The Marne: A Tale of the War

by Edith Wharton

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THE MARNE

A TALE OF THE WAR

BY EDITH WHARTON

MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED ST. MARTIN'S STREET, LONDON 1918

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THE MARNE

I

Ever since the age of six Troy Belknap of New York had embarked for Europe every June on the fastest steamer of one or another of the most expensive lines.

With his family he had descended at the dock from a large noiseless motor, had kissed his father good-bye, turned back to shake hands with the chauffeur (a particular friend), and trotted up the gang-plank behind his mother's maid, while one welcoming steward captured Mrs. Belknap's bag, and another led away her miniature French bull-dog—also a particular friend of Troy's.

From that hour all had been delight. For six golden days Troy had ranged the decks, splashed in the blue salt water brimming his huge porcelain tub, lunched and dined with the grown-ups in the Ritz restaurant, and swaggered about in front of the children who had never crossed before, and didn't know the stewards, or the purser,

or the captain's cat, or on which deck you might exercise your dog, or how to induce the officer on the watch to let you scramble up for a minute to the bridge. Then, when these joys began to pall, he had lost himself in others deeper and dearer. Another of his cronies, the library steward, had unlocked the book-case doors for him, and, buried for hours in the depths of a huge library armchair (there weren't any to compare with it on land), he had ranged through the length and breadth of several literatures.

These six days of bliss would have been too soon over if they had not been the mere prelude to intenser sensations. On the seventh morning—generally at Cherbourg—Troy Belknap followed his mother, and his mother's maid, and the French bull, up the gang-plank and into another large noiseless motor, with another chauffeur (French, this one) to whom he was also deeply attached, and who sat grinning and cap-touching at the wheel. And then—in a few minutes, so swiftly and smilingly was the way of Mrs. Belknap smoothed—the noiseless motor was off, and they were rushing eastward through the orchards of Normandy.

The little boy's happiness would have been complete if there had been more time to give to the beautiful things that flew past them: thatched villages with square-towered churches in hollows of the deep green country, or grey shining towns above rivers on which cathedrals seemed to be moored like ships; miles and miles of field and hedge and park falling away from high terraced houses, and little embroidered stone manors reflected in reed-grown moats under ancient trees.

Unfortunately Mrs. Belknap always had pressing engagements in Paris. She had made appointments beforehand with all her dressmakers, and, as Troy was well aware, it was impossible, at the height of the season, to break such engagements without losing one's turn, and having to wait weeks and weeks to get a lot of nasty rags that one had seen, by that time, on the back of every other woman in the place.

Luckily, however, even Mrs. Belknap had to eat; and during the halts in the shining

towns, where a succulent luncheon was served in a garden or a flowery courtyard, Troy had time (as he grew bigger) to slip away alone, and climb to the height where the cathedral stood, or at least to loiter and gaze in the narrow crooked streets, between gabled cross-beamed houses, each more picture-bookishly quaint than its neighbours.

In Paris, in their brightly-lit and beflowered hotel drawing-room, he was welcomed by Madame Lebuc, an old French lady smelling of crape, who gave him lessons and took him and the bull-dog for walks, and who, as he grew older, was supplemented, and then replaced, by an ugly vehement young tutor, of half-English descent, whose companionship opened fresh fields and pastures to Troy's dawning imagination.

Then in July—always at the same date—Mr. Belknap was deposited at the door by the noiseless motor, which had been down to Havre to fetch him; and a few days later they all got into it, and while Madame Lebuc (pressing a packet of chocolates into her pupil's hand) waved a damp farewell from the doorway, the Pegasus motor flew up the Champs Élysées, devoured the leafy alleys of the Bois, and soared away to new horizons.

Most often they were mountain horizons, for the tour invariably ended in the Swiss Alps. But there always seemed to be new ways (looked out by Mr. Belknap on the map) of reaching their destination; ways lovelier, more winding, more wonderful, that took in vast sweeping visions of France from the Seine to the Rhone. And when Troy grew older the vehement young tutor went with them, and once they all stopped and lunched at his father's house, on the edge of a gabled village in the Argonne, with a view stretching away for miles toward the Vosges and Alsace. Mr. and Mrs. Belknap were very kind people, and it would never have occurred to them to refuse M. Gantier's invitation to lunch with his family; but they had no idea of the emotions stirred in their son's eager bosom by what seemed to them merely a rather inconvenient deviation from their course. Troy himself was hardly aware of these

emotions at the time, though his hungry interest in life always made him welcome the least deflection from the expected. He had simply thought what kind jolly people the Gantiers were, and what fun it was to be inside one of the quaint stone houses, with small window-panes looking on old box-gardens, that he was always being whisked past in the motor. But later he was to re-live that day in all its homely details.

II

They were at St Moritz—as usual.

He and M. Gantier had been for a tramp through the Val Suvretta, and, coming home late, were rushing into their evening clothes to join Mr. and Mrs. Belknap at dinner (as they did now regularly, Troy having reached the virile age of fifteen, and having to justify the possession of a smoking-jacket and patent-leather shoes). He was just out of his bath, and smothered in towels, when the tutor opened the door and thrust in a newspaper.

"There will be war—I must leave to-morrow."

Troy dropped the towels.

War! War! War against his beautiful France! And this young man, his dearest friend and companion, was to be torn from him suddenly, senselessly, torn from their endless talks, their long walks in the mountains, their elaborately planned courses of study—archæology, French literature, mediæval philosophy, the Divine Comedy, and vistas and vistas beyond—to be torn from all this, and to disappear from Troy Belknap's life into the black gulf of this unfathomable thing called War, that seemed suddenly to have escaped out of the history books like a dangerous lunatic escaping from the asylum in which he was supposed to be securely confined!

Troy Belknap was stunned.

He pulled himself together to bid a valiant farewell to M. Gantier (the air was full of the "Marseillaise" and Sambre-et-Meuse, and everybody knew the Russians would be in Berlin in six weeks); but once his tutor was gone the mystery and horror again closed in on him.

France, his France, attacked, invaded, outraged; and he, a poor helpless American boy, who adored her, and could do nothing for her—not even cry, as a girl might! It was bitter.

His parents, too, were dreadfully upset; and so were all their friends. But what chiefly troubled them was that they could get no money, no seats in the train, no assurance that the Swiss frontier would not be closed before they could cross the border. These preoccupations seemed to leave them, for the moment, no time to think about France; and Troy, during those first days, felt as if he were an infant Winkelried, with all the shafts of the world's woe gathered into his inadequate breast.

For France was his holiday world, the world of his fancy and imagination, a great traceried window opening on the universe. And now, in the hour of her need, all he heard about him was the worried talk of people planning to desert her!

Safe in Paris, Mr. and Mrs. Belknap regained their balance. Having secured (for a sum that would have fitted up an ambulance) their passages on a steamer sailing from England, they could at length look about them, feel sorry, and subscribe to all the budding war charities. They even remembered poor Madame Lebuc, stranded by the flight of all her pupils, and found a job for her in a refugee bureau. Then, just as they were about to sail, Mrs. Belknap had a touch of pneumonia, and was obliged to postpone her departure; while Mr. Belknap, jamming his possessions into a single suit-case, dashed down to Spain to take ship at Malaga. The turn affairs were taking made it advisable for him to get back as quickly as possible, and his wife and son were to follow from England in a month.

All the while there came no news of M. Gantier. He had rejoined his depot at once, and Troy had had a post-card from him, dated the 6th of August, and saying that he was leaving for the front. After that, silence.

Troy, poring over the morning papers, and slipping out alone to watch for the noon communiqués in the windows of the Paris Herald, read of the rash French advance in Alsace, and the enemy's retaliatory descent on the region the Belknaps had so often sped over. And one day, among the names of the ruined villages, he lit on that of the little town where they had all lunched with the Gantiers. He saw the box-garden with the horn-beam arbour where they had gone to drink coffee, old M. Gantier ceremoniously leading the way with Mrs. Belknap; he saw Mme. Gantier, lame and stout, hobbling after with Mr. Belknap; a little old aunt with bobbing curls; the round-faced Gantier girl, shy and rosy; an incredibly dried and smoked and aged grandfather, with Voltairian eyes and sly snuff-taking gestures; and his own friend, the eldest of the three brothers; he saw all these modest beaming people grouped about Mme. Gantier's coffee and Papa Gantier's best bottle of "Fine," he smelt the lime-blossoms and box, he heard the bees in the lavender, he looked out on the rich fields and woods and the blue hills bathed in summer light. And he read: "Not a house is standing. The curé has been shot. A number of old people were burnt in the Hospice. The mayor and five of the principal inhabitants have been taken to Germany as hostages."

The year before the war, he remembered, old M. Gantier was mayor!

He wrote and wrote, after that, to his tutor; wrote to his depot, to his Paris address, to the ruin that had been his home; but had no answer. And finally, amid the crowding horrors of that dread August, he forgot even M. Gantier, and M. Gantier's family, forgot everything but the spectacle of the Allied armies swept back from Liège, from Mons, from Laon, from Charleroi, and the hosts of evil surging nearer and ever nearer to the heart of France.

His father, with whom he might have talked, was gone; and Troy could not talk to his mother. Not that Mrs. Belknap was not kind and full of sympathy: as fast as the bank at home cabled funds she poured them out for war charities. But most of her time was spent in agitated conference with her compatriots, and Troy could not bear to listen to their endlessly reiterated tales of flight from Nauheim or Baden or Brussels, their difficulties in drawing money, hiring motors, bribing hotel-porters, battling for seats in trains, recovering lost luggage, cabling for funds, and their general tendency to regard the war as a mere background to their personal grievances.

"You were exceedingly rude to Mrs. Sampson, Troy," his mother said to him, surprised one day by an explosion of temper. "It is so natural she should be nervous at not being able to get staterooms; and she had just given me five hundred dollars for the American ambulance."

"Giving money's no use," the boy growled, obscurely irritated; and when Mrs. Belknap exclaimed, "Why, Troy, how callous—with all this suffering!" he slunk out without answering, and went downstairs to lie in wait for the evening papers.

The misery of feeling himself a big boy, long-limbed, strong-limbed, old enough for evening clothes, champagne, the classics, biology, and views on international politics, and yet able to do nothing but hang about marble hotels and pore over newspapers, while rank on rank, and regiment on regiment, the youth of France and England, swung through the dazed streets and packed the endless trains—the misery of this was so great to Troy that he became, as the days dragged on, more than ever what his mother called "callous," sullen, humiliated, resentful at being associated with all the rich Americans flying from France.

At last the turn of the Belknaps came too; but, as they were preparing to start, news came that the German army was at Lille, and civilian travel to England interrupted.

It was the fateful week, and every name in the bulletins—Amiens, Compiègne,

Rheims, Meaux, Senlis—evoked in Troy Belknap's tortured imagination visions of ancient beauty and stability. He had done that bit of France alone with M. Gantier the year before, while Mrs. Belknap waited in Paris for belated clothes; and the thought of the great stretch of desolation spreading and spreading like a leprosy over a land so full of the poetry of the past, and so rich in a happy prosperous present, was added to the crueller vision of the tragic and magnificent armies that had failed to defend it.

Troy, as soon as he was reassured about his mother's health, had secretly rejoiced at the accident which had kept them in France. But now his joy was turned to bitterness. Mrs. Belknap, in her horrified surprise at seeing her plans again obstructed, lost all sense of the impending calamity except as it affected her safety and Troy's, and joined in the indignant chorus of compatriots stranded in Paris, and obscurely convinced that France ought to have seen them safely home before turning her attention to the invader.

"Of course I don't pretend to be a strategist," whimpering or wrathful ladies used to declare, their jewel-boxes clutched in one hand, their passports in the other, "but one can't help feeling that if only the French Government had told our Ambassador in time, trains might have been provided...."

"Or why couldn't Germany have let our Government know? After all, Germany has no grievance against America...."

"And we've really spent enough money in Europe for some consideration to be shown us ..." the woeful chorus went on.

The choristers were all good and kindly persons, shaken out of the rut of right feeling by the first real fright of their lives. But Troy was too young to understand this, and to foresee that, once in safety, they would become the passionate advocates of France, all the more fervent in their championship because of their reluctant participation in her peril.

("What did I do?—Why, I just simply stayed in Paris.... Not to run away was the only thing one could do to show one's sympathy," he heard one of the passport-clutchers declare, a year later, in a New York drawing-room.)

Troy, from the height of his youthful indignation, regarded them all as heartless egoists, and fled away into the streets from the sound of their lamentations.

But in the streets was fresh food for misery; for every day the once empty vistas were filled with trains of farm-waggons, drawn by slow country horses, and heaped with furniture and household utensils; and beside the carts walked lines of haggard people, old men and women with vacant faces, mothers hugging hungry babies, and children limping after them with heavy bundles. The fugitives of the Marne were pouring into Paris.

Troy dashed into the nearest shops, bought them cakes and fruit, followed them to the big hippodrome where they were engulfed in the dusty arena, and finally, in despair at his inability to do more than gape and pity, tried to avoid the streets they followed on their way into Paris from St. Denis and Vincennes.

Then one day, in the sunny desert of the Place de la Concorde, he came on a more cheering sight. A motley band of civilians, young, middle-aged, and even grey-headed, were shambling along together, badged and beribboned, in the direction of the Invalides; and above them floated the American flag. Troy flew after it, and caught up with the last marchers.

"Where are we going?... Foreign Legion," an olive-faced "dago" answered joyously in broken American. "All 'nited States citizens.... Come and join up, sonnie...." And for one mad moment Troy thought of risking the adventure.

But he was too visibly only a schoolboy still; and with tears of envy in his smarting eyes he stood, small and useless, on the pavement, and watched the heterogeneous band under the beloved flag disappearing in the doorway of the registration office.

When he got back to his mother's drawing-room the tea-table was still surrounded,

and a lady was saying: "I've offered anything for a special train, but they won't listen...." And another, in a stricken whisper: "If they do come, what do you mean to do about your pearls?"

III

Then came the Marne, and suddenly the foreigners caught in Paris by the German advance became heroes—or mostly heroines—who had stayed to reassure their beloved city in her hour of need.

"We all owe so much to Paris," murmured Mrs. Belknap, in lovely convalescent clothes, from her sofa-corner. "I'm sure we can none of us ever cease to be thankful for this chance of showing it...."

She had sold her staterooms to a compatriot who happened to be in England, and was now cabling home to suggest to Mr. Belknap that she should spend the winter in France and take a job on a war charity. She was not strong enough for nursing, but she thought it would be delightful to take convalescent officers for drives in the Bois in the noiseless motor. "Troy would love it too," she cabled.

Mr. Belknap, however, was unmoved by these arguments. "Future too doubtful," he cabled back. "Insist on your sailing. Staterooms November tenth paid for. Troy must return to school."

"Future too doubtful" impressed Mrs. Belknap more than "Insist," though she made a larger use of the latter word in explaining to her friends why, after all, she was obliged to give up her projected war work. Meanwhile, having quite recovered, she rose from her cushions, donned a nurse's garb, poured tea once or twice at a fashionable hospital, and, on the strength of this effort, obtained permission to carry supplies (in her own motor) to the devastated regions. Troy of course went with her, and thus had his first glimpse of war.

Fresh in his mind was a delicious July day at Rheims with his tutor, and the memory

of every detail noted on the way, along the green windings of the Marne, by Meaux, Montmirail and Epernay. Now, traversing the same towns, he seemed to be looking into murdered faces, vacant and stony. Where he had seen the sociable gossiping life of the narrow streets, young men lounging at the blacksmith's, blue-sleeved carters sitting in the wine-shops while their horses shook off the flies in the hot sunshine of the village square, black-pinafored children coming home from school, the fat curé stopping to talk to little old ladies under the church porch, girls with sleek hair calling to each other from the doorways of the shops, and women in sunburnt gingham bending over the village wash-trough or leaning on their rakes among the hayricks—where all this had been, now only a few incalculably old people sat in the doorways and looked with bewildered eyes at strange soldiers fulfilling the familiar tasks.

This was what war did! It emptied towns of their inhabitants as it emptied veins of their blood; it killed houses and lands as well as men. Out there, a few miles beyond the sunny vineyards and the low hills, men were dying at that very moment by hundreds, by thousands—and their motionless young bodies must have the same unnatural look as these wan ruins, these gutted houses and sterile fields.... War meant Death, Death, Death—Death everywhere and to everything.

By a special favour, the staff-officer who accompanied them managed to extend their trip to the ruined château of Mondement, the pivot on which the battle had turned. He had himself been in the thick of the fight, and standing before the shattered walls of the old house he explained the struggle for the spur of Mondement: the advance of the grey masses across the plain, their capture of the ridge that barred the road to Paris; then the impetuous rush of General Humbert's infantry, repulsed, returning, repulsed again, and again attacking; the hand-to-hand fighting in court and gardens; the French infantry's last irresistible dash, the batteries rattling up, getting into place on the ridge, and flinging back the grey battalions from the hillside into the marshes.

Mrs. Belknap smiled and exclaimed, with vague comments and a wandering glance (for the officer, carried away by his subject, had forgotten her and become technical); while Troy, his map spread on the top of a shot-riddled wall, followed every word and gesture with eyes that absorbed at the same time all the details of the immortal landscape.

The Marne—this was the actual setting of the battle of the Marne! This happy temperate landscape, with its sheltering woods, its friendly fields and downs flowing away to a mild sky, had looked on at the most awful conflict in history. Scenes of anguish and heroism that ought to have had some Titanic background of cliff and chasm had unrolled themselves among harmless fields, and along wood-roads where wild strawberries grew and children cut hazel-switches to drive home their geese. A name of glory and woe was attached to every copse and hollow, and to each grey steeple above the village roofs....

Troy listened, his heart beating higher at each exploit, till he forgot the horror of war, and thought only of its splendours. Oh, to have been there too! To have had even the smallest share in those great hours! To be able to say, as this young man could say: "Yes, I was in the battle of the Marne"; to be able to break off, and step back a yard or two, correcting one's self critically: "No ... it was here the General stood when I told him our batteries had got through ..." or: "This is the very spot where the first seventy-five was trained on the valley. I can see the swathes it cut in the Bavarians as they swarmed up at us a third and fourth time...."

Troy suddenly remembered a bit of Henry V. that M. Gantier had been fond of quoting:

And gentlemen in England now abed Shall think themselves accurst they were not here, And hold their manhood cheap, when any speaks That fought with us....

Ah, yes—ah, yes—to have been in the battle of the Marne!

On the way back, below the crest of the hill, the motor stopped at the village church

and the officer jumped down. "Some of our men are buried here," he said.

Mrs. Belknap, with a murmur of sympathy, caught up the bunch of roses she had gathered in the ravaged garden of the château, and they picked their way among the smashed and slanting stones of the cemetery to a corner behind the church where wooden crosses marked a row of fresh graves. Half-faded flowers in bottles were thrust into the loose earth, and a few tin wreaths hung on the arms of the crosses.

Some of the graves bore only the date of the battle, with "Pour la France," or "Priez pour lui"; but on others names and numbers had been roughly burnt into the crosses.

Suddenly Troy stopped short with a cry.

"What is it?" his mother asked. She had walked ahead of him to the parapet overhanging the valley, and forgetting her roses she leaned against the low cemetery wall while the officer took up his story.

Troy made no answer. Mrs. Belknap stood with her back to him, and he did not ask her to turn. He did not want her, or any one else, to read the name he had just read; of a sudden there had been revealed to him the deep secretiveness of sorrow. But he stole up to her and drew the flowers from her hand, while she continued, with vague inattentive murmurs, to follow the officer's explanations. She took no notice of Troy, and he went back to the grave and laid the roses on it.

On the cross he had read: "September 12, 1914. Paul Gantier, —th Chasseurs à pied."

"Oh, poor fellows ... poor fellows. Yes, that's right, Troy; put the roses on their graves," Mrs. Belknap assented approvingly, as she picked her way back to the motor.

IV

The 10th of November came, and they sailed.

The week in the steamer was intolerable, not only because they were packed like herrings, and Troy (who had never known discomfort before) had to share his narrow cabin with two young German-Americans full of open brag about the Fatherland; but also because of the same eternally renewed anecdotes among the genuine Americans about the perils and discomforts they had undergone, and the general disturbance of their plans.

Most of the passengers were in ardent sympathy with the Allies, and hung anxiously on the meagre wirelesses; but a flat-faced professor with lank hair, having announced that "there were two sides to every case," immediately raised up a following of unnoticed ladies, who "couldn't believe all that was said of the Germans" and hoped that America would never be "drawn in"; while, even among the right-minded, there subsisted a vague feeling that war was an avoidable thing, which one had only to reprobate enough to prevent its recurrence.

They found New York—Mrs. Belknap's New York—buzzing with war-charities, yet apparently unaware of the war. That at least was Troy's impression during the twenty-four hours before he was packed off to school to catch up with his interrupted studies.

At school he heard the same incessant war-talk, and found the same fundamental unawareness of the meaning of the war. At first the boys were very keen to hear his story, but he described what he had seen so often—and especially his haunting impressions of the Marne—that they named him "Marny Belknap," and finally asked him to cut it out.

The masters were mostly frankly for the Allies, but the Rector had given out that neutrality was the attitude approved by the Government, and therefore a patriotic duty; and one Sunday after chapel he gave a little talk to explain why the President thought it right to try to keep his people out of the dreadful struggle. The words duty and responsibility and fortunate privilege recurred often in this address, and it struck

Troy as odd that the lesson of the day happened to be the story of the Good Samaritan.

When he went home for the Christmas holidays everybody was sending toys and sugar-plums to the Belgian war-orphans, with little notes from "Happy American children" requesting to have their gifts acknowledged.

"It makes us so happy to help," beaming young women declared with a kind of ghoulish glee, doing up parcels, planning war-tableaux and charity dances, rushing to "propaganda" lectures given by handsome French officers, and keeping up a kind of continuous picnic on the ruins of civilization.

Mr. and Mrs. Belknap had inevitably been affected by the surrounding atmosphere.

"The tragedy of it—the tragedy—no one can tell who hasn't seen it and been through it," Mrs. Belknap would begin, looking down her long dinner-table between the orchids and the candelabra; and the pretty women and prosperous men would interrupt their talk, and listen for a moment, half absently, with spurts of easy indignation that faded out again as they heard the story oftener.

After all, Mrs. Belknap wasn't the only person who had seen a battlefield! Lots and lots more were pouring home all the time with fresh tales of tragedy: the Marne had become—in a way—an old story. People wanted something newer ... different....

And then, why hadn't Joffre followed up the offensive? The Germans were wonderful soldiers after all.... Yes, but such beasts ... sheer devils.... Here was Mr. So-and-so, just back from Belgium—such horrible stories—really unrepeatable! "Don't you want to come and hear them, my dear? Dine with us to-morrow; he's promised to come unless he's summoned to Washington. But do come anyhow; the Jim Cottages are going to dance after dinner...."

In time Mrs. Belknap, finding herself hopelessly out-storied, out-charitied, out-adventured, began insensibly to take a calmer and more distant view of the war. What was the use of trying to keep up her own enthusiasm when that of her audience

had flagged? Wherever she went she was sure to meet other ladies who had arrived from France much more recently, and had done and seen much more than she had. One after another she saw them received with the same eagerness—"Of course we all know about the marvellous things you've been doing in France—your wonderful war-work"—then, like herself, they were superseded by some later arrival, who had been nearer the front, or had raised more money, or had had an audience of the Queen of the Belgians, or an autograph letter from Lord Kitchener. No one was listened to for long, and the most eagerly-sought-for were like the figures in a movy-show, forever breathlessly whisking past to make way for others.

Mr. Belknap had always been less eloquent about the war than his wife; but somehow Troy had fancied he felt it more deeply. Gradually, however, he too seemed to accept the situation as a matter of course, and Troy, coming home for the Easter holidays, found at the family table a large sonorous personage—a Senator, just back from Europe—who, after rolling out vague praises of France and England, began insidiously to hint that it was a pity to see such wasted heroism, such suicidal determination on the part of the Allies to resist all offers of peace from an enemy so obviously their superior.

"She wouldn't be if America came in!" Troy blurted out, reddening at the sound of his voice.

"America?" some one playfully interjected; and the Senator laughed, and said something about geographical immunity. "They can't touch us. This isn't our war, young man."

"It may be by the time I'm grown up," Troy persisted, burning redder.

"Well," returned the Senator good-humouredly, "you'll have to hurry, for the economists all say it can't last more than a year longer. Lord Reading told me——"

"There's been misery enough, in all conscience," sighed a lady, playing with her pearls; and Mr. Belknap added gravely: "By the time Troy grows up I hope wars and

war-talk will be over for good and all."

"Oh, well—at his age every fellow wants to go out and kill something," remarked one of his uncles sympathetically.

Troy shuddered at the well-meant words. To go out and kill something! They thought he regarded the war as a sport, just as they regarded it as a moving-picture show! As if any one who had had even a glimpse of it could ever again think with joy of killing! His boy's mind was sorely exercised to define the urgent emotions with which it laboured. To save France—that was the clear duty of the world, as he saw it. But none of these kindly careless people about him knew what he meant when he said "France." Bits of M. Gantier's talk came back to him, embodying that meaning.

"Whatever happens, keep your mind keen and clear: open as many windows on the universe as you can...." To Troy, France had been the biggest of those windows.

The young tutor had never declaimed about his country; he had simply told her story and embodied her ideals in his own impatient, questioning and yet ardent spirit. "Le monde est aux enthousiastes," he had once quoted; and he had shown Troy how France had always been alive in every fibre, and how her inexhaustible vitality had been perpetually nourished on criticism, analysis and dissatisfaction. "Self-satisfaction is death," he had said; "France is the phœnix-country always rising from the ashes of her recognized mistakes."

Troy felt what a wonderful help it must be to have that long rich past in one's blood. Every stone that France had carved, every song she had sung, every new idea she had struck out, every beauty she had created in her thousand fruitful years, was a tie between her and her children. These things were more glorious than her battles, for it was because of them that all civilization was bound up in her, and that nothing that concerned her could concern her only.

V

"It seems too absurd," said Mrs. Belknap; "but Troy will be eighteen to-morrow. And that means," she added with a sigh, "that this horrible war has been going on for three whole years. Do you remember, dearest, your fifteenth birthday was on the very day that odious Archduke was assassinated? We had a picnic on the Morterasch."

"Oh, dear," cried Sophy Wicks, flinging her tennis-racket into the air with a swing that landed it in the middle of the empty court—"perhaps that's the reason he's never stopped talking about the war for a single minute since!"

Around the big tea-table under the trees there was a faint hush of disapproval. A year before, Sophy Wicks's airy indifference to the events that were agitating the world had amused some people and won the frank approval of others. She did not exasperate her friends by professions of pacifism, she simply declared that the war bored her; and after three years of vain tension, of effort in the void, something in the baffled American heart whispered that, things being as they were, she was perhaps right.

But now things were no longer as they had been. Looking back, Troy surveyed the gradual development of the war-feeling as it entered into a schoolboy's range of vision. He had begun to notice the change before the sinking of the Lusitania. Even in the early days, when his school-fellows had laughed at him and called him "Marny," some of them had listened to him and imitated him. It had become the fashion to have a collection of war-trophies from the battlefields. The boys' sisters were "adopting war-orphans" at long distance, and when Troy went home for the holidays he heard more and more talk of war-charities, and noticed that the funds collected were no longer raised by dancing and fancy-balls. People who used the war as an opportunity to have fun were beginning to be treated almost as coldly as the pacifists.

But the two great factors in the national change of feeling were the Lusitania and the training-camps.

The Lusitania showed America what the Germans were, Plattsburg tried to show her the only way of dealing with them.

Both events called forth a great deal of agitated discussion, for if they focussed the popular feeling for war, they also gave the opponents of war in general a point of departure for their arguments. For a while feeling ran high, and Troy, listening to the heated talk at his parents' table, perceived with disgust and wonder that at the bottom of the anti-war sentiment, whatever specious impartiality it put on, there was always the odd belief that life-in-itself—just the mere raw fact of being alive—was the one thing that mattered, and getting killed the one thing to be avoided.

This new standard of human dignity plunged Troy into the lowest depths of pessimism. And it bewildered him as much as it disgusted him, since it did away at a stroke with all that gave any interest to the fact of living. It killed romance, it killed poetry and adventure, it took all the meaning out of history and conduct and civilization. There had never been anything worth while in the world that had not had to be died for, and it was as clear as day that a world which no one would die for could never be a world worth being alive in.

Luckily most people did not require to reason the matter out in order to feel as Troy did, and in the long run the Lusitania and Plattsburg won the day. America tore the gag of neutrality from her lips, and with all the strength of her liberated lungs claimed her right to a place in the struggle. The pacifists crept into their holes, and only Sophy Wicks remained unconverted.

Troy Belknap, tall and shy and awkward, lay at her feet and blushed and groaned inwardly at her wrong-headedness. All the other girls were war-mad; with the rupture of diplomatic relations the country had burst into flame, and with the declaration of war the flame had become a conflagration. And now, having at last a

definite and personal concern in the affair, every one was not only happier but more sensible than when a perpetually thwarted indignation had had to expend itself in vague philanthropy.

It was a peculiar cruelty of fate that made Troy feel Miss Wicks's indifference more than the zeal of all the other young women gathered about the Belknap tennis-court. In spite of everything, he found her more interesting, more inexhaustible, more "his size" (as they said at school), than any of the gay young war-goddesses who sped their tennis-balls across the Belknap court.

It was a Long Island Sunday in June. A caressing warmth was in the air, and a sea-breeze stirred the tops of the lime branches. The smell of fresh hay-cocks blew across the lawn, and a sparkle of blue water and a dipping of white sails showed through the trees beyond the hay-fields.

Mrs. Belknap smiled indulgently on the pleasant scene: her judgement of Sophy Wicks was less severe than that of the young lady's contemporaries. What did it matter if a chit of eighteen, having taken up a foolish attitude, was too self-conscious to renounce it?

"Sophy will feel differently when she has nursed some of our own soldiers in a French base hospital," she said, addressing herself to the disapproving group.

The young girl raised her merry eyebrows. "Who'll stay and nurse Granny if I go to a French base hospital? Troy, will you?" she suggested.

The other girls about the tea-table laughed. Though they were only Troy's age, or younger, they did not mind his being teased, for he seemed only a little boy to them, now that they all had friends or brothers in the training-camps or on the way to France. Besides, though they disapproved of Sophy's tone, her argument was unanswerable. They knew her precocious wisdom and self-confidence had been acquired at the head of her grandmother's household, and that there was no one else to look after poor old paralytic Mrs. Wicks and the orphan brothers and sisters to

whom Sophy was mother and guardian.

Two or three of the young men present were in uniform, and one of them, Mrs. Belknap's nephew, had a captain's double bar on his shoulder. What did Troy Belknap and Sophy Wicks matter to young women playing a last tennis-match with heroes on their way to France?

The game began again, with much noise and cheerful wrangling. Mrs. Belknap walked toward the house to welcome a group of visitors, and Miss Wicks remained beside the tea-table, alone with Troy. She was leaning back in a wide basket-chair, her thin ankles in white open-work stockings thrust out under her short skirt, her arms locked behind her thrown-back head. Troy lay on the ground and plucked at the tufts of grass at his elbow. Why was it that, with all the currents of vitality flowing between this group of animated girls and youths, he could feel no nearness but hers? The feeling was not particularly agreeable, but there was no shaking it off: it was like a scent that has got into one's clothes. He was not sure that he liked her, but he wanted to watch her, to listen to her, to defend her against the mockery and criticism in the eyes of the others. At this point his powers of analysis gave out, and his somewhat extensive vocabulary failed him. After all, he had to fall back on the stupid old school phrase: she was "his size"—that was all.

"Why do you always say the war bores you?" he asked abruptly, without looking up.

"Because it does, my boy; and so do you, when you hold forth about it."

He was silent, and she touched his arm with the tip of her swinging tennis-shoe. "Don't you see, Troy, it's not our job—not just now, anyhow. So what's the use of always jawing about it?"

She jumped up, recovered her racket, and ran to take her place in a new set beside Troy's cousin, the captain.

VI

It was not "his job"—that was the bitter drop in all the gladness.

At last what Troy longed for had come: his country was playing her part. And he, who had so watched and hoped and longed for the divine far-off event, had talked of it early and late to old and young, had got himself laughed at, scolded, snubbed, ridiculed, nicknamed, commemorated in a school-magazine skit in which "Marne" and "yarn" and "oh, darn," formed the refrain of a lyric beginning "Oh say, have you heard Belknap flap in the breeze?"—he, who had borne all the scoldings and all the ridicule, sustained by a mysterious secret faith in the strength of his cause, now saw that cause triumph, and all his country waving with flags and swarming with khaki, while he had to stand aside and look on, because his coming birthday was only his nineteenth.... He remembered the anguish of regret with which he had seen M. Gantier leave St. Moritz to join his regiment, and thought now with passionate envy of his tutor's fate. "Dulce et decorum est ..." the old hackneyed phrase had taken on a beauty that filled his eyes with tears.

Eighteen—and "nothing doing" till he was twenty-one! He could have killed the cousins and uncles strutting about in uniform and saying: "Don't fret, old man—there's lots of time. The war is sure to last another four years." To say that, and laugh, how little they must know of what war meant!

It was an old custom in the Belknap family to ask Troy what he wanted for his birthday. The custom (according to tradition) had originated on his sixth anniversary, when, being given a rabbit with ears that wiggled, he had grown very red and stammered out: "I did so want a 'cyclopedia...."

Since then he had always been consulted on the subject with a good deal of ceremony, and had spent no little time and thought in making a judicious choice in advance. But this year his choice took no thinking over.

"I want to go to France," he said immediately.

"To France——?" It struck his keen ears that there was less surprise than he had

feared in Mr. Belknap's voice.

"To France, my boy? The Government doesn't encourage foreign travel just now."

"I want to volunteer in the Foreign Legion," said Troy, feeling as if the veins of his forehead would burst.

Mrs. Belknap groaned, but Mr. Belknap retained his composure.

"My dear chap, I don't think you know much about the Foreign Legion. It's a pretty rough berth for a fellow like you. And they're as likely as not," he added carelessly, "to send you to Morocco or the Cameroon."

Troy, knowing this to be true, hung his head.

"Now," Mr. Belknap continued, taking advantage of his silence, "my counter-proposition is that you should go to Brazil for three months with your Uncle Tom Jarvice, who is being sent down there on a big engineering job. It's a wonderful opportunity to see the country—see it like a prince too, for he'll have a special train at his disposal. Then, when you come back," he continued, his voice weakening a little under the strain of Troy's visible inattention, "we'll see...."

"See what?"

"Well—I don't know ... a camp ... till it's time for Harvard...."

"I want to go to France at once, father," said Troy, with the voice of a man.

"To do what?" wailed his mother.

"Oh, any old thing—drive an ambulance," Troy struck out at random.

"But, dearest," she protested, "you could never even learn to drive a Ford runabout!"

"That's only because it never interested me."

"But one of those huge ambulances—you'll be killed!"

"Father!" exclaimed Troy, in a tone that seemed to say: "Aren't we out of the nursery, at least?"

"Don't talk to him like that, Josephine," said Mr. Belknap, visibly wishing that he knew how to talk to his son himself, but perceiving that his wife was on the wrong tack.

"Don't you see, father, that there's no use talking at all? I'm going to get to France anyhow."

"In defiance of our wishes?"

"Oh, you'll forget all that later," said Troy.

Mrs. Belknap began to cry, and her husband turned on her.

"My dear, you're really—really—I understand Troy!" he blurted out, his veins swelling too.

"But if the Red Cross is to send you on that mission to Italy, why shouldn't Troy wait and go as your secretary?" Mrs. Belknap said, tacking skilfully.

Mr. Belknap, who had not yet made up his mind to accept the mission, made it up on the instant. "Yes, Troy—why not? I shall be going myself—in a month or so."

"I want to go to France," said his son. And he added, laughing with sudden courage: "You see, you've never refused me a birthday present yet."

VII

France again—France at last! As the cliffs grew green across the bay he could have knelt to greet them—as he hurried down the gang-plank with the eager jostling crowd he could have kissed the sacred soil they were treading.

The very difficulties and delays of the arrival thrilled and stimulated him, gave him a keener sense of his being already a humble participant in the conflict. Passports, identification papers, sharp interrogatories, examinations, the enforced surrendering of keys and papers: how different it all was from the old tame easy landings, with the noiseless motor waiting at the dock, and France lying safe and open before them

whichever way they chose to turn!

On the way over many things had surprised and irritated him—not least the attitude of some of his fellow-passengers. The boat swarmed with young civilians, too young for military service, or having, for some more or less valid reason, been exempted from it. They were all pledged to some form of relief work, and all overflowing with zeal: "France" was as often on their lips as on Troy's. But some of them seemed to be mainly concerned with questions of uniform and rank. The steamer seethed with wrangles and rivalries between their various organisations, and now and then the young crusaders seemed to lose sight of the object of their crusade—as had too frequently been the case with their predecessors.

Very few of the number knew France or could speak French, and most of them were full of the importance of America's mission. This was Liberty's chance to Enlighten the World; and all these earnest youths apparently regarded themselves as her chosen torch-bearers.

"We must teach France efficiency," they all said with a glowing condescension.

The women were even more sure of their mission; and there were plenty of them, middle-aged as well as young, in uniform too, cocked-hatted, badged and gaitered—though most of them, apparently, were going to sit in the offices of Paris war-charities, and Troy had never noticed that Frenchwomen had donned khaki for that purpose.

"France must be purified," these young Columbias proclaimed. "Frenchmen must be taught to respect Women. We must protect our boys from contamination ... the dreadful theatres ... and the novels ... and the Boulevards.... Of course we mustn't be hard on the French, for they've never known Home Life, or the Family ... but we must show them ... we must set the example...."

Troy, sickened by their blatancy, had kept to himself for the greater part of the trip; but during the last days he had been drawn into talk by a girl who reminded him of

Miss Wicks, though she was in truth infinitely prettier. The evenings below decks were long, and he sat at her side in the saloon and listened to her.

Her name was Hinda Warlick, and she came from the Middle West. He gathered from her easy confidences that she was singing in a suburban church choir while waiting for a vaudeville engagement. Her studies had probably been curtailed by the task of preparing a repertory, for she appeared to think that Joan of Arc was a Revolutionary hero, who had been guillotined with Marie Antoinette for blowing up the Bastille; and her notions of French history did not extend beyond this striking episode. But she was ready and eager to explain France to Troy, and to the group of young men who gathered about her, listening to her piercing accents and gazing into her deep blue eyes.

"We must carry America right into the heart of France—for she has got a great big heart, in spite of everything," Miss Warlick declared. "We must teach her to love children and home and the outdoor life, and you American boys must teach the young Frenchmen to love their mothers. You must set the example.... Oh, boys, do you know what my ambition is? It's to organize an Old Home Week just like ours, all over France from Harver right down to Marseilles—and all through the devastated regions too. Wouldn't it be lovely if we could get General Pershing to let us keep Home Week right up at the front, at 'Eep and Leal and Rams, and all those martyr cities—right close up in the trenches? So that even the Germans would see us and hear us, and perhaps learn from us too?—for you know we mustn't despair even of teaching the Germans!"

Troy, as he crept away, heard one young man, pink and shock-headed, murmur shyly to the Prophetess: "Hearing you say this has made it all so clear to me——" and an elderly Y.M.C.A. leader, adjusting his eye-glasses, added with nasal emphasis: "Yes, Miss Warlick has expressed in a very lovely way what we all feel: that America's mission is to contribute the human element to this war."

"Oh, good God!" Troy groaned, crawling to his darkened cabin. He remembered M. Gantier's phrase, "Self-satisfaction is death," and felt a sudden yearning for Sophy Wicks's ironic eyes and her curt "What's the use of jawing?"

He had been for six months on his job, and was beginning to know something about it: to know, for instance, that nature had never meant him for an ambulance-driver.

Nevertheless he had stuck to his task with such a dogged determination to succeed that after several months about the Paris hospitals he was beginning to be sent to exposed sectors.

His first sight of the desolated country he had traversed three years earlier roused old memories of the Gantier family, and he wrote once more to their little town, but again without result. Then one day he was sent to a sector in the Vosges which was held by American troops. His heart was beating hard as the motor rattled over the hills, through villages empty of their inhabitants, like those of the Marne, but swarming with big fair-haired soldiers. The land lifted and dipped again, and he saw ahead of him the ridge once crowned by M. Gantier's village, and the wall of the terraced garden, with the horn-beam arbour putting forth its early green. Everything else was in ruins: pale weather-bleached ruins over which the rains and suns of three years had passed effacingly. The church, once so firm and four-square on the hill, was now a mere tracery against the clouds; the hospice roofless, the houses all gutted and bulging, with black smears of smoke on their inner walls. At the head of the street a few old women and children were hoeing vegetables before a row of tin-roofed shanties, and a Y.M.C.A. hut flew the stars-and-stripes across the way.

Troy jumped down and began to ask questions. At first the only person who recognized the name of Gantier was an old woman too frightened and feeble-minded to answer intelligibly. Then a French territorial who was hoeing with the women came forward. He belonged to the place and knew the story.

"M. Gantier—the old gentleman? He was mayor, and the Germans took him. He

died in Germany. The young girl—Mlle. Gantier—was taken with him. No, she's not dead.... I don't know.... She's shut up somewhere in Germany ... queer in the head, they say.... The sons—ah, you knew Monsieur Paul? He went first.... What, the others?... Yes: the three others—Louis at Notre Dame de Lorette; Jean on a submarine: poor little Félix, the youngest, of the fever at Salonika. Voilà.... The old lady? Ah, she and her sister went away ... some charitable people took them, I don't know where.... I've got the address somewhere...." He fumbled, and brought out a strip of paper on which was written the name of a town in the centre of France.

"There's where they were a year ago.... Yes, you may say: there's a family gone—wiped out. How often I've seen them all sitting there, laughing and drinking coffee under the arbour! They were not rich, but they were happy and proud of each other. That's over."

He went back to his hoeing.

After that, whenever Troy Belknap got back to Paris he hunted for the surviving Gantiers. For a long time he could get no trace of them; then he remembered his old governess, Mme. Lebuc, for whom Mrs. Belknap had found employment in a refugee bureau.

He ran down Mme. Lebuc, who was still at her desk in the same big room, facing a row of horse-hair benches packed with tired people waiting their turn for a clothing-ticket or a restaurant card.

Mme. Lebuc had grown much older, and her filmy eyes peered anxiously through large spectacles before she recognized Troy. Then, after tears and raptures, he set forth his errand, and she began to peer again anxiously, shuffling about the bits of paper on the desk, and confusing her records hopelessly.

"Why, is that you?" cried a gay young voice; and there, on the other side of the room, sat one of the young war-goddesses of the Belknap tennis-court, trim, uniformed, important, with a row of bent backs in shabby black before her desk.

"Ah, Miss Batchford will tell you—she's so quick and clever," Mme. Lebuc sighed, resigning herself to chronic bewilderment.

Troy crossed to the other desk. An old woman sat before it in threadbare mourning, a crape veil on her twitching head. She spoke in a low voice, slowly, taking a long time to explain; each one of Miss Batchford's quick questions put her back, and she had to begin all over again.

"Oh, these refugees!" cried Miss Batchford, stretching a bangled arm above the crape veil to clasp Troy's hand. "Do sit down, Mr. Belknap.—Dépêchez-vous, s'il vous plaît," she said, not too unkindly, to the old woman; and added, to Troy: "There's no satisfying them."

At the sound of Troy's name the old woman had turned her twitching head, putting back her veil. Her eyes met Troy's, and they looked at each other doubtfully. Then—"Madame Gantier!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, yes," she said, the tears running down her face.

Troy was not sure if she recognized him, though his name had evidently called up some vague association. He saw that most things had grown far off to her, and that for the moment her whole mind was centred on the painful and humiliating effort of putting her case to this strange young woman who snapped out questions like a machine.

"Do you know her?" asked Miss Batchford, surprised.

"I used to, I believe," Troy answered.

"You can't think what she wants—just everything! They're all alike. She wants to borrow five hundred francs to furnish a flat for herself and her sister."

"Well, why not?"

"Why, we don't lend money, of course. It's against all our principles. We give work, or relief in kind—that's what I'm telling her."

"I see. Could I give it to her?"

"What—all that money? Certainly not. You don't know them!"

Troy shook hands and went out into the street to wait for Mme. Gantier; and when she came he told her who he was. She cried and shook a great deal, and he called a cab and drove her home to the poor lodging where she and her sister lived. The sister had become weak-minded, and the room was dirty and untidy, because, as Mme. Gantier explained, her lameness prevented her from keeping it clean, and they could not afford a charwoman. The pictures of the four dead sons hung on the wall, a wisp of crape above each, with all their ribbons and citations. But when Troy spoke of old M. Gantier and the daughter Mme. Gantier's face grew like a stone, and her sister began to whimper like an animal.

Troy remembered the territorial's phrase: "You may say: there's a family wiped out." He went away, too shy to give the five hundred francs in his pocket.

One of his first cares on getting back to France had been to order a head-stone for Paul Gantier's grave at Mondement. A week or two after his meeting with Mme. Gantier, his ambulance was ordered to Epernay, and he managed to get out to Mondement and have the stone set up and the grave photographed. He had brought some flowers to lay on it, and he borrowed two tin wreaths from the neighbouring crosses, so that Paul Gantier's mound should seem the most fondly tended of all. He sent the photograph to Mme. Gantier, with a five hundred franc bill; but after a long time his letter came back from the post-office. The two old women had gone....

VIII

In February Mr. Belknap arrived in Paris on a mission. Tightly buttoned into his Red Cross uniform, he looked to his son older and fatter, but more important and impressive, than usual.

He was on his way to Italy, where he was to remain for three months, and Troy

learned with dismay that he needed a secretary, and had brought none with him because he counted on his son to fill the post.

"You've had nearly a year of this, old man, and the front's as quiet as a church. As for Paris, isn't it too frivolous for you? It's much farther from the war nowadays than New York. I haven't had a dinner like this since your mother joined the Voluntary Rationing League," Mr. Belknap smiled at him across their little table at the Nouveau Luxe.

"I'm glad to hear it—about New York, I mean," Troy answered composedly. "It's our turn now. But Paris isn't a bit too frivolous for me. Which shall it be, father—the Palais Royal—or the Capucines? They say the new revue there is great fun."

Mr. Belknap was genuinely shocked. He had caught the war fever late in life, and late in the war, and his son's flippancy surprised and pained him.

"The theatre? We don't go to the theatre...." He paused to light his cigar, and added, embarrassed: "Really, Troy, now there's so little doing here, don't you think you might be more useful in Italy?"

Troy was anxious, for he was not sure that Mr. Belknap's influence might not be sufficient to detach him from his job on a temporary mission; but long experience in dealing with parents made him assume a greater air of coolness as his fears increased.

"Well, you see, father, so many other chaps have taken advantage of the lull to go off on leave that if I asked to be detached now—well, it wouldn't do me much good with my chief," he said cunningly, guessing that if he appeared to yield his father might postpone action.

"Yes, I see," Mr. Belknap rejoined, impressed by the military character of the argument. He was still trying to get used to the fact that he was himself under orders, and nervous visions of a sort of mitigated court-martial came to him in the middle of pleasant dinners, or jumped him out of his morning sleep like an alarm-clock.

Troy saw that his point was gained; but he regretted having proposed the Capucines to his father. He himself was not shocked by the seeming indifference of Paris: he thought the gay theatres, the crowded shops, the restaurants groaning with abundance, were all healthy signs of the nation's irrepressible vitality. But he understood that America's young zeal might well be chilled by the first contact with this careless exuberance, so close to the lines where young men like himself were dying day by day in order that the curtain might ring up punctually on low-necked revues, and fat neutrals feast undisturbed on lobster and champagne. Only now and then he asked himself what had become of the Paris of the Marne, and what would happen if ever again——But that of course was nonsense....

Mr. Belknap left for Italy—and two days afterward Troy's ambulance was roused from semi-inaction and hurried to Beauvais. The retreat from St. Quentin had begun, and Paris was once again the Paris of the Marne.

The same—but how different!—were the tense days that followed. Troy Belknap, instead of hanging miserably about marble hotels and waiting with restless crowds for the communiqués to appear in the windows of the newspaper offices, was in the thick of the retreat, swept back on its tragic tide, his heart wrung, but his imagination hushed by the fact of participating in the struggle, playing a small dumb indefatigable part, relieving a little fraction of the immense anguish and the dreadful disarray.

The mere fact of lifting a wounded man "so that it wouldn't hurt"; of stiffening one's lips to a smile as the ambulance pulled up in the market-place of a terror-stricken village; of calling out "Nous les tenons!" to whimpering women and bewildered old people; of giving a lift to a family of foot-sore refugees; of prying open a tin of condensed milk for the baby, or taking down the address of a sister in Paris, with the promise to bring her news of the fugitives; the heat and the burden and the individual effort of each minute carried one along through the endless and yet

breathless hours—backward and forward, backward and forward, between Paris and the fluctuating front, till in Troy's weary brain the ambulance took on the semblance of a tireless grey shuttle humming in the hand of Fate....

It was on one of these trips that, for the first time, he saw a train-load of American soldiers on the way to the battle front. He had, of course, seen plenty of them in Paris during the months since his arrival; seen them vaguely roaming the streets, or sitting in front of cafés, or wooed by polyglot sirens in the obscure promiscuity of cinema-palaces.

At first he had seized every chance of talking to them; but either his own shyness or theirs seemed to paralyze him. He found them, as a rule, bewildered, depressed and unresponsive. They wanted to kill Germans all right, they said; but this hanging around Paris wasn't what they'd bargained for, and there was a good deal more doing back home at Podunk or Tombstone or Skohegan.

It was not only the soldiers who took this depreciatory view of France. Some of the officers whom Troy met at his friends' houses discouraged him more than the enlisted men with whom he tried to make friends in the cafés. They had more definite and more unfavourable opinions as to the country they had come to defend. They wanted to know, in God's name, where in the blasted place you could get fried hominy and a real porter-house steak for breakfast, and when the ball-game season began, and whether it rained every day all the year round; and Troy's timid efforts to point out some of the compensating advantages of Paris failed to excite any lasting interest.

But now he seemed to see a different race of men. The faces leaning from the windows of the train glowed with youthful resolution. The soldiers were out on their real business at last, and as Troy looked at them, so alike and so innumerable, he had the sense of a force, inexorable and exhaustless, poured forth from the reservoirs of the new world to replenish the wasted veins of the old.

"Hooray!" he shouted frantically, waving his cap at the passing train; but as it disappeared he hung his head and swore under his breath. There they went, his friends and fellows, as he had so often dreamed of seeing them, racing in their hundreds of thousands to the rescue of France; and he was still too young to be among them, and could only yearn after them with all his aching heart!

After a hard fortnight of day-and-night work he was ordered a few days off, and sulkily resigned himself to inaction. For the first twenty-four hours he slept the leaden sleep of weary youth, and for the next he moped on his bed in the Infirmary; but the third day he crawled out to take a look at Paris.

The long-distance bombardment was going on, and now and then, at irregular intervals, there was a more or less remote crash, followed by a long reverberation. But the life of the streets was not affected. People went about their business as usual, and it was obvious that the strained look on every face was not caused by the random fall of a few shells, but by the perpetual vision of that swaying and receding line on which all men's thoughts were fixed. It was sorrow, not fear, that Troy read in all those anxious eyes—sorrow over so much wasted effort, such high hopes thwarted, so many dear-bought miles of France once more under the German heel.

That night when he came home he found a letter from his mother. At the very end, in a crossed postscript, he read: "Who do you suppose sailed last week? Sophy Wicks. Soon there'll be nobody left! Old Mrs. Wicks died in January—did I tell you?—and Sophy has sent the children to Long Island with their governess, and rushed over to do Red Cross nursing. It seems she had taken a course at the Presbyterian without any one's knowing it. I've promised to keep an eye on the children. Let me know if you see her."

Sophy Wicks in France! There was hardly room in his troubled mind for the news. What Sophy Wicks did or did not do had shrunk to utter insignificance in the crash of falling worlds. He was rather sorry to have to class her with the other hysterical

girls fighting for a pretext to get to France; but what did it all matter, anyhow? On the way home he had overheard an officer in the street telling a friend that the Germans were at Creil....

Then came the day when the advance was checked. The glorious counter-attack of General Mangin gave France new faith in her armies, and Paris irrepressibly burst at once into abounding life. It was as if she were ashamed of having doubted, as if she wanted, by a livelier renewal of activities, to proclaim her unshakable faith in her defenders. In the perpetual sunshine of the most golden of springs she basked and decked herself, and mirrored her recovered beauty in the Seine.

And still the cloudless weeks succeeded each other, days of blue warmth and nights of silver lustre; and still, behind the impenetrable wall of the front, the Beast dumbly lowered and waited. Then one morning, toward the end of May, Troy, waking late after an unusually hard day, read: "The new German offensive has begun. The Chemin des Dames has been retaken by the enemy. Our valiant troops are resisting heroically...."

Ah, now indeed they were on the road to Paris! In a flash of horror he saw it all. The bitter history of the war was re-enacting itself, and the battle of the Marne was to be fought again....

The misery of the succeeding days would have been intolerable if there had been time to think of it. But day and night there was no respite for Troy's service; and, being by this time a practised hand, he had to be continually on the road.

On the second day he received orders to evacuate the wounded from an American base hospital near the Marne. It was actually the old battleground he was to traverse; only, before, he had traversed it in the wake of the German retreat, and now it was the allied troops who, slowly, methodically, and selling every inch dear, were falling back across the sacred soil. Troy faced eastward with a heavy heart....

IX

The next morning at daylight they started for the front.

Troy's breast swelled with the sense of the approach to something bigger than he had yet known. The air of Paris, that day, was heavy with doom. There was no mistaking its taste on the lips. It was the air of the Marne that he was breathing....

Here he was, once more involved in one of the great convulsions of destiny, and still almost as helpless a spectator as when, four years before, he had strayed the burning desert of Paris and cried out in his boy's heart for a share in the drama. Almost as helpless, yes—in spite of his four more years, his grown-up responsibilities, and the blessed uniform thanks to which he, even he, a poor little ambulance-driver of eighteen, ranked as a soldier of the great untried army of his country. It was something—it was a great deal—to be even the humblest part, the most infinitesimal cog, in that mighty machinery of the future; but it was not enough, at this turning-point of history, for one who had so lived it all in advance, who was so aware of it now that it had come, who had carried so long on his lips the taste of its scarcely breathable air.

As the ambulance left the gates of Paris, and hurried eastward in the grey dawn, this sense of going toward something new and overwhelming continued to grow in Troy. It was probably the greatest hour of the war that was about to strike—and he was still too young to give himself to the cause he had so long dreamed of serving.

From the moment they left the gates the road was encumbered with huge grey motor-trucks, limousines, torpedoes, motor-cycles, long trains of artillery, army kitchens, supply wagons, all the familiar elements of the procession he had so often watched unrolling itself endlessly east and west from the Atlantic to the Alps. Nothing new in the sight—but something new in the faces! A look of having got beyond the accident of living, and accepted what lay over the edge, in the dim land of the final. He had seen that look in the days before the Marne....

Most of the faces on the way were French: as far as Epernay they met their compatriots only in isolated groups. But whenever one of the motor-trucks lumbering by bore a big U.S. on its rear panel Troy pushed his light ambulance ahead and skimmed past, just for the joy of seeing the fresh young heads rising pyramid-wise above the sides of the lorry, hearing the snatches of familiar song—"Hail, hail, the gang's all here!" and "We won't come back till it's over over there!"—and shouting back, in reply to a stentorian "Hi, kid, beat it!", "Bet your life I will, old man!"

Hubert Jacks, the young fellow who was with him, shouted back too, as lustily; but between times he was more occupied with the details of their own particular job—to which he was newer than Troy—and seemed not to feel so intensely the weight of impending events.

As they neared the Montmirail monument: "Ever been over this ground before?" Troy asked carelessly, and Jacks answered: "N—no."

"Ah—I have. I was here just after the battle of the Marne, in September 'fourteen."

"That so? You must have been quite a kid," said Jacks with indifference, filling his pipe.

"Well—not quite," Troy rejoined sulkily; and they said no more.

At Epernay they stopped for lunch, and found the place swarming with troops. Troy's soul was bursting within him: he wanted to talk and remember and compare. But his companion was unimaginative, and perhaps a little jealous of his greater experience. "He doesn't want to show that he's new at the job," Troy decided.

They lunched together in a corner of the packed restaurant, and while they were taking coffee some French officers came up and chatted with Troy. To all of them he felt the desperate need of explaining that he was driving an ambulance only because he was still too young to be among the combatants.

"But I shan't be—soon!" he always added, in the tone of one who affirms. "It's

merely a matter of a few weeks now."

"Oh, you all look like babies—but you all fight like devils," said a young French lieutenant seasoned by four years at the front; and another officer added gravely: "Make haste to be old enough, cher monsieur. We need you all—every one of you...."

"Oh, we're coming—we're all coming!" Troy cried.

That evening, after a hard and harrowing day's work between postes de secours and a base hospital, they found themselves in a darkened village, where, after a summary meal under flying shells, some one suggested ending up at the Y.M.C.A. hut.

The shelling had ceased, and there seemed nothing better to do than to wander down the dark street to the underground shelter packed with American soldiers. Troy was sleepy and tired, and would have preferred to crawl into his bed at the inn; he felt, more keenly than ever, the humiliation (the word was stupid, but he could find no other) of being among all these young men, only a year or two his seniors, and none, he was sure, more passionately eager than himself for the work that lay ahead, and yet so hopelessly divided from him by that stupid difference in age. But Hubert Jacks was seemingly unconscious of this, and only desirous of ending his night cheerfully. It would have looked unfriendly not to accompany him, so they pushed their way together through the cellar door surmounted by the sociable red triangle.

It was a big cellar, but brown uniforms and ruddy faces crowded it from wall to wall. In one corner the men were sitting on packing-boxes at a long table made of boards laid across barrels, the smoky light of little oil lamps reddening their cheeks and deepening the furrows in their white foreheads as they laboured over their correspondence. Others were playing checkers, or looking at the illustrated papers, and everybody was smoking and talking—not in large groups, but quietly, by twos or threes. Young women in trig uniforms, with fresh innocent faces, moved among the barrels and boxes, distributing stamps or books, chatting with the soldiers, and

being generally homelike and sisterly. The men gave them back glances as honest, and almost as innocent, and an air of simple daylight friendliness pervaded the Avernian cave.

It was the first time that Troy had ever seen a large group of his compatriots so close to the fighting front, and in an hour of ease, and he was struck by the gravity of the young faces, and the low tones of their talk. Everything was in a minor key. No one was laughing or singing or larking: the note was that which might have prevailed in a club of quiet elderly men, or in a drawing-room where the guests did not know each other well. Troy was all the more surprised because he remembered the jolly calls of the young soldiers in the motor-trucks, and the songs and horse-play of the gangs of trench-diggers and hut-builders he had passed on the way. Was it that his compatriots did not know how to laugh when they were at leisure, or was it rather that, in the intervals of work, the awe of the unknown laid its hand on these untried hearts?

Troy and Jacks perched on a packing-box, and talked a little with their neighbours; but presently they were interrupted by the noise of a motor stopping outside. There was a stir at the mouth of the cavern, and a girl said eagerly: "Here she comes!"

Instantly the cellar woke up. The soldiers' faces grew young again, they flattened themselves laughingly against the walls near the entrance, the door above was cautiously opened, and a girl in a long blue cloak appeared at the head of the stairs.

"Well, boys—you see I managed it!" she cried; and Troy recognized the piercing accents and azure gaze of Miss Hinda Warlick.

"She managed it!" the whole cellar roared as one man, drowning her answer in a cheer. And, "Of course I did!" she continued, laughing and nodding right and left as she made her triumphant way down the lane of khaki, to what, at her appearance, had somehow promptly become the stage at the farther end of a packed theatre. The elderly Y.M.C.A. official who accompanied her puffed out his chest like a general

and blinked knowingly behind his gold eye-glasses.

Troy's first movement had been one of impatience. He hated all that Miss Warlick personified, and hated it most of all on this sacred soil, and at this fateful moment, with the iron wings of doom clanging so close above their heads. But it would have been almost impossible to fight his way out through the crowd that had closed in behind her—and he stayed.

The cheering subsided, she gained her improvised platform—a door laid on some biscuit-boxes—and the recitation began.

She gave them all sorts of things, ranging from grave to gay, and extracting from the sentimental numbers a peculiarly piercing effect that hurt Troy like the twinge of a dental instrument. And her audience loved it all, indiscriminately and voraciously, with souls hungry for the home-flavour and long nurtured on what Troy called "cereal-fiction." One had to admit that Miss Warlick knew her public, and could play on every chord.

It might have been funny if it had not been so infinitely touching. They were all so young, so serious, so far from home, and bound on a quest so glorious! And there overhead, just above them, brooded and clanged the black wings of their doom.... Troy's mockery was softened to tenderness, and he felt, under the hard shell of his youthful omniscience, the stir of all the things to which the others were unconsciously responding.

"And now, by special request, Miss Warlick is going to say a few words," the elderly eye-glassed officer importantly announced.

Ah, what a pity! If only she had ended on that last jolly chorus, so full of artless laughter and tears! Troy remembered her dissertations on the steamer, and winced at a fresh display of such fatuity in such a scene.

She had let the cloak slip from her shoulders, and stepped to the edge of her unsteady stage. Her eyes burned large in a face grown suddenly grave.... For a

moment she reminded him again of Sophy Wicks.

"Only a few words, really," she began apologetically; and the cellar started a cheer of protest.

"No—not that kind. Something different...." She paused long enough to let the silence prepare them: sharp little artist that she was! Then she leaned forward. "This is what I want to say. I've come from the French front—pretty near the edge. They're dying there, boys—dying by thousands, now, this minute.... But that's not it—I know: you want me to cut it out—and I'm going to.... But this is why I began that way; because it was my first sight of—things of that sort. And I had to tell you——"

She stopped, pale, her pretty mouth twitching.

"What I really wanted to say is this. Since I came to Europe, nearly a year ago, I've got to know the country they're dying for—and I understand why they mean to go on and on dying—if they have to—till there isn't one of them left.

"Boys—I know France now—and she's worth it! Don't you make any mistake!

"I have to laugh now when I remember what I thought of France when I landed. My! How d'you suppose she'd got on so long without us? Done a few things too—poor little toddler! Well—it was time we took her by the hand, and showed her how to behave. And I wasn't the only one either; I guess most of us thought we'd have to teach her her letters. Maybe some of you boys right here felt that way too?"

A guilty laugh, and loud applause.

"Thought so," said Miss Warlick, smiling.

"Well," she continued, "there wasn't hardly anything I wasn't ready to teach them. On the steamer coming out with us there was a lot of those Amb'lance boys. My! How I gassed to them. I said the French had got to be taught how to love their mothers—I said they hadn't any home-feeling—and didn't love children the way we do. I've been round among them some since then, in the hospitals, and I've seen

fellows lying there shot 'most to death, and their little old mothers in white caps arriving from 'way off at the other end of France. Well, those fellows know how to see their mothers coming even if they're blind, and how to hug 'em even if their arms are off.... And the children—the way they go on about the children! Ever seen a French soldier yet that didn't have a photograph of a baby stowed away somewhere in his dirty uniform? I never have. I tell you, they're white! And they're fighting as only people can who feel that way about mothers and babies. The way we're going to fight; and maybe we'll prove it to 'em sooner than any of us think....

"Anyhow, I wanted to get this off my chest to-night; not for you, only for myself. I didn't want to have a shell get me before I'd said 'Veever la France!' before all of you.

"See here, boys—the Marcellaze!"

She snatched a flag from the wall, drawing herself up to heroic height; and the whole cellar joined her in a roar.

X

The next morning Jacks dragged Troy out of bed by the feet. The room was still dark, and through the square of the low window glittered a bunch of stars.

"Hurry call to Montmirail—step lively!" Jacks ordered, his voice thick with sleep.

All the old names; with every turn of the wheel they seemed to be drawing nearer and nearer to the ravaged spot of earth where Paul Gantier slept his faithful sleep. Strange if, to-day of all days, Troy should again stand by his friend's grave.

They pushed along eastward under the last stars, the roll of the cannon crashing through the quiet dawn. The birds flew up with frightened cries from the trees along the roadside; rooks cawed their warning from clump to clump, and gathered in the sky in dark triangles flying before the danger.

The east began to redden through the dust-haze of the cloudless air. As they advanced the road became more and more crowded, and the ambulance was caught in the usual dense traffic of the front: artillery, field-kitchens, motor-trucks, horse-wagons, hay-carts packed with refugees, and popping motor-cycles zigzagging through the tangle of vehicles. The movement seemed more feverish and uncertain than usual, and now and then the road was jammed, and curses, shouts and the crack of heavy whips sounded against the incessant cannonade that hung its iron curtain above the hills to the north-east. The faces of soldiers and officers were unshaved sallow drawn with fatigue and anxiety. Women crouched sobbing on their piled-up baggage, and here and there, by the roadside, a little country cart had broken down, and the occupants sat on the bank watching the confusion like impassive lookers-on.

Suddenly, in the thickest of the struggle, a heavy lorry smashed into Troy's ambulance, and he felt the unmistakable wrench of the steering-gear. The car shook like a careening boat, and then righted herself and stopped.

"Oh, hell!" shouted Jacks in a fury. The two lads jumped down, and in a few minutes they saw that they were stranded beyond remedy. Tears of anger rushed into Troy's eyes. On this day of days he was not even to accomplish his own humble job!

Another ambulance of their own formation overtook them, and it was agreed that Jacks, who was the sharper of the two, was to get a lift to the nearest town, and try to bring back a spare part, or, failing that, pick up some sort of a car in which they could continue their work.

Troy was left by the roadside. Hour after hour he sat there waiting and cursing his fate. When would Jacks be back again? Not at all, most likely; it was ten to one he would be caught on the way and turned on to some more pressing job. He knew, and Troy knew, that their ambulance was for the time being a hopeless wreck, and would probably have to stick ignominiously in its ditch till some one could go and fetch a

spare part from Paris. And meanwhile, what might not be happening nearer by?

The rumble and thump of the cannonade grew more intense; a violent engagement was evidently going on not far off. Troy pulled out his map and tried to calculate how far he was from the front; but the front, at that point, was a wavering and incalculable line. He had an idea that the fighting was much nearer than he or Jacks had imagined. The place at which they had broken down must be about fifteen miles from the Marne. But could it be possible that the Germans had crossed the Marne?

Troy grew hungry, and thrust his hand in his pocket to pull out a sandwich. With it came a letter of his mother's, carried off in haste when he left Paris the previous morning. He re-read it with a mournful smile. "Of course we all know the Allies must win; but the preparations here seem so slow and blundering; and the Germans are still so strong...." (Thump, thump, the artillery echoed: "Strong!") And just at the end of the letter, again; "I do wonder if you'll run across Sophy...."

He lit a cigarette, and shut his eyes and thought. The sight of Miss Warlick had made Sophy Wicks's presence singularly vivid to him: he had fallen asleep thinking of her the night before. How like her to have taken a course at the Presbyterian Hospital without letting any one know! He wondered that he had not suspected, under her mocking indifference, an ardour as deep as his own, and he was ashamed of having judged her as others had, when, for so long, the thought of her had been his torment and his joy. Where was she now, he wondered? Probably in some hospital in the south or the centre: the authorities did not let beginners get near the front, though, of course, it was what all the girls were mad for.... Well, Sophy would do her work wherever it was assigned to her: he did not see her intriguing for a showy post.

Troy began to marvel again at the spell of France—his France! Here was a girl who had certainly not come in quest of vulgar excitement, as so many did: Sophy had always kept herself scornfully aloof from the pretty ghouls who danced and

picnicked on the ruins of the world. He knew that her motives, so jealously concealed, must have been as pure and urgent as his own. France, which she hardly knew, had merely guessed at through the golden blur of a six weeks' midsummer trip, France had drawn her with an irresistible pressure; and the moment she had felt herself free she had come. "Whither thou goest will I go, thy people shall be my people...." Yes, France was the Naomi-country that had but to beckon, and her children rose and came....

Troy was exceedingly tired: he stretched himself on the dusty bank, and the noise of the road-traffic began to blend with the cannonade in his whirling brain. Suddenly he fancied the Germans were upon him. He thought he heard the peppering volley of machine-guns, shouts, screams, rifle-shots close at hand....

He sat up and rubbed his eyes.

What he had heard was the cracking of whips and the shouting of carters urging tired farm-horses along. Down a by-road to his left a stream of haggard country people was pouring from the direction of the Marne. This time only a few were in the carts: the greater number were flying on their feet, the women carrying their babies, the old people bent under preposterous bundles, blankets, garden utensils, cages with rabbits, an agricultural prize framed and glazed, a wax wedding-wreath under a broken globe. Sick and infirm people were dragged and shoved along by the older children: a goitred idiot sat in a wheel-barrow pushed by a girl, and laughed and pulled its tongue....

In among the throng Troy began to see the torn blue uniforms of wounded soldiers limping on bandaged legs.... Others too, not wounded, elderly haggard territorials, with powder-black faces, bristling beards, and the horror of the shell-roar in their eyes.... One of them stopped near Troy, and in a thick voice begged for a drink ... just a drop of anything, for Gods sake. Others followed, pleading for food and drink. "Gas, gas ..." a young artilleryman gasped at him through distorted lips.... The

Germans were over the Marne, they told him, the Germans were coming. It was hell back there, no one could stand it.

Troy ransacked the ambulance, found water, brandy, biscuits, condensed milk, and set up an impromptu canteen. But the people who had clustered about him were pushed forward by others crying: "Are you mad to stay here? The Germans are coming!"—and in a feeble panic they pressed on.

One old man, trembling with fatigue, and dragging a shaking brittle old woman, had spied the stretcher beds inside the ambulance, and without asking leave scrambled in and pulled his wife after him. They fell like logs on to the grey blankets, and a livid territorial with a bandaged arm drenched in blood crawled in after them and sank on the floor. The rest of the crowd had surged by.

As he was helping the wounded soldier to settle himself in the ambulance, Troy heard a new sound down the road. It was a deep continuous rumble, the rhythmic growl of a long train of army-trucks. The way must have been cleared to let them by, for there was no break or faltering in the ever-deepening roar of their approach.

A cloud of dust rolled ahead, growing in volume with the growing noise; now the first trucks were in sight, huge square olive-brown motor-trucks stacked high with scores and scores of rosy soldiers. Troy jumped to his feet with a shout. It was an American regiment being rushed to the front!

The refugees and the worn-out blue soldiers fell back before the triumphant advance, and a weak shout went up. The rosy soldiers shouted back, but their faces were grave and set. It was clear that they knew where they were going, and to what work they had been so hurriedly summoned.

"It's hell back there!" a wounded territorial called out, pointing backward over his bandaged shoulder, and another cried: "Vive l'Amérique!"

"Vive la France!" shouted the truckful abreast of Troy, and the same cry burst from his own lungs. A few miles off the battle of the Marne was being fought again, and

here were his own brothers rushing forward to help! He felt that his greatest hour had struck.

One of the trucks had halted for a minute just in front of him, marking time, and the lads leaning over its side had seen him, and were calling out friendly college calls.

"Come along and help!" cried one, as the truck got under way again.

Troy glanced at his broken-down motor; then his eye lit on a rifle lying close by in the dust of the roadside. He supposed it belonged to the wounded territorial who had crawled into the ambulance.

He caught up the rifle, scrambled up over the side with the soldier's help, and was engulfed among his brothers. Furtively he had pulled the ambulance badge from his collar ... but a moment later he understood the uselessness of the precaution. All that mattered to any one just then was that he was one more rifle for the front.

XI

On the way he tried to call up half-remembered snatches of military lore.

If only he did not disgrace them by a blunder!

He had talked enough to soldiers, French and American, in the last year: he recalled odd bits of professional wisdom, but he was too excited to piece them together. He was not in the least afraid of being afraid, but his heart sank at the dread of doing something stupid, inopportune, idiotic. His envy of the youths beside him turned to veneration. They had all been in the front line, and knew its vocabulary, its dangers and its dodges.

All he could do was to watch and imitate....

Presently they were all tumbled out of the motors and drawn up by the roadside. An officer bawled unintelligible orders, and the men executed mysterious movements in obedience.

Troy crept close to the nearest soldier, and copied his gestures awkwardly—but no one noticed. Night had fallen, and he was thankful for the darkness. Perhaps by to-morrow morning he would have picked up a few of their tricks. Meanwhile, apparently, all he had to do was to march, march, march, at a sort of break-neck trot that the others took as lightly as one skims the earth in a dream. If it had not been for his pumping heart and his aching bursting feet, Troy at moments would have thought it was a dream....

Rank by rank they pressed forward in the night toward a sky-line torn with intermittent flame.

"We're going toward a battle," Troy sang to himself, "toward a battle, toward a battle...." But the words meant no more to him than the doggerel the soldier was chanting at his elbow.

They were in a wood, slipping forward cautiously, beating their way through the under-growth. The night had grown cloudy, but now and then the clouds broke, and a knot of stars clung to a branch like swarming bees.

At length a halt was called in a clearing, and then the group to which Troy had attached himself was ordered forward. He did not understand the order, but seeing the men moving he followed, like a mascot dog trotting after its company, and they began to beat their way onward, still more cautiously, in little crawling lines of three or four. It reminded Troy of "playing Indian" in his infancy.

"Careful ... watch out for 'em ..." the soldier next to him whispered, clutching his arm at a noise in the underbrush; and Troy's heart jerked back violently, though his legs were still pressing forward.

They were here, then: they might be close by in the blackness, behind the next tree-hole, in the next clump of bushes—the destroyers of France, old M. Gantier's murderers, the enemy to whom Paul Gantier had given his life! These thoughts slipped confusedly through Troy's mind, scarcely brushing it with a chill wing. His

main feeling was one of a base physical fear, and of a newly-awakened moral energy which had the fear by the throat and held it down with shaking hands. Which of the two would conquer, how many yards farther would the resolute Troy drag on the limp coward through this murderous wood? That was the one thing that mattered....

At length they dropped down into a kind of rocky hollow overhung with bushes, and lay there, finger on trigger, hardly breathing. "Sleep a bit if you can—you look beat," whispered the friendly soldier.

Sleep!

Troy's mind was whirling like a machine in a factory blazing with lights. His thoughts rushed back over the miles he had travelled since he had caught up the rifle by the roadside.

"My God!" he suddenly thought, "what am I doing here, anyhow? I'm a deserter."

Yes: that was the name he would go by if ever his story became known. And how should it not become known? He had deserted—deserted not only his job, and his ambulance, and Jacks, who might come back at any moment—it was a dead certainty to him now that Jacks would come back—but also (incredible perfidy!) the poor worn-out old couple and the wounded territorial who had crawled into the ambulance. He, Troy Belknap, United States Army Ambulance driver, and sworn servant of France, had deserted three sick and helpless people who, if things continued to go badly, would almost certainly fall into the hands of the Germans.... It was too horrible to think of, and so, after a minute or two, he ceased to think of it—at least with the surface of his mind.

"If it's a court-martial it's a court-martial," he reflected; and began to stretch his ears again for the sound of men slipping up in the darkness through the bushes....

But he was really horribly tired, and in the midst of the tension the blaze of lights in his head went out, and he fell into a half-conscious doze. When he started into full

consciousness again the men were stirring, and he became aware that the sergeant was calling for volunteers.

Volunteers for what? He didn't know and was afraid to ask. But it became clear to him that the one chance to wash his guilt away (was that funny old-fashioned phrase a quotation, and where did it come from?) was to offer himself for the job, whatever it might be.

The decision once taken, he became instantly calm, happy and alert. He observed the gesture made by the other volunteers and imitated it. It was too dark for the sergeant to distinguish one man from another, and without comment he let Troy fall into the line of men who were creeping up out of the hollow.

The awful cannonade had ceased, and as they crawled along single file between the trees the before-dawn twitter of birds rained down on them like dew, and the woods smelt like the woods at home.

They came to the end of the trees, and guessed that the dark wavering wall ahead was the edge of a wheat-field. Some one whispered that the Marne was just beyond the wheat-field, and that the red flares they saw must be over Château-Thierry.

The momentary stillness laid a reassuring touch on Troy's nerves, and he slipped along adroitly at the tail of the line, alert but cool. Far off the red flares still flecked the darkness, but they did not frighten him. He said to himself: "People are always afraid in their first battle. I'm not the least afraid, so I suppose this is not a battle" ... and at the same moment there was a small shrieking explosion followed by a horrible rattle of projectiles that seemed to spring up out of the wheat at their feet.

The men dropped on their bellies and crawled away from it, and Troy crawled after, sweating with fear. He had not looked back, but he knew that some of the men must be lying where they had dropped, and suddenly it occurred to him that it was his business to go and see....

Was it, though? Or would that be disobeying orders again?

The Ambulance driver's instinct awoke in him, and he did not stop to consider, but turned and crawled back, straight back to the place that the horrible explosion had come from. The firing had stopped, but in the thin darkness he saw a body lying in front of him in the flattened wheat. He looked in the direction from which he had come, and saw that the sergeant and the rest of the men were disappearing to the right; then he ramped forward again, forward and forward, till he touched the arm of the motionless man and whispered: "Hi, kid, it's me...."

He tried to rouse the wounded man, to pull him forward, to tow him like a barge along the beaten path in the wheat. But the man groaned and resisted. He was evidently in great pain, and Troy, whom a year's experience in ambulance work had enlightened, understood that he must either be carried away or left where he was.

To carry him it was necessary to stand up, and the night was growing transparent, and the wheat was not more than waist high.

Troy raised his head an inch or two and looked about him. In the east, beyond the wheat, a pallor was creeping upward, drowning the last stars. Any one standing up would be distinctly visible against that pallor. With a sense of horror and reluctance and dismay he lifted the wounded man and stood up. As he did so he felt a small tap on his back, between the shoulders, as if some one had touched him from behind. He half turned to see who it was, and doubled up, slipping down with the wounded soldier in his arms.

XII

Troy, burning with fever, lay on a hospital bed.

He was not very clear where the hospital was, nor how he had got there; and he did not greatly care. All that was left of clearness in his brain was filled with the bitter sense of his failure. He had abandoned his job to plunge into battle, and before he had seen a German or fired a shot he found himself ignominiously laid by the heels

in a strange place full of benevolent-looking hypocrites whose least touch hurt him a million times more than the German bullet.

It was all a stupid agitating muddle, in the midst of which he tried in vain to discover what had become of Jacks, what had happened to the ambulance, and whether the old people and the wounded territorial had been heard of. He insisted particularly on the latter point to the cruel shaved faces that were always stooping over him, but they seemed unable to give him a clear answer—or else their cruelty prompted them to withhold what they knew. He groaned and tossed and got no comfort, till, suddenly opening his eyes, he found Jacks sitting by his bed.

He poured out his story to Jacks in floods and torrents: there was no time to listen to what his friend had to say. He went in and out of the whole business with him, explaining, arguing, and answering his own arguments. Jacks, passive and bewildered, sat by the bed and murmured: "All right—all right" at intervals. Then he too disappeared, giving way to other unknown faces.

The third night (some one said it was the third night) the fever dropped a little. Troy felt more quiet, and Jacks, who had turned up again, sat beside him, and told him all the things he had not been able to listen to the first day—all the great things in which he had played an unconscious part.

"Battle of the Marne? Sure you were in it—in it up to the hilt, you lucky kid!"

And what a battle it had been! The Americans had taken Vaux and driven the Germans back across the bridge at Château-Thierry, the French were pressing hard on their left flank, the advance on Paris had been checked—and the poor old couple and the territorial in the ambulance had not fallen into enemy hands, but had been discovered by Jacks where Troy had left them, and hurried off to places of safety the same night.

As Troy lay and listened, tears of weakness and joy ran down his face. The Germans were back across the Marne, and he had really been in the action that had sent them

there! The road to Paris was barred—and Sophy Wicks was somewhere in France.... He felt as light as a feather, and if it had not been for his deathly weakness he would have jumped out of bed and insisted on rejoining the ambulance. But as it was he could only lie flat and feebly return Jacks's grin....

There was just one thing he had not told Jacks: a little thing that Jacks would not have understood. Out in the wheat, when he had felt that tap on the shoulder, he had turned round quickly, thinking that a friend had touched him. At the same instant he had stumbled and fallen, and his eyes had grown dark; but through the darkness he still felt confusedly that a friend was near, if only he could lift his lids and look.

He did lift them at last; and there in the dawn he saw a French soldier, haggard and battle-worn, looking down at him. The soldier wore the uniform of the chasseurs à pied, and his face was the face of Paul Gantier, bending low and whispering: "Mon petit—mon pauvre petit gars...." Troy heard the words distinctly, he knew the voice as well as he knew his mother's. His eyes shut again, but he felt Gantier's arms under his body, felt himself lifted, lifted, till he seemed to float in the arms of his friend.

He said nothing of that to Jacks or any one, and now that the fever had dropped he was glad he had held his tongue. Some one told him that a sergeant of the chasseurs à pied had found him and brought him in to the nearest poste de secours, where Jacks, providentially, had run across him and carried him back to the base. They told him that his rescue had been wonderful, but that nobody knew what the sergeant's name was, or where he had gone to.... ("If ever a man ought to have had the Croix de Guerre—!" one of the nurses interjected emotionally.)

Troy listened and shut his lips. It was really none of his business to tell these people where the sergeant had gone to; but he smiled a little when the doctor said: "Chances are a man like that hasn't got much use for decorations ..." and when the emotional nurse added: "Well, you must just devote the rest of your life to trying to find him."

Ah, yes, he would do that, Troy swore—he would do it on the battlefields of France.

THE END

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