The water-pump stood just outside the station entrance. Asking leave of no one, he pushed his way through a crowd of soldiers and filled his flask as the goose-stepping troops marched past a bemedalled General on horseback.

On returning, he was roughly challenged by a station sentry. He attempted to show the soldier his pass, but that impatient one grabbed him by the collar and hauled him into the station. A simple explanation, but, if this were Brut Verhagen, hardly sufficient.

He had hardly finished his explanation when the train puffed into Ghent. The old man politely allowed the two women and the child to depart first, and I handed a valise to the woman and her daughter. I was alone in the carriage with Brut Verhagen. I must speak, and quickly.

"Mynheer, the pin nearly became unfastened," I whispered hurriedly.

A searching, penetrating look and the old man whispered back, "What number, my dear?"

"No number, Mynheer. 'Laura'," I replied.

With a startled look he exclaimed, "Good heavens, yes! I might have guessed. You joined us at Roulers."

This whispered exchange took place as we were preparing to descend from the compartment. We walked side by side down the long platform, passing one or

two gendarme station guards, and in a rapid undertone I told my travelling companion the reasons for my visit to Ghent.

"There is a man will meet me outside the station. Give me just a few seconds, my dear, to instruct him to follow you. When you have finished at the hospital he will guide you back to me."

At the barrier I purposely allowed my companion to precede me whilst our passes and vouchers were minutely scrutinized. Outside the station, in a small group of soldiers and civilians, I soon caught sight of my companion speaking to a tall, shabbily dressed man. To gain another few moments I boldly walked up to a German gendarme and enquired my way to the officers' hospital. Politely the policeman gave me the direction, and as I walked away I saw the tall individual detach himself from the group, look round and, as our eyes met give a slight nod of recognition. I had no difficulty in finding the hospital, but when I enquired for the officer I was told he was out. However, his return was expected during the afternoon. Knowing that the hospital orderlies in many cases were somewhat untrustworthy, I decided to return and deliver the parcel personally, so as to give my doctor friend the satisfaction of being sure that his precious collection had been placed in safe hands.

Regaining the street, I signed to the stranger and in turn I shadowed him through the deserted and shabby-looking streets of Ghent. Once I was stopped by a gendarme patrol, and the Gefreiter, whistling indifferently, closely examined my pass, and with the same lack of interest handed it back as he gave the order to the patrol

to move off. My guide led me to a quiet side street off the Rue Capure, and without knocking he entered an imposing-looking house. Although the street was empty and silent, I walked past the house and made a short detour. Returning, I walked up to the door and without the slightest hesitation pushed it open and entered. The tall stranger stood at the end of a corridor waiting, and as I turned from closing the door after me he signed to me to follow. I was shown into a room at the rear of the house and overlooking a quiet-looking garden. And then, for the last time, I met one of the most remarkable men it has ever been my fortune to speak to—Brut Verhagen, the brains and leading genius of the famous Eecloo bureau.

Happily he appeared to be in an expansive frame of mind. For him, I suppose, my presence was a relaxation after months of dealing in death and destruction.

"Now, my dear," he greeted kindly, "sit down and make yourself comfortable. I'm having a little mea brought in for both of us."

As I seated myself I asked: "Mynheer, whatever made you take such a risk this morning? The water, you know," I explained.

"Oh, at the station, you mean?" he asked in return. "Well, I had to convince myself of the identity of the parading troops, and they were as I thought. They're the new 'Sturm-truppen', an army which the invaders are setting great store on." "But"—shaking his head—"the Prussian is losing his nerve. Specializing is against his front-line ideas. The 'Sturm-truppen' are the élite of his army. When they are gone, what happens? We can see hope in that, my dear, for the strength of a machine is

its weakest part. However, a report has already been sent in about them. But my main object of pushing myself into the square was to see the General reviewing the parade. He's a particular old friend of mine"; and Verhagen's eyes twinkled with good humour. "He and I have had hours of conversation on maladies. Illnesses are an obsession of his. He has already recommended me to several German Army specialists, and, of course, I cannot travel without a pass. But on this occasion I've to be home before he gets to know I've been absent."

From this I understood that the astute Verhagen received many favours from the General, posing as a suffering invalid. Looking directly at me, Verhagen continued sorrowfully: "Some people have strange twists. Now that General would send a batch of civilians in front of a firing squad for the most venial offence, but for one with an interesting illness he'd not only discuss it for hours, but he'd move heaven and earth to dispatch the suffering one to the other end of the Fatherland if necessary. You saw the lady and her little daughter in our compartment this morning?" and before I had time to answer he continued: "The pass and voucher Madame travelled on was one of the General's passes given to me, but, of course, with slight alterations. For greater impression the signature of the Governing General was cleverly forged. But Madame didn't know all this. I'll miss my amateur medical adviser when he is transferred to his 'Sturmtruppen'," said Verhagen.

"So the mysterious pass and voucher was the work of your bureau?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered simply, "and I travelled to see she came to no harm, and for several other reasons."

After a pause to allow the meal to be served by a silent youth, he said, "You mentioned the aeroplane bases round here? Well, the particulars were 'sent over' yesterday. That piece of news may save you a deal of trouble."

I was very relieved to hear it, and I said so, but at the same time I said: "In any case, I'm glad I made the trip if only to be sure that the information had been secured. It would have been almost an impossibility to have gathered any reliable information in the time at my disposal."

After the meal I sat spellbound for two hours listening to a most extraordinary man. His make-up was "queer", a mixture of simple childishness and ferocious cold hatred of the invader. His grasp of the follies of human nature, and especially the foibles and vanities of the invaders, was immense, but all through his cunning (if I might use the word) was "devilish". And coupled with this was amazing luck in his undertakings. The combination, hardly conceivable in one individual. made a formidable and terrible secret enemy.

He told me with great gusto the adventure of "Colonel Rothbann". When I reached the open air again I must confess my feeling was one of great relief. But before I left him he warned me: "My dear, be prepared for bad days ahead. Our runners will become very scarce, for I have learned of a decree—a decree which is as secret as the grave; but the Prussian, not content with stripping our country of its rolling stock and industrial plant, is about to bleed the remnants of

our poor man-power. The decree is for the forced "recruitment" of Belgium's remaining manhood."

Quickly I returned to the hospital and handed my parcel to the doctor's friend. Knowing that I had to return to Roulers, he went into the yard and arranged with the officer in charge of the ambulances for me to drive in an ambulance returning to Lichtervelde, and from that town I walked back to Roulers.

CHAPTER X

THE PHANTOM BATTALION

A BATTERED English regimental badge makes a strange connecting link with the disappearance of Canteen Ma. Yet it is so. The badge was sent by Alphonse to me with the story, and also with it came his farewell letter just before he took the strict vows and entered into that serene life his soul craved, offering his life to his Maker with the same joy with which he would have given his all for *La Belle France*.

1918. The Russian front had crumpled and for the first time the invader was able to get at death grips with his implacable foes, and, be it said, the invader made no secret of his intentions. This was to be the victory drive! The hat was to be thrown into the arena, and *all* must go in for the last mighty effort. A preliminary attack was made across the Langemarck road in our sector. A counter sweep forward was made by the sorely tried British troops, and in the confused bitter fighting the remnants of an English battalion, owing to its impetuous rush, found itself too far forward in an old German "stronghold". It was cut off and surrounded between the Langemarck road and the Ypres railway.

Alphonse had been warned that during the attack he must be prepared to make several trips during the

night as far forward as the advance would allow. The medical officer had established a post just beyond the battered ruins of the Poelcappelle church. On the blustering rainy evening of the first day of the attack Alphonse pulled in his ambulance as near to the medical dug-out as he could conveniently get. At first the Alsatian thought that the attack had not prospered, for as he made his way into the dug-out the ripping sound of hostile machine-gun bullets flitted overhead. The English were closer than they had been before the attack! Near the entrance to the dug-out were two runners, and Alphonse, before entering to report to the medical officer, spoke to them.

"The 'Tommies' don't seem to be far away," he said.

"No," answered one of the runners; "they're sitting astride the Langemarck-Ypres road in an old 'block-house' of ours. But they'll be soon dug out of it. They're surrounded, for our fellows are clean through St. Julien. Our next stop is Ypres, comrade," predicted the runner, falsely.

Without any comment Alphonse entered the dug-out and reported to the medical officer. The officer gave instructions to Alphonse, saying: "Driver, I've got to go forward and establish a post on the other side of the railway, but, as I understand that the road here is blocked, there'll be no use in you chancing the ambulance so far up. As things are you would have to make too big a detour to get to us, so if I can get sufficient stretcher-bearers together I'll relay the wounded back to this post."

"Very good, Herr Doktor," answered Alphonse.

The Alsatian stole outside and stood listening in the

narrow trench. Furious machine-gun and rifle-fire came from the direction of the "block". Twanging burst of hand-grenades told that the fighting was close and desperate. Alphonse wondered how many men were out there in the murky night battling . . . battling in a forlorn hope. Did they know they were surrounded? They must, he thought. Then a movement of the stretcher-bearers and quickly his ambulance was loaded, and the driver bumped back to Roulers. Again he returned, but this time the doctor had left to establish his forward post. A runner handed a note to the Alsatian. It was an order from the medical officer saying that Alphonse must stand by as a further batch of wounded was being sent along. And whilst he waited there a dull grey dawn came stealing over the torn and riven land. The close firing over by the "block" had died down, and then Alphonse understood the reason. As a convoy of stretcher-bearers struggled towards the dug-out with their suffering burdens the whistling scream of shells hurried overhead. The German infantry had withdrawn a little distance to allow the guns to take up the tale. Shells fell mercilessly on the gallant defenders of the "block" until it seemed to the watching Alphonse that nothing could live in that hell of heaving terror.

The intensive bombardment suddenly ceased and again came the hurrying spit of machine-guns and the sound of hand-grenades. But the block still held!

Returning to Roulers, Alphonse was struck with the idea of a chance—a chance in a million, but worth trying. He would warn the Allied Intelligence of the gallant stand. If his information could get through quick enough perhaps a counter-attack could be organized

in time to relieve the sorely pressed garrison. Alphonse knew every inch of the district, and from his own map could give an exact map reference of the spot.

On the off-chance of meeting Canteen Ma he wrote out the report. Romany was now the sole medium of speeding information to the frontier. Her trips to Roulers had become irregular and infrequent, for her vegetable hawking had to be done with a heavy basket on her arm. Bill, the pony, had been confiscated. By chance, Alphonse happened to mention to mother his desire to meet Canteen Ma, and mother told him that the vegetables woman had called earlier that same morning. His only chance of finding her that day would be to wait for her on the road leading out of Roulers to her home, along which she would pass after finishing her rounds in the town. So Alphonse, with what patience he could muster, waited. At last, in the early evening, he caught sight of the familiar figure trudging along.

"Romany," asked the soldier eagerly, "can you get a message 'over' quickly?"

Canteen Ma slowly shook her head. "All the runners that haven't been shot have been deported to France to work for the 'knubs'. Anyway, I'll take it, Alphonse, and I'll do my best with it. The 'knubs' have Manton Devany on the run, but I know the place he's hiding, and if I can get him to-night I'll ask him to cross over the frontier with the note. It'll be better for him to stay there, for if they catch sight of him here they'll shoot at sight."

Alphonse gratefully thanked the indomitable Romany as he passed her the information.

"How are the little ones?" asked Alphonse.

"They're all away with some relations of mine on a farm near Ghent, but Pierre is still with me. I'm terribly afraid the 'knubs' will take him for working in France. I was speaking to Martha's mother this morning, but she doesn't seem to know much. Do you or Stephan ever hear how Martha is?"

"All we know, Romany, is that she is still in the land of the living. If anything else happened to her Stephan would hear quickly enough."

As he walked back to the town Alphonse hoped with all his heart that Romany would be able to get the message "over" quickly. In the old days such a message would have been depended upon to reach Intelligence inside forty-eight hours, but now . . .

Alphonse could not dismiss the plight of the battalion from his mind, and it became almost an obsession with him. He found himself anxiously tuning up his ambulance eager to be on the route to the medical post. He started early, and to his relief, before ever he arrived at the dug-out, by the sounds of the firing, he knew that the surrounded defenders were still resisting vigorously. The post was packed with wounded, but before commencing to load his ambulance he paused to ask a nearby stretcher-bearer, and, pointing towards the "block", said:

"They haven't got them out yet then, comrade?"

"No, not yet," answered the soldier, "but they'll have the swines out to-night. We put up a board this morning and chalked on it was, 'You are surrounded. Surrender.' They shot the board to pieces, and a short while after they hoisted a board and my comrade carrier, who knows the Englanders' jargon, read it out: "To

hell with you. Don't know the meaning of surrender," it said. But we'll have 'em out to-night, comrade, all right. They've cost us too much already."

. . . . .

For several reasons Canteen Ma decided to deliver the message herself to Manton Devany, but the principal reason was to urge Manton to escape from the country altogether, because not once but many times during the last few weeks feld-gendarmes had closely enquired at her home for the elusive Thourout runner. The burly Manton was a badly wanted man and, as the gendarmes had found to their cost, a most difficult one to take. As soon as darkness descended Canteen Ma donned an old battered carrier's coat and cap. This was a favourite disguise of Romany's for night expeditions. The man's coat drew tight round her figure and kept her voluminous dress in control and gave her freedom of movement when she was called upon to take to the fields and hedges. The house she was making for was a lonely deserted labourer's cottage in a small forest of chestnut trees. It lay well away from the main Thourout road. Although Romany was deadly weary, she pushed on and covered the four kilometres without meeting a soul, but as she entered the pathway leading to the cottage she heard guttural voices coming from the direction of the house. Hastily she pushed her way through the low hedge and hid herself. She kept near the hedge, and, with the deep shadows of the swaying trees behind her, she waited.

The patrol consisted of three gendarmes, a Feldwebel and two men, and they were searching for Manton

Devany. They had received secret information that Manton was using the deserted cottage as a sanctuary. They had already searched the small building, but without success. On coming out of the building the Feldwebel had thought he had seen a vanishing shadow among the trees and near the pathway. Softly he called the others to him and in an excited whisper ordered: "You two go on talking loudly as you walk away down the pathway. I'll wait here. I think we'll get the swine-hound."

Then Canteen Ma made her fatal mistake. Thinking there were only two gendarmes, when they were well away she stealthily crept forward towards the house. The Feldwebel, catching sight of the figure of a crouching man, and knowing the desperate nature of Devany, carefully took aim. Crack! Without a sigh the form crumpled up. On hearing the shot the two men hurriedly returned.

"Have you got him, Feldwebel?" asked one.

"Yes," answered the Feldwebel, "he's lying near the hedge there."

The three cautiously walked towards the hedge and the Feldwebel produced a small pocket torch, and by its gleam they discovered the huddled up form. It was lying face downwards, and one of the men roughly turned it over with his foot.

The Feldwebel suddenly bent forward staring at the face. "Gott in Himmel!" he exclaimed. "It's a young girl!" For on the face of Canteen Ma was a smile of utter peace, and the features had taken the contours in death which had been hers in happy girlhood. One of the men examined the body closer. "A girl? That's not

a girl. I know her; it's the old vegetable cow from Swevezeele, and I've long thought she was a twister!"

"Crack! A blinding report came from just in front of the three, and the Feldwebel, with a coughing grunt, collapsed by the form of Canteen Ma. Manton Devany had at least accounted for one of the killers of Romany. The other two hastily scrambled through the hedge, and, discretion urging them on, they decided to return to headquarters and report—to return no doubt with a larger search party. Next morning the two bodies were spirited away. The "accidental" shooting of Canteen Ma was hushed up by the simple method of burying the body as an unknown. But it is a fact that the authorities found nothing of an incriminating nature on the body.

. . . . .

Alphonse drew up at the post near the battered church ruins. For four days now he had arrived with increasing anxiety. The day before a runner had told him that an Allied aeroplane, flying low at dawn, had dropped several small cases into the "block" trenches. No doubt rations and ammunition, and Alphonse's hopes had risen high. Canteen Ma had got the message away, and the English over there were even now perhaps planning a counter-attack, he had thought.

But his disappointment was keen, for during that day the German infantry, Alphonse discovered, had stormed over the "block-house". Only five men were left alive, and they were desperately wounded men found in a "cubby-hole". The others died fighting desperately to a man.

On the way down to the medical post four of the

wounded men had died. The sole survivor was lying in the dug-out, and Alphonse, because the Englishman was a badly wounded case, contrived to get him on board for the first journey. But on arrival at the Roulers hospital Alphonse found the soldier had breathed his last. The Alsatian searched the clothes of the Englishman but could find nothing to establish his identity. Only in the breast-pocket of his tunic was a battered regimental badge. For a reason that Alphonse could not account for, the Alsatian slipped the badge into his own pocket. On dozens of occasions Alphonse had opportunities for collecting morbid souvenirs, but this was a practice against his nature. Nevertheless, he held on to the badge, which I now prize as a priceless keepsake, and not only do I associate it with the deathless courage of the phantom battalion, but also with the deathless courage of Romany Rondeel, "Canteen Ma".

The regimental badge is the badge of the Duke of Wellington's regiment.

CHAPTER XI

"RESPICE FINEM"

AS in a dream, stunned at my arrest, and living in daily terror of fresh denouncements, mother continued her daily rounds. With what available meagre news there was Alphonse and Stephan often stole into the deserted café and endeavoured to cheer her up. Then gradually a conviction came to her that all would come well with me. Regarding my captivity, all knew my views. No attempt must be made at rescue. For any attempt would most certainly have led to the arrest of both my parents. Marie Louise Van Oplinus, my mother, had the battling spirit of generations of fighters in her blood. In the "cock-pit" of Europe her forebears, the Van Oplinus, had always been in the forefront of the battle. Six of her great-uncles, all brothers, had fought gallantly in the wars for Belgium's independence, and two of her mother's brothers had sided with France in the disaster of 1870.

To all entreaties to leave Roulers she gave a flat refusal. She would be there to welcome her children's return. (Indeed, my parents were two of the fifty souls left in Roulers when the Allies finally broke through. Fifty souls in a town which, when the war broke out, boasted 25,000 inhabitants!)

Soldier and civilian, by that stark leveller "want", were driven to work and trick together in an attempt to obtain the bare necessities for existence. The civilians in the town, at this time numbering no more than 450, were in rags, and grim starvation stalked the area. The troops were in little better case, but still the military machine ground on. Minions could still be found to harass and drive the persecuted civilians. Actions and talk must needs be guarded, for woe betide anyone setting damaging rumours about. There were constant house-to-house raids—ostensibly raids for food-hoarding, because the "hoarding" of the bare necessities was a crime!

By one soldier mother saw herself singled out for special severity. Gefreiter Victor Helman, with a smattering of learning, who in civilian life had followed some sedentary occupation, was specially detailed to keep a sharp watch on the premises. At all hours, and under any pretence, he would stalk into the bare café and with gruff commands search the place from cellar to roof. Although others suffered from these house-to-house raids, mother quickly knew, through Stephan, that this treatment was outside the usual run and was under police orders. The Gefreiter had been forced into the Army late in the War, and was true to his type. For usually such back-area minions were the most bellicose in protesting loudly that the German armies would fight to the last man and last rifle before they would relinquish Belgium. There were many such. But they would take particular good care that they did not hold the last rifle.

After one such raid Stephan stole in. He had managed

to save or steal part of a loaf of bread and a small piece of bacon.

"Here, Mother, take this," he said; "somebody'll go short to-day."

Mother took the precious provisions, and thanked him.

"Since Martha has gone the place seems horrible to me here. I think of her every day. In any case, those swines haven't shot her. I should most certainly have heard of it, Mother, if they had. I'd give something to see her strolling in here. It would seem like old times."

"Never fear, Stephan, she'll come back all right," said mother, and then, thinking of the events that *must* occur before that happy day could take place, she asked: "But, Stephan, what will you and Alphonse do?"

"God alone knows, Mother. I try never to think of it." Then, brightening up, he said: "But meanwhile, Mother, we'll do what we can to hasten the day. Listen, I've got a refugee on my hands who's 'jumped' his way from Northern France. He's a Flemish man, and from these parts, who was deported over there a few months ago. Although he's a first-class surveyor, the 'knubs' have been working him as an ordinary navvy on the Siegfried lines. At last he managed to escape, and he tells of colossal preparations for a great advance. Thousands of your countrymen and Russian prisoners have built new roads, railways and approach routes to the battlefield. His information is so complicated and so wide that it's impossible to make an ordinary report. It will be infinitely better to get him over personally, for he'll be worth his weight in gold to the Allied Intelligence. Now, Mother, he'll be here in a few moments,

and I'm hoping you'll let him stay for a few hours here just while he gets a rest, for the poor fellow's all in and broken with fatigue. I wouldn't ask you, Mother, but you know I cannot trust anyone else in the town."

Mother hesitated only for a moment. The chances were that a further raid would not take place for another twenty-four hours. "I don't mind, Stephan, but you know he runs a terrible risk here. If the Gefreiter comes stamping around and discovers your man, why, his life won't be worth a centime."

"We can't help it, Mother. I'll keep my eye on the Gefreiter, and if I see him making any move towards here I'll let you know in time," answered Stephan. "In any case, he'll be away early to-morrow morning, as he reckons he can get to the frontier alone," he added.

Stephan had hardly finished speaking when a knock came on the back door. The Pole rose and let in a man who was dressed in the shabbiest work clothes my mother ever beheld. The man was a walking scarecrow, and his face terribly emaciated. He wore no hat, and a stock of bristly grey hair formed an unruly mop on his head. He looked in the last extremity of fatigue, and mother immediately said, "Come, follow me."

The stranger stumbled after her up a short flight of steps leading into a room which my father used as a bedroom when night-raiding was frequent. As the man threw himself on the bed, mother cautioned him with, "Now, no matter what happens, say and do nothing."

When she returned to the kitchen Stephan was gone. On father's return mother told him what had happened, and she asked him to stay with some friends, and although father could not endure a cellar during an air-

raid, and the friends he was asked to go to lived in cellars, nevertheless he at once consented.

Mother was preparing to go to rest, when she heard a now familiar loud rap on the door, and for a breathless second her heart almost stopped beating. It was the Gefreiter! Had he seen the stranger enter? Mother, collecting her wits, went to the stove and placed the remains of the coffee near the smouldering fire. This done, she went quickly to the door and called, "Who knocks?"

"Open the door, old one, or I'll kick it down!" answered the well-known voice of Gefreiter Helman.

With trembling hand mother unlocked the door, knowing that it would be worse than useless to try and trick him away. Helman almost fell through the door when it was opened, and mother at once saw that he had been drinking heavily.

"What was the door locked for, old one? Don't you know nothing must be locked against imperial law?" he leered. "Now I suppose you have something to hide from me. They say the older the goat the more cunning, so I'm going to look for myself"; and as he hitched his rifle from his shoulder, he added, "No time like the present to catch these cunning swines."

Now perfectly calm, mother walked to the stove and poured a small portion of the warmed coffee into a mug, at the same time saying to the swaying soldier, "Gefreiter, my man is sick. He hasn't slept for several nights. To-night is the first time for days he has fallen into a dose. Search where you will, but do please let him rest."

With a low growl the soldier stumbled down the

cellar steps, and in his usual manner commenced his search. At last he came to the room where the sleeping stranger lay. Mother followed the soldier in. She walked to a side table and laid the coffee quite naturally by the side of the sleeping man and, as if arranging the bedclothes for his better comfort, covered up his face. All that could be seen was the unruly mop of grey hair against the pillow. The Gefreiter knew my father well, but he never cast a second glance on the bed, and to mother's infinite relief he stamped out of the room. She heard him stumbling about upstairs, then the descending footsteps and a slam on the door told that the unwelcome searcher had gone.

Considerably refreshed, the stranger next morning left early on his hazardous attempt to cross the frontier. He had slept the whole time the Gefreiter was in the house, and he never knew how close he was to being captured.

The following weeks were heartbreaking to the harassed woman. The Gefreiter, full of bluster, would enter. "Look, old one, where we are. We have them all by the throats." He waved a newspaper in front of mother's nose. "Look; you don't like to see that, eh? Paris surrounded and in another few days we'll be clean through Belgium. Just look at those victories, those are the kind that count. One hundred and twenty thousand damned Englanders taken prisoners." He spat out, "Not blasted Russians this time; Englanders, ay, and thousands of the French! That's what I say ends the war in victory. Where are the Americanos now with their Sambo's? Ha, ha! They're going to swim over, and they'll get a nice wash when they do come." The

Gefreiter seemed to take a peculiar delight in flaunting the newspaper reports of the tremendous German sweep forward in France and Italy.

For all the impression his loud boastings made on mother, the Gefreiter might just as well have spoken to the air. She was pleased for this reason. As long as the victories continued she was left in comparative peace, for the searchings had finished. But she had long ago convinced herself that victory for the invader was impossible. They had gone forward before with the same amount of yelling and shouts of glory and victory. That they would be driven back again, and crack in one of their retreats was a deep religious belief with her.

The new hope, and the news of the resounding successes, went to the heads of the troops like heavy wine. A few short weeks before low muttering growls of angry, sorely tried men against the powers that be had been heard, but now had come a miraculous change. Victory, so long delayed, was in the air! Cheeks and chests were puffed out, and the toast, drunk in very weak waters it is true, was, "Comrade, to *the* victory!"

Captured rations, wholesome stuff, whilst pointing the moral to the lies of their inspired Press, helped for the time being to put the troops in a more contented frame of mind. Once before the East Front had allowed "Shining Michael" to turn and smite his foes on the West Front, but now the fates had placed a far better winning card in his hands, for the Muscovite was finished—dead. Last time the Russian Bear had revived and struck back hard, but how, had not Brest Litovsk settled him for ever?

But the simple faith of my parent held far more truth

than all their newspaper knowledge. They did not see, nor would they have admitted it, that the titanic effort was the last desperate throw of the gambler to win back all. The all that had already been lost.

For some time the searchings and annoyances had ceased, but gradually the Gefreiter became more silent and stern. Very seldom he searched, but he would stand in the kitchen, his gimlet eyes boring through my parent. Ha, thought mother, as the newspapers' gloating has stopped altogether, the Allies are coming. Then, from Stephan and Alphonse, she heard of frightful reverses inflicted on the invader. For many weeks the town had been quiet, and then suddenly the guns began to thunder near again and shells crashed into the streets. There came constant night-bombers, and, to add to the terror, daring day-raiders would sweep over the town and machine-gun the soldiers in the streets. They flew boldly over without any opposition. As fleeing from a pestilence, most of the civilians fled the town. The Gefreiter seemed to have nobody else to vent his spleen upon, so my parent was worried by him day after day, until at last she thought the soldier was bereft of his reason. Shortly after the commencement of the invader's retreat an officer's batman, a boy of seventeen years, was billeted in the house. He had come to arrange a billet for his officer when the relief for his company should arrive. Days turned into weeks, but there was no relief. There were no troops to relieve them. The officer, under the pretence of sending the boy down to look after the company baggage, kept him out of the front line. In mother's hearing the Gefreiter had often lectured the boy on the glory of the Fatherland. The boy had once

turned to mother when the Gefreiter had left and remarked, "Glory must be fine on a full stomach."

Early one morning, after a fierce night-raid, the boy hurriedly entered the kitchen and in a matter-of-fact tone of voice said to my parent, "Mother, you'll soon be able to fill your belly with white bread and real meat. They're at the Cross Chapel."

As the soldier spoke the Gefreiter entered. "Who's at the Cross Chapel?" he demanded.

"Why, the Englanders," answered the boy. "I went up to the Front last night, and I hadn't to go far. I found them at the end of the town here. My officer's sent me back to gather his kit. I've got to beat it as hard as I can to Thielt. Them's his orders, so I'm off."

As he spoke the boy was busy gathering his own and the officer's belongings, and before he left he said to the Gefreiter, who looked at the whole proceedings with startled eyes, "Better take off, Gefreiter, while you've a chance," he advised.

Youth, though brutally frank, can at times give golden counsel, but the Gefreiter glared as the hurrying rat-tat-tat of machine-guns and the short barking cough of the light field-guns broke on the ears of the startled listeners. Taking no heed of the young soldier's sound advice, he turned on mother, who was listening with all her ears, for this was the first time for four long years she had heard the machine-guns of the Allies, and the hope caused her eyes to shine. "They'll be driven back, old one, never fear; they'll be driven back," grated the Gefreiter. "What, do you think," he raved, working himself up into a fury, "we're going to give this up after

the noblest and best of our Fatherland have flooded the land with their blood?"

Defiantly he commenced to search the house again. Tap, tap, tap, over walls and dull stamp, stamp, on the floors, as if with each tap and stamp he could convince himself that the attackers would be driven back. Rations for three days were in the pantry—one pound of rice and half a loaf of black bread, and when the Gefreiter left mother discovered that the rations had been stolen.

The rattling fire continued during the night, and with burning hope, and hand-in-hand, my parents watched anxiously. Would they come? The Cross Chapel was so close. Only the length of a long street away. Was deliverance here at last? She heard noises in the square, and by the light of a dull watery moon she saw ghostly forms frantically digging, pulling up and again setting the pavements. Tappings and hurried hammerings came from the direction of the church behind. The firing died down next morning, and still the grey-clad forms flitted to and fro in the square. Suddenly, and with increased fury, the sound of firing recommenced. A last desperate stand was being made by the invaders at the Cross Chapel. The sound of the struggle came nearer and nearer, and, unable to contain herself, mother went to the front door and partly opened it. A form was dashing past, but he stopped in his stride. It was a Hauptmann of the pioneer battalion, and a decent homely man who knew mother quite well. "Frau, for the love of God fly from here as quickly as you can! I thought all civilians were away."

Mother answered with a shake of her head, "I stay here, Hauptmann."

"Mother," he pleaded, "for pity's sake go from here. There is something, but I dare not tell you."

Mother again shook her head to the distracted-looking officer, and as she was about to close the door he pushed closer. "Listen, Frau," he said urgently, "it won't matter much now if you do know, for it's too late to alter it. *The whole of this block and the square is mined. Now will you go?*"

"No, Hauptman," answered mother as she slammed the door. The sounds of the fighting came closer, and suddenly mother understood the significance of the ghostly digging squads. She slipped out of the back door and stood in the side street, looking into the road which led from the Cross Chapel into the Grand Place, the road along which the oncoming Allies must pass. Suddenly she caught sight of crouching running soldiers in sky-blue uniforms slipping past the head of the side street. She called, and a soldier caught sight of her. Frantically she beckoned to him, and the soldier approached. Luckily mother had retained a fair smattering of French. "Get me an officer, quick," she urged, "the whole district here is mined." An officer, with a soldier who acted as interpreter, hurried along the side street towards my waiting parent. Quickly she indicated the places where she had seen the squads digging, and she warned them that the whole of the block was mined. Engineers were rushed up and the mines in the square were safely removed. And in the houses around the church no fewer than a score of "booby traps" were discovered.

The town was a shell, a grave, and hard days followed. They were gladly borne, for was she not with the long-expected deliverers at last, almost stupid with joy and

relief? But joy and relief cannot keep body and soul together, food must be obtained from somewhere, and father had fallen ill, weak from starvation. The hard-fighting Allied troops must be fed first. They were through the town now, and were battling in open country. Soon Ghent would fall. But meanwhile mother was forced to beg from passing field-kitchens, and the good-natured soldiers gave what they could spare. When organization settled down times would become better. But meanwhile life must be kept going.

So it was one evening, only a few short days after the French had passed through the town, mother stood near the back door in the dusk of a weeping November day. Through the gloom a familiar voice cried, "Mother, have you bread?"

She looked and beheld shuffling towards her Gefreiter Helman. He held a broad street-broom in his hands. His captors had put him to sweeping the streets, and he stood there shivering and in rags. He looked a wan picture in the November rain, and his starved, pinched look was pitiful to see. "Mother, bread!" he muttered.

Mother whispered, "Come in." She turned on her heels, and on reaching the kitchen she poured out the last of the remains of a few grains of coffee, and with a world of compassion shining in her eyes she gave to the starving soldier the last piece of bread she possessed.

So must the Saviour have looked on the repentant one crucified beside Him. And this, surely, is Christ's true conception of a Christian woman: Service and sacrifice, and, for the fallen, compassion and forgiveness.

THE END