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THE HOSTS OF THE AIR

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The Hosts of the Air:

Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE TRENCH

A young man was shaving. His feet rested upon a broad plank embedded in mud, and the tiny glass in which he saw himself hung upon a wall of raw, reeking earth. A sky, somber and leaden, arched above him, and now and then flakes of snow fell in the sodden trench, but John Scott went on placidly with his task.

The face that looked back at him had been changed greatly in the last six months. The smoothness of early youth was gone —for the time—and serious lines showed about the mouth and eyes. His cheeks were thinner and there was a slight sinking at the temples, telling of great privations, and of dangers endured. But the features were much stronger. The six months had been in effect six years. The boy of Dresden had become the man of the trenches.

He finished, rubbed his hand over his face to satisfy himself that the last trace of young beard and mustache was gone, put away his shaving materials in a little niche that he had dug with his own hands in the wall of the trench, and turned to the

Englishman.

"Am I all right, Carstairs?" he asked.

"You do very well. There's mud on your boots, but I suppose you can't help it. The melting snow in our trench makes soggy footing in spite of all we can do. But you're trim, Scott. That new gray uniform with the blue threads running through it becomes you. All the Strangers are thankful for the change. It's a great improvement over those long blue coats and baggy red trousers."

"But we don't have any chance to show 'em," said Wharton, who sat upon a small stool, reading a novel. "Did I ever think that war would come to this? Buried while yet alive! A few feet of cold and muddy trench in which to pass one's life! This is an English story I'm reading. The lovely *Lady Ermentrude* and the gallant *Sir Harold* are walking in the garden among the roses, and he's about to ask her the great question. There are roses, roses, and the deep green grass and greener oaks everywhere, with the soft English shadows coming and going over them. The birds are singing in the boughs. I suppose they're nightingales, but do nightingales sing in the daytime? And when I shut my book I see only walls of raw, red earth, and a floor, likewise of earth, but stickier and more hideous. Even the narrow strip of sky above our heads is the color of lead, and has nothing soft about it."

"If you'll stand up straight," said John, "maybe you'll see the rural landscape for which you're evidently longing."

"And catch a German bullet between the eyes! Not for me. While I was taking a trip down to the end of our line this morning

I raised my head by chance above the edge of the trench, and quick as a wink a sharpshooter cut off one of my precious brown locks. I could have my hair trimmed that way if I were patient and careful enough. Ah, here comes a messenger!"

They heard a roar that turned to a shriek, and caught a fleeting glimpse of a black shadow passing over their heads. Then a huge shell burst behind them, and the air was filled with hissing fragments of steel. But in their five feet of earth they were untouched, although horrible fumes as of lyddite or some other hideous compound assailed them.

"This is the life," said Wharton, resuming his usual cheerfulness. "I take back what I said about our beautiful trench. Just now I appreciate it more than I would the greenest and loveliest landscape in England or all America. Oh, it's a glorious trench! A splendid fortress for weak human flesh, finer than any castle that was ever built!"

"Don't be dithyrambic, Wharton," said Carstairs. "Besides the change is too sudden. It hasn't been a minute since you were pouring abuse upon our safe and happy little trench."

"It's time for the Germans to begin," said John, looking at his watch. "We'd better lie close for the next hour."

They heard the shrieking of more shells and soon the whole earth rocked with the fire of the great guns. The hostile trenches were only a few hundred yards in front of them, but the German batteries all masked, or placed in pits, were much further away. The French cannon were stationed in like fashion behind their

own trenches.

John and his comrades, for the allotted hour, hugged the side of the trench nearest to the Germans. The shells from the heavy guns came at regular intervals. Far in the rear men were killed and others were wounded, but no fragment of steel dropped in their trench. There was not much danger unless one of the shells should burst almost directly over their heads, and they were so used to these bombardments that they paid little attention to them, except to keep close as long as they lasted.

Wharton resumed his novel, Carstairs, sitting on one end of a rude wooden bench, began a game of solitaire, and John, at the other end, gave himself over to dreaming, which the regulated thunder of many cannon did not disturb at all.

It had been months now since he had parted with Philip and Julie Lannes. He had seen Philip twice since, but Julie not at all When the German army made a successful stand near the river Aisne, and both sides went into trenches, Lannes had come in the *Arrow* and, in reply to John's restrained but none the less eager questions, had said that Julie was safe in Paris again with her mother, Antoine Picard and the faithful Suzanne. She had wanted to return to the front as a Red Cross nurse, but Madame Lannes would not let her go.

A month later he saw Lannes again and Julie was still in the capital, but he inferred from Philip's words rather than his tone that she was impatient. Thousands of French girls were at the front, attending to the wounded, and sharing hardship and

danger. John knew that Julie had a will like her brother's and he believed that, in time, she would surely come again to the battle lines.

The thought made him smile, and he felt a light glow pass over his face. He knew it was due to the belief that he would see Julie once more, and yet the trenches now extended about four hundred miles across Northern France and Belgium. The chances seemed a hundred to one against her arrival in the particular trench, honored by the presence of the Strangers, but John felt that in reality they were a hundred to one in favor of it. He wished it so earnestly that it must come true.

"You're smiling, Scott," said Carstairs. "A good honest English penny for your thoughts."

"What do I care for money? What could I do with it if I had it, held here between walls of mud only four feet apart?"

"At least," interrupted Wharton, "the high cost of living is not troubling us. Next month's rent may come from where it pleases. It doesn't bother me."

A messenger turned the angle of the trench and summoned John to the presence of his commander, Captain Colton, who was about three hundred yards away. Young Scott, stooping in order to keep his head covered well, started down the trench. The artillery fire was at its height. The waves of air followed one another with great violence, and the fumes of picric acid and of other acids that he did not know became very strong. But he scarcely noticed it. The bombardment was all in the day's

work, and when the Germans ceased, the French, after a decent interval, would begin their own cannonade, carried on at equal length.

John thought little of the fire of the guns, now almost a regular affair like the striking of a clock, but force of habit kept his head down and no German sharpshooter watching in the trench opposite had a chance at him. He advanced through a vast burrow. Trenches ran parallel, and other trenches cut across them. One could wander through them for miles. Most of them were uncovered, but others had roofs, partial or complete, of thatch or boards or canvas. Many had little alcoves and shelves, dug out by the patient hands of the soldiers, and these niches contained their most precious belongings.

Back of the trenches often lay great heaps of refuse like the kitchen middens of primeval man. Attempts at coziness had achieved a little success in some places, but nearly everywhere the abode of burrowing soldiers was raw, rank and fetid. Heavy and hideous odors arose from the four hundred miles of unwashed armies. Men lived amid disease, dirt and death. Civilization built up slowly through painful centuries had come to a sudden stop, and once more they were savages in caves seeking to destroy one another.

This, at least, was the external aspect of it, but the flower of civilization was still sound at the stem. When the storm was over it would grow and bloom again amid the wreckage. French and Germans, in the intervals of battle, were often friendly with each

other. They listened to the songs of the foe, and sometimes at night they talked together. John recognized the feeling. He knew that man at the core had not really returned to a savage state, and a soldier, but not a believer in war, he looked forward to the time when the grass should grow again over the vast maze of trenches.

A shell bursting almost overhead put all such thoughts out of his mind for the present. A hot piece of metal shooting downward struck on the bottom of the trench and lay there hissing. John stepped over it and passed on.

The cannonade was at its height, and he noticed that it was heavier than usual. Perhaps the increase of volume was due to the presence of some great dignitary, the Kaiser himself maybe, or the Crown Prince, or the Chief of the General Staff. But it was only a flitting thought. The subject did not interest him much.

The sky was turning darker and the heavy flakes of snow fell faster. John looked up apprehensively. Snow now troubled him more than guns. It was no welcome visitor in the trenches where it flooded some of them so badly as it melted that the men were compelled to move.

As he walked along he was hailed by many friendly voices. He was well known in that part of the gigantic burrow, and the adaptable young American had become a great favorite, not only with the Strangers, but with his French comrades. Fleury, coming out of a transverse cut, greeted him. The Savoyard had escaped during the fighting on the Aisne, and had rejoined the command of General Vaugirard, wounded in the arm, but now recovered.

"Duty?" he said to John.

"Yes. Captain Colton has sent for me, but I don't know what he wants."

"Don't get yourself captured again. Twice is enough."

"I won't. There isn't much taking of prisoners while both sides keep to their holes."

Fleury disappeared in one of the earthy aisles, and John went on, turning a little later into an aisle also, and arriving at Captain Cotton's post.

Daniel Colton had for his own use a wooden bench three feet long, set in an alcove dug in the clay. Some boards and the arch of the earth formed an uncertain shelter. An extra uniform hung against the wall of earth, and he also had a tiny looking-glass and shaving materials. He was as thin and dry as ever, addicted to the use of words of one syllable, and sparing even with them.

John saluted. He had a great respect and liking for his captain.

"Sit down," said Captain Colton, making room on the bench.

John sat.

"Know well a man named Weber?"

"Yes," replied John in surprise. He had not thought of the Alsatian in days, and yet they had been together in some memorable moments.

"Thought you'd say so. Been here an hour. Asks for you. Must see you, he says."

"I'll be glad to meet him again, sir. I've a regard for him. We've shared some great dangers. You've heard that he was in

the armored automobile with Carstairs, Wharton and myself that time we ran it into the river?"

Captain Colton nodded.

"Then we were captured and both escaped during the fighting along the Marne. Lannes took me away in his aeroplane, but we missed Weber. I thought, though, that he'd get back to us, and I'm glad, very glad that he's here."

"See him now," said Colton, "and find out what he wants."

He blew a whistle, and an orderly appeared, saluting.

"Bring Weber," said the captain.

The orderly returned with Weber, the two coming from one of the narrow aisles, and John rose impulsively to meet the Alsatian. But before offering his hand Weber saluted the captain.

"Go ahead. Tell all," said Colton briefly.

Weber first shook John's hand warmly. Evidently he had not been living the life of the trenches, as he looked fresh, and his cheeks were full of color. His gray uniform, with the blue threads through it, was neat and clean, and his black pointed beard was trimmed like that of a painter with money.

"We're old comrades in war, Mr. Scott," he said, "and I'm glad, very glad to find you again. You and Lannes left me rather abruptly that time near the Marne, but it was the only thing you could do. If by an effort of the mind I could have sent a wireless message to you I'd have urged you to instant flight. I hid in the bushes, in time reached one of our armies, and since then I've been a bearer of dispatches along the front. I heard some time

back that you were still alive, but my duty hitherto has kept me from seeing you. Now, it sends me to you."

His tone, at first eager and joyous, as was fitting in an old friend meeting an old friend, now became very grave, and John looked at him with some apprehension. Captain Colton motioned to a small stool.

"Sit down," he said to Weber. Then he offered the Alsatian a match and a cigarette which were accepted gratefully. He made the same offer to John, who shook his head saying that he did not smoke. The captain took two or three deliberate puffs, and contemplated Weber who had made himself comfortable on the stool.

"Military duty?" he asked. "If so, Scott's concern is my concern too."

"That is quite true, Captain Colton," said Weber, respectfully. "As Mr. Scott is under your command you have a right to know what message I bring."

"Knew you'd see it," said Colton, taking another puff at his cigarette. "There! Germans have ceased firing!"

"And our men begin!" said John.

The moment the distant German thunder ceased the French reply, nearer at hand and more like a rolling crash, began. It would continue about an hour, that is until nightfall, unless the heavy clouds and falling snow brought darkness much earlier than usual. The flakes were coming faster, but the three were protected from them by the rude board shelter. John again

glanced anxiously at Weber. He felt that his news was of serious import.

"I saw your friend Lieutenant Philip Lannes about three weeks ago at a village called Catreaux, lying sixty miles west of us," said Weber. "He had just made a long flight from the west, where he had observed much of the heavy fighting around Ypres, and also had been present when the Germans made their great effort to break through to Dunkirk and Calais. I hear that he had more than a messenger's share in these engagements, throwing some timely bombs."

"Was he well when you saw him?" asked John. "He had not been hurt? He had not been in any accident?"

"He was in the best of health, bard and fit. But his activities in the *Arrow* had diminished recently. Snow, rain, icy hail make difficulties and dangers for aviators. But we wander. He had not heard from his mother, Madame Lannes, or his sister, the beautiful Mademoiselle Julie, for a long time, and he seemed anxious about them."

"He himself took Mademoiselle Julie back to Paris in the *Arrow,"* said John.

"So he told me. They arrived safely, as you know, but Lannes was compelled to leave immediately for the extreme western front. The operations there were continuous and so exacting that he has been unable to return to Paris. He has not heard from his mother and sister in more than two months, and his great anxiety about them is quite natural."

"But since the retreat of the Germans there is no danger in Paris save from an occasional bomb."

"No. But a few days after seeing Lannes my own duties as a messenger carried me back to Paris, and I took it upon myself to visit Lannes' house. I had two objects, both I hope justifiable. I wanted to take to them good news of Lannes and I wanted to take to Lannes good news of them."

"You found them there?" said John, his anxiety showing in his tone.

"I did. But a letter from Lannes, by good luck, had just come through the day before. It was a noble letter. It expressed the fine spirit of that brave young man, a spirit universal now throughout France. He said the fighting had been so severe and the wounded were so many that all Frenchwomen who had the skill and strength to help must come to the hospitals, where the hurt in scores of thousands were lying."

"Did he mention any point to which she was to come?"

"A village just behind the fortress of Verdun. To say that she was willing was not enough. A great spirit, a magnificent spirit, Mr. Scott. The soul of chivalry may dwell in the heart of a young girl. She was eager to go. Madame, her mother, would have gone too, but she was ill, so she remained in the house, while the beautiful Mademoiselle Julie departed with the great peasant, Antoine Picard, and his daughter Suzanne."

"Do you know how they went?"

"By rail, I think, as far as they could go, and thence they were

to travel by motor to the tiny village of Chastel, their destination. Knowing your interest in Mademoiselle Julie, I thought it would not displease you to hear this. Chastel is no vast distance from this point."

A blush would have been visible on John's face had he not been tanned so deeply, but he felt no resentment. Captain Colton took his cigarette from his lips and said tersely:

"Every man likes a pretty face. Man who doesn't—no man at all."

"I agree with you, Captain Colton," said Weber heartily. "When I no longer notice a beautiful woman I think it will be time for me to die. But I take no liberty, sir, when I say that in all the garden of flowers Mademoiselle Julie Lannes is the rarest and loveliest. She is the delicate and opening rose touched at dawn with pearly dew."

"A poet, Weber! A poet!" interjected Captain Colton.

"No, sir, I but speak the truth," said Weber seriously. "Mademoiselle Julie Lannes, though a young girl but yet, promises to become the most beautiful woman in Europe, and beauty carries with it many privileges. Men may have political equality, but women can never have an equality of looks."

"Right, Weber," said Captain Colton.

John's pulses had begun to leap. Julie was coming back to the front, and she would not be so far away. Some day he might see her again. But he felt anxiety.

"Is the journey to Chastel safe, after she leaves the railway?"

he asked of Weber.

"Is anything safe now?"

"Nothing in Europe," interjected Captain Colton.

"But I don't think Mademoiselle Lannes will incur much danger," said Weber. "It's true, roving bands of Uhlans or hussars sometimes pass in our rear, but it's likely that she and other French girls going to the front march under strong escort."

His tone was reassuring, but his words left John still troubled.

"My object in telling you of Mademoiselle Lannes' movements, Mr. Scott," continued Weber, "was to enable you to notify Lieutenant Lannes of her exact location in case you should see him. Knowing your great friendship I thought it inevitable that you two should soon meet once more. If so, tell him that his sister is at Chastel. He will be glad to know of her arrival and, work permitting, will hurry to her there."

"Gladly I'll do it," said John. "I wish I could see Philip now."

But when he said "Philip" he was thinking of Julie, although the bond of friendship between him and young Lannes had not diminished one whit.

"And now," said Weber, "with Captain Colton's permission I'll go. My duties take me southward, and night is coming fast."

"And it will be dark, cold and snowy," said John, shivering a little. "These trenches are not exactly palace halls, but I'd rather be in them now than out there on such a night."

The dusk had come and the French fire was dying. In a few more minutes it would cease entirely, and then the French hour

with the guns having matched the German hour, the night would be without battle.

But the silence that succeeded the thunder of the guns was somber. In all that terrible winter John had not seen a more forbidding night. The snow increased and with it came a strong wind that reached them despite their shelter. The muddy trenches began to freeze lightly, but the men's feet broke through the film of ice and they walked in an awful slush. It seemed impossible that the earth could ever have been green and warm and sunny, and that Death was not always sitting at one's elbow.

The darkness was heavy, but nevertheless as they talked they did not dare to raise their heads above the trenches. The German searchlights might blaze upon them at any moment, showing the mark for the sharpshooters. But Captain Colton pressed his electric torch and the three in the earthy alcove saw one another well.

"Will you go to Chastel yourself?" asked John of Weber.

"Not at present. I bear a message which takes me in the Forest of Argonne, but I shall return along this line in a day or two, and it may be that I can reach the village. If so, I shall tell Mademoiselle Julie and the Picards that I have seen you here, and perhaps I can communicate also with Lannes."

"I thank you for your kindness in coming to tell me this."

"It was no more than I should have done. I knew you would be glad to hear, and now, with your permission, Captain Colton, I'll go."

"Take narrow, transverse trench, leading south. Good of you to see us," said the captain of the Strangers.

The Alsatian shook hands with John and disappeared in the cut which led a long distance from the front. Colton extinguished the torch and the two sat a little while in the darkness. Although vast armies faced one another along a front of four hundred miles, little could be heard where John and his captain sat, save the sighing of the wind and the faint sound made by the steady fall of the snow, which was heaping up at their feet.

Not a light shone in the trench. John knew that innumerable sentinels were on guard, striving to see and hear, but a million or two million men lay buried alive there, while the snow drifted down continually. The illusion that the days of primeval man had come back was strong upon him again. They had become, in effect, cave-dwellers once more, and their chief object was to kill. He listened to the light swish of the snow, and thought of the blue heights into which he had often soared with Lannes.

Captain Colton lighted another cigarette and it glowed in the dark.

"Uncanny," he said.

"I find it more so than usual tonight," said John. "Maybe it's the visit of Weber that makes me feel that way, recalling to me that I was once a man, a civilized human being who bathed regularly and who put on clean clothes at frequent intervals."

"Such days may come again—for some of us."

"So they may. But it's ghastly here, holed up like animals for

the winter."

"Comparison not fair to animals. They choose snug dens. Warm leaves and brush all about 'em."

"While we lie or stand in mud or snow. After all, Captain, the animals have more sense in some ways than we. They kill one another only for food, while we kill because of hate or ignorance."

"Mostly ignorance."

"I suppose so. Hear that! It's a pleasant sound."

"So it is. Makes me think of home."

Some one further down the trench was playing a mouth organ. It was merely a thin stream of sound, but it had a soft seductive note. The tune was American, a popular air. It was glorified so far away and in such terrible places, and John suddenly grew sick for home and the pleasant people in the sane republic beyond the seas. But he crushed the emotion and listened in silence as the player played on.

"A hundred of those little mouth-organs reached our brigade this morning," said Colton. "Men in the trenches must have something to lift up their minds, and little things outside current of war will do it."

It was a long speech for him to make and John felt its truth, but he atoned for it by complete silence while they listened to many tunes, mostly American, played on the mouth-organ. John's mind continually went back to the great republic overseas, so safe and so sane. While he was listening to the thin tinkle in the dark and

snowy trench his friends were going to the great opera house in New York to hear "Aida" or "Lohengrin" maybe. And yet he would not have been back there. The wish did not occur to him. Through the dark and the snow he saw the golden hair and the deep blue eyes of Julie Lannes float before him, and it pleased him too to think that he was a minute part in the huge event now shaking the world.

A sudden white light blazed through the snow, and then was gone, like a flash of lightning.

"German searchlight seeking us out," said Colton.

"I wonder what they want," said John. "They can't be thinking of a rush on such a night as this."

"Don't know, but must be on guard. Better return to your station and warn everybody as you go along. You can use your torch, but hold it low."

As John walked back he saw by the light of his little electric torch men sound asleep on the narrow shelves they had dug in the side of the trench, their feet and often a shoulder covered with the drifting snow. Strange homes were these fitted up with the warriors' arms and clothes, and now and then with some pathetic little gift from home.

He met other men on guard like himself walking up and down the trench and also carrying similar torches. He found Carstairs and Wharton still awake, and occupied as they were when he had left them.

"What was it, Scott?" asked Carstairs. "Has the British army

taken Berlin?"

"No, nor has the German army taken London."

"Good old London! I'd like to drop down on it for a while just now."

"They say that at night it's as black as this trench. Zeppelins!"

"I could find my way around it in the dark. I'd go to the Ritz or the Carlton and order the finest dinner for three that the most experienced chef ever heard of. You don't know how good a dinner I can give—if I only have the money. I invite you both to become my guests in London as soon as this war is over and share my gustatory triumph."

"I accept," said John.

"And I too," said Wharton, "though we may have to send to Berlin for our captive host."

"Never fear," said Carstairs. "I wasn't born to be taken. What did Captain Colton want with you, Scott, if it's no great military or state secret?"

"To see Fernand Weber, the Alsatian, whom you must remember."

"Of course we recall him! Didn't we take that dive in the river together? But he's an elusive chap, regular will-o'-the-wisp, messenger and spy of ours, and other things too, I suppose."

"He's done me some good turns," said John. "Been pretty handy several times when I needed a handy man most. He brought news that Mademoiselle Julie Lannes and her servants, the Picards, father and daughter, are on their way to or are at

Chastel, a little village not far from here, where the French have established a huge hospital for the wounded. She left Paris in obedience to a letter from her brother, and we are to tell Philip if we should happen to see him."

"Pretty girl! Deucedly pretty!" said Carstairs.

"I don't think the somewhat petty adjective 'pretty' is at all adequate," said John with dignity.

"Maybe not," said Carstairs, noticing the earnest tone in his comrade's voice. "She's bound to become a splendid woman. Is Weber still with the captain?"

"No, he's gone on his mission, whatever it is."

"A fine night for travel," said Wharton sardonically. "A raw wind, driving snow, pitchy darkness, slush and everything objectionable underfoot. Yet I'd like to be in Weber's place. A curse upon the man who invented life in the trenches! Of all the dirty, foul, squalid monotony it is this!"

"You'll have to curse war first," said John. "War made the trench."

"Here comes a man with an electric torch," said Carstairs. "Something is going to happen in our happy lives."

They saw the faint glimmer of the torch held low, and an orderly arrived with a message from Captain Colton, commanding them to wake everybody and to stand to their arms. Then the orderly passed quickly on with similar orders for others.

"Old Never Sleep," said Carstairs, referring to Colton, "thinks we get too much rest. Why couldn't he let us tuck ourselves away

in our mud on a night like this?"

"I fancy it's not restlessness," said John. "The order doubtless comes from a further and higher source. Good old Papa Vaugirard is not more than a quarter of a mile away."

"I hear they had to enlarge the trench for him," grumbled Carstairs. "He's always bound to keep us stirring."

"But he watches over us like a father. They say his troops are in the best condition of all."

The three young men traveled about the vast burrow along the main trenches, the side trenches and those connecting. The order to be on guard was given everywhere, and the men dragged themselves from their sodden beds. Then they took their rifles and were ready. But it was dark save for the glimmer of the little pocket electrics.

The task finished, the three returned to their usual position. John did not know what to expect. It might be a device of Papa Vaugirard to drag them out of a dangerous lethargy, but he did not think so. A kind heart dwelled in the body of the huge general, and he would not try them needlessly on a wild and sullen night. But whatever the emergency might be the men were ready and on the right of the Strangers was that Paris regiment under Bougainville. What a wonderful man Bougainville had proved himself to be! Fiery and yet discreet, able to read the mind of the enemy, liked by his men whom nevertheless he led where the danger was greatest. John was glad that the Paris regiment lay so close.

"Nothing is going to happen," said Carstairs. "Why can't I lay me down on my little muddy shelf and go to sleep? Nobody would send a dog out on such a night!"

"Man will often go where a dog won't," said Wharton, sententiously.

"And the night is growing worse," continued Carstairs. "Hear that wind howl! Why, it's driving the snow before it in sheets! The trenches won't dry out in a week!"

"You might be worth hearing if you'd only quit talking and say something, Carstairs," said Wharton.

"If you obeyed that rule, Wharton, you'd be known as the dumb man."

John stood up straight and looked over the trench toward the German lines, where he saw nothing. The night filled with so much driving snow had become a kind of white gloom, less penetrable than the darkness.

Only that shifting white wall met his gaze, and listen as he would, he could hear nothing. The feeling of something sinister and uncanny, something vast and mighty returned. Man had made war for ages, but never before on so huge a scale.

"Well, Sister Anna, otherwise John Scott, make your report," said Carstairs lightly. "What do you see?"

"Only a veil of snow so thick that my eyes can't penetrate it."

"And that's all you will see. Papa Vaugirard is a good man and he cares for his many children, but he's making a mistake tonight."

"I think not," said John, dropping suddenly back into the trench. A blinding white glare, cutting through the gloom of the snow, had dazzled him for a moment.

"The searchlight again!" exclaimed Wharton.

"And it means something," said John.

The blaze, whiter and more intense than usual, played for a few minutes over the French trenches, sweeping to right and left and back again and then dying away at a far distant point. After it came the same white gloom and deep silence.

"Just a way of greeting," said Carstairs.

"I think not," said John. "Papa Vaugirard makes few mistakes. To my mind the intensity of the silence is sinister. Often we hear the Germans singing in their trenches, but now we hear nothing."

Another half-hour of the long and trying waiting followed. Then the white light flared again for a moment, and powerful lights behind the French lines flared back, but did not go out. The great beams, shooting through the white gloom, disclosed masses of men in gray uniforms and spiked helmets rushing forward.

CHAPTER II
THE YOUNG AUSTRIAN

It seemed to John that the heavy German masses were almost upon them, when they were revealed in the glare of the searchlights, sweeping forward in solid masses, and uttering a tremendous hurrah. But the French lights continued to throw an intense vivid white blaze over the advancing columns, broad German faces and stalwart German figures standing out vividly. Officers, reckless of death, waving their swords and shouting the word of command, led them on.

The French field guns behind their trenches opened, sending showers of missiles over their heads and into the charging ranks, and the trenches themselves blazed with the fire of the rifles.

"A surprise that isn't a surprise?" shouted Carstairs. "They thought to catch us napping in the night and the snow!"

The battle spread with astonishing rapidity over a front of more than a mile, and in the driving snow and white gloom it assumed a frightful character. The German guns fired for a little while over their troops at the French artillery beyond, but soon ceased lest they pour shells into their own men, and the heavy French batteries ceased also, lest they, too, mow down friend as well as foe. But the light machine guns posted in the trenches kept up a rapid and terrible crackle. The front lines of the Germans

were cut down again and again, always to be replaced by fresh men, who unflinchingly exposed their bodies to the deadly hail.

"The massed attack!" exclaimed Wharton. "What courage! Nobody was ever more willing to die for victory than these Germans!"

Even in the moment of danger and utmost excitement he could not refuse tribute to the enemy. Nevertheless he snatched up a rifle and was firing as fast as he could into the gray ranks. John and Carstairs were doing the same and the trench held by the Strangers was a continuous red blaze. There was so much fire and smoke and so much whirling snow that John could not see clearly. He was a prey to illusions. Now the Germans were apparently at the very edge of the trench, and then they were further away than he had first seen them. The white gloom was shot with a red haze, and the shouts of soldiers, the commands of officers and groans of wounded were mingled in a terrible turmoil of sound. But John knew that the Germans would be driven tack. Only surprise could have enabled them to win, and the vigilance of the French scouts had put their commanders on guard.

Captain Colton walked up and down the trench, his face ghastly white, although it was the flare of the searchlight and not any retreat of the blood that made it so. Now and then under the frightful crash of the rifles and machine guns he addressed brief words of warning and encouragement to his men:

"Don't raise your heads too high! Keep cool! Aim at something! Here they come again! Fire low!"

All of John's pulses were throbbing hard with excitement. He wished the Germans would go back, and his wish was prompted —less by the desire of victory than the sickening of his soul at so much slaughter. Why would their leaders continue to hurl these simple and honest peasants upon that invincible line of rifles and machine guns? The dead and wounded were piling up fast in the driving snow, but the willing servants of an emperor came on as steadily as ever to be killed. So much slaughter for so little purpose! The height of battle, excitement and danger, could not keep him from thinking of it.

Occasionally a man fell in the trench and lay in the mud and snow, but the others never ceased for a moment to send bullets into the gray masses which fell back only to come on again. Nothing but modern weapons, machine guns from which missiles fairly flowed in an unending stream, and rifles which a man fired as fast as he could pull the trigger could check them. "Why don't they stop! Why don't they stop!" John was shouting to himself through burned lips, and again he shuddered with sick horror, when he saw a whole line of men blown away, as if they had been grain swept by a tornado.

Once they came to the very edge of the trench to be slain there, and the body of a German fell in at John's very feet. He never knew how many times they charged, but human flesh and blood must yield, in the end, before unyielding steel, and at last through the crash and confusion the notes of trumpets sounded. Then the German masses melted away and the heavy white gloom once

more enveloped the ground before the trenches from which came faint cries. The wounded lay thickly there with the dead, but neither side dared to go for them. An upright human figure would draw at once a hail of bullets.

Several machine guns still purred and crackled, but no reply came. Presently they, too, ceased, and the silence in front was complete, save for the faint groans and the swish of the drifting snow. John shivered, and it was not with cold. His feeling of horror was increasing. Many men had been killed and as many maimed, and he was sure that all of them had fallen for nothing.

"It's a victory," said Carstairs, "isolated and detached, but a victory nevertheless."

"So it is," said John, "but it's just a little segment on a vast curving line of four hundred miles. Maybe the Germans have taken a trench somewhere else."

"And maybe we have, at yet another point. This isn't much like the war we've read about, is it, Scott? A great battlefield, vast batteries blazing, long lines of infantry in brilliant uniforms advancing, twenty thousand cavalry charging at the gallop the earth reeling under the hoofs of their horses!"

"No, it's just murder in the dark."

"But a black night would oppress me less than the ghastly whitish glare of the snow. I can't see a thing out there, Scott, but those low sounds I hear appall me."

The wind and the fall of snow alike were increasing in violence. The great flakes poured in a feathery storm into the

trench, and, before them, all things were hidden. John knew, too, that it was covering the many dead in their front with a blanket of white and that the wounded who were unable to crawl back would probably lie frozen beneath it in the morning. Once more that shiver of horror and utter repulsion seized him. Despite himself, he could not control it, and he merely remained quiet until his nerves became steady again.

But a low moaning just beyond the trench held his attention. It did not seem to him that it was more than a dozen feet away, and he felt a great sympathy and pity. He did not doubt that some German boy hurt terribly lay almost within reach of his arm. He moved once in order that he might not hear the dreadful sound, but an irresistible attraction drew him back. Then he heard it more plainly, but the thick pouring snow covered all things.

"Carstairs," he said, "I'm going to get a wounded man out there. I just can't stand it any longer."

"Don't be foolish. They may send a volley at any time through the snow, and one of their bullets is likely to get you."

"I'll chance it."

"It's against orders."

"I'm going anyhow. Maybe I've suddenly grown squeamish, but I mean to save that wounded German from freezing to death."

"Stop, Scott! You mustn't risk your life this way. I'll report you to Captain Colton!"

But it was too late. John had climbed up the side of the trench, and, standing in the deep snow, was feeling about for the one who

groaned. Guided by the sound his hands soon touched a human body.

The fallen man was lying on his side and he was already half buried in the snow. John ran his hand along his arm and shoulder, and felt cold thick blood, clotting his sleeve. But he was yet alive, because he groaned again, and John believed from the quality of his voice that he was very young. The hurt was in the shoulder and the loss of blood had been great.

He knelt beside the wounded lad and spoke to him in English and French, and in German that he had learned recently. A faint reply came; but it was too low for him to understand. Then he knelt in the snow beside him and was just barely able to see that he had a blond youth younger than himself. Shots came from the German line as he knelt there, but they were merely random bullets whistling through the snowy gloom. He was made of tenacious material, and the danger from the flying bullets merely confirmed him in his purpose. Moreover, he could not bear to return, and listen to those groans so near him. He grasped the young German under the shoulders and dragged him to the edge of the trench. Then he called softly:

"Carstairs, Wharton! I've got him! Help me down!"

Carstairs and Wharton appeared and Carstairs said:

"Well, you light-headed Yankee, you have come back!"

"Yes, and I've brought with me what I went after. Help me down with him. Easy there now! He's hit hard in the shoulder!"

The two lifted him into the trench and John slid after him, just

as a half-dozen random shots whistled over his head. There they drew the rescued youth into one of the alcoves dug in the wall and Carstairs flashed his electric torch on his face, revealing features boyish, delicate, and white as death now. His gray uniform was of richer material than usual and an iron cross was pinned upon his breast.

"A brave lad as the cross shows," said Carstairs, "and I should judge too from his appearance that he's of high rank. Maybe he's a prince or the son of a prince. You've already had adventures with two of them."

"One of whom I liked."

"He looks like a good fellow," said Wharton. "I'm glad you saved him. Rub his hands while I give him a taste of this."

John and Carstairs rubbed his palms until he opened his eyes, when Wharton put a flask to his lips and made him drink. He groaned again and tried to sit up.

"Just you lie still, Herr Katzenellenbogen," said Wharton. "You're in the hands of your friends, the enemy, but we're saving your life or rather it's been done already by the man on your left; name, John Scott; nationality, American; service, French."

Captain Colton appeared and threw a white light with his own electric torch upon the little group.

"What have you there?" he asked.

"Young German who lay groaning too near the edge of our trench," replied Carstairs. "Scott couldn't stand it, so he went out and brought him in. Fancy his name is Katzenellenbogen,

Kaiserslautern, Hohenfriedberg, or something else short and simple."

Captain Colton permitted himself a grim smile.

"Your act of mercy, Scott, does honor to you," he said, "though it's no part of your business to get yourself killed helping a wounded enemy. Bring him round, then send him to hospital in rear."

He walked on, continuing his inspection of the Strangers although sure that no other attack would be made that night, and the three young men applied themselves with renewed energy to the revival of their injured captive. Wharton cut the uniform away from his shoulder and, after announcing that the bullet had gone entirely through, bound up the two wounds with considerable skill. Then he gave him another but small drink out of the flask and, as they saw the color come back into his face, they felt all the pleasure of a surgeon when he sees his efforts succeed. The boy glanced at his shoulder, and then gave the three a grateful look.

"You're all right," said Carstairs cheerfully in English. "You're guest or prisoner, whichever you choose to call it and we three are your hosts or captors. My name is Carstairs and these two assistants of mine are Wharton and Scott, distant cousins, that is to say, Yankees. It was Scott who saved you."

The boy smiled faintly. He was in truth handsome with a delicate fairness one did not see often among the Germans, who were generally cast in a sterner mold.

"And I am Leopold Kratzek," he replied in good English.

"Kratzek," said John. "Ah, you're an Austrian. Now I remember there's an Austrian field-marshal of that name."

"He is my father but he is in the East. My regiment was sent with an Austrian corp to the western front. It seems that I am in great luck. My wound is not mortal, but I should certainly have frozen to death out there if one of you had not come for me."

"Scott went, of course," said Carstairs. "He's an American and naturally a tuft-hunter. He's been making a long list of princely acquaintances recently, and he was bound to bring in the son of a field-marshal and make a friend of him, too."

"Shut up, Carstairs," said John. "You talk this way to hide your own imperfections. You know that at heart every Englishman is a snob."

"Snobby is as snobby does," laughed Carstairs. "Now, Kratzek, lie back again and we'll spread these blankets over you."

The young Austrian smiled.

"I've fallen into very good company," he said.

John, whose character was serious, felt some sadness as he looked at him. He remembered those gay Viennese who had set the torch of the great war, and how merry they were over it with their visions of quick victory and glory. Poor, gay, likable, light-headed Austrians! Brave but short-sighted, they were likely to suffer more than any other nation! The fair, handsome youth, wrapped now in the blankets, seemed to him to typify all the Austrian qualities.

"You'd better go to sleep if you can," said John. "We can't move you yet, but in time you'll reach a good hospital of ours in the rear."

"I'll obey you," said Kratzek, in the most tractable manner, and closing his eyes he soon fell asleep despite his wound.

"Now, having caught your Austrian, what are you going to do with him?" said Carstairs to John.

"Nothing for the present, but later on I'll have him taken down one of the transverse trenches to a hospital. Maybe you think I'm foolish, Carstairs, but I've an idea that I've made a friend, though I didn't have that purpose in view when I went out for him. I never think that anybody hates me unless he proves it. People as a rule don't take the time and trouble to hate and plot."

"You're right, Scott. Hating is a terribly tiresome business, and I notice that you're by nature friendly."

"Which may be because I'm American."

"Oh, well, we English are friendly, too."

"But seldom polite, although I think you're unaware of the latter fact."

"If a man doesn't know he's impolite, then he isn't. It's the intention that counts."

"We'll let it go, but I've a strong premonition that this Austrian boy is going to do me a great favor some day."

"I have premonitions, too, often, but they're invariably wrong. Now, I see an orderly coming. I hope he hasn't a message from Captain Colton for us to prowl around in the snow somewhere."

Happily, the message released them from further duty that night and bade them seek rest. Young Kratzek was lying in John's bed and was sleeping. He looked so young and so pale that the heart of his captor and rescuer was moved to pity. Light-headed the Austrians might be, but no one could deny them valor.

Just beyond the niche was another and smaller one, seldom used, owing to its extreme narrowness, but John decided that he could sleep in it. At any rate, if he fell off he would land in six or eight inches of soft snow.

The flakes were still coming down heavily. It was the biggest snow that he had yet seen in Europe and he believed that it would fall all night. They had plenty of blankets and spreading two on the shelf which was no broader than himself he lay down and put two more over him.

He was in a pleasant mental glow, because he had saved young Kratzek, forgetting the rest who lay out there under the snow. All his instincts were for mercy and gentleness, but like others, he was being hardened by war, or at least he was made forgetful. Resting in the earthen side of a trench, the horrors of the battle passed out of his mind. The white gloom was so heavy there that he could not see the other wall four feet away, and the falling flakes almost grazed his face as they passed, but he had a marvelous sense of comfort and ease, even of luxury. The caveman had fared no better, often worse, because he had no blankets, and John drew a deep sigh of content.

A gun thundered somewhere far back in the German lines, and

a gun also far back in the French lines thundered in reply. Then came a random and scattering fire of rifles through the falling snow from both sides, but John was not disturbed in the least by these reports. He felt as safe in his narrow trench as if he had been a hundred miles from the field of battle, and compared, with the driving storm outside, his six feet by one of an earthen bed was all he wished. The pleasant warmth from the blankets flowed through his veins, and his limbs and senses relaxed. There was firing again, faint and from a distant point, but it was soothing now like the tune played on the little mouth-organ earlier in the evening, and he fell into a deep and peaceful slumber.

When he awoke in the morning the sun was shining in the trench, the bottom of which was covered with eight inches of snow, now slushy on top from the red beams. John felt himself restored and strong, and he stepped down into the snow and slush, having first tucked his blue-gray trousers into his high boots. He was lucky in the possession of a fine pair of boots that would turn the last drop of water, and in such times as these they were worth more than gold.

A shell screaming high overhead was his morning salutation, and then came other shells, desultory but noisy. John paid no more attention to them than if they had been distant bees buzzing. He looked at his young prisoner, Kratzek, and found that he was still sleeping, with a healthy color in his face. John was impressed anew by his youth. "Why do they let such babies come to the war?" he asked himself, but he added, "They're brave

babies, though."

"Well, he's pulling along all right," said Carstairs. "I was up before you and I learned that Captain Colton sent a surgeon in the night to examine him. Wharton had done a good job with his bandages, he admitted, but he cleaned and dressed the wound and said the patient was in such a healthy condition that he would be entirely well again in a short time. He's only a young boy, isn't he, Scott?"

"Yes, I suppose that's why I have such a fatherly feeling for him."

"That, or because you brought him in from sure death. We're always attached to anyone we save."

"I mean to have him exchanged and sent back to his mother in Austria. He's bound to have a mother there and she'll thank me though she may never see me. I wish these pleasant Austrians had more sense."

Kratzek opened his eyes and looked blankly at the two young men. He strove to rise, but fell back with a low sigh of pain. Then he closed his eyes, but John saw the muscles of his face working.

"He's trying to remember," whispered Carstairs.

Memory came back to Kratzek in a few moments, and he opened his eyes again.

"I was saved by somebody last night and I think it was you," he said, looking at John. "I want to say to you that I am very grateful. I do not wish to appear boastful, but I have relatives in both the Austrian and German armies who are very powerful—

ours is both a North German and South German house, and East German, too."

"That is, it's *wohlgeboren* and *hochwohlgeboren*," said Wharton, who appeared at that moment.

"Yes," said the Austrian boy, smiling faintly. "I am highborn and very highborn, although it's not my fault. You, I take it, by your accent, are American and these things, of course, don't count with you."

"I don't know, they seem to count pretty heavily with some of our women, if you can judge by the newspapers."

"Who are these men of whom you speak?" asked John.

"The chief is Prince Karl of Auersperg, who is not far from your front. I betray no military secret when I say that. I shall send word to him that you have saved my life, and, if you should fall a prisoner into German hands, he will do as much for you as you have done for me."

The Austrian boy did not notice the quick glances exchanged by the three, and he went on:

"Prince Karl of Auersperg is a general of ability, and owing to that and his very high birth, he has great influence with both emperors. You have nothing to fear from our brave Germans if you should fall into their hands, but I beg you in any event, to get word to the prince and to give him my name."

"I'll do it," replied John, but he soothed his conscience by telling himself that it was a white lie. If he should be captured for the third time Prince Karl of Auersperg was the last one whom

he wanted to know of it. Neither was he pleased to hear that this medieval baron was again so near, although he did not realize why until later.

"We've talked enough now," said John, "and I'll see that food is sent you. Then it's off with you to the hospital. It's a French hospital, but they'll treat a German shoulder just as they would one of their own."

The life in the vast honeycomb of trenches was awakening fast. Two million men perhaps, devoted to the task of killing one another, crept from their burrows and stood up. Along the whole line almost of twenty score miles snow had fallen, but the rifles and cannon were firing already, spasmodic sharpshooting at some points, and fierce little battles at others.

John peered over the edge of the trench. A man was allowed to put his head in the German range but not his hand. So long as he lived he must preserve a hand which could pull the trigger or wield the bayonet.

They were not firing in the immediate front, and he had a good view of fields and low hills, deep in snow. Just before him the ground was leveled, and he saw many raised places in the snow there. He knew that bodies lay beneath, and once more he shuddered violently. But the world was full of beauty that morning. The sun was a vast sheet of gold, giving a luminous tint to the snow, and two clusters of trees, covered to the last bough and twig with snow, were a delicate tracery of white, shot at times by the sun with a pale yellow glow like that of a rose. On the

horizon a faint misty smoke, the color of silver, was rising, and he knew that it came from the cooking fires of the Germans.

It reminded him that he was very hungry. Cave life under fire, if it did not kill a man, gave him a ferocious appetite, and turning into one of the transverse trenches he followed a stream of the Strangers who were already on the way to their hotel.

The narrow cut led them nearly a mile, and then they came out in a valley the edges of which were fringed with beeches. But in the wide space within the valley most of the snow had been cleared away and enormous automobile kitchens stood giving forth the pleasant odors of food and drink. At one side officers were already satisfying their hunger and farther on men were doing the same. They were within easy range of the German guns, but it was not the habit of either side to send morning shells unless a direct attack was to be made.

John had no thought of danger. Youth was youth and one could get hardened to anything. He had been surprised more than once in this war to find how his spirits could go from the depths to the heights and now they were of the best. He was full of life and the world was very beautiful that morning. It was the fair land of France again, but it was under a thick robe of snow, the golden tint on the white, as the large yellow sun slowly sailed clear of the high hills on their right.

General Vaugirard stood near the first of the wagons, drinking cup after cup of hot steaming coffee, and devouring thick slices of bread and butter. He wore a long blue overcoat over his

uniform, and high boots. But the dominant note was given to his appearance by the thick white beard which seemed to be touched with a light silver frost. Under the great thatch of eyebrow the keen little eyes twinkled. He made John think of a huge, white and inoffensive bear.

The general's roving eye caught sight of Scott and he exclaimed:

"Come here, you young Yankee! I hear that you distinguished yourself last night by saving the life of one of our enemies, thus enabling him perhaps to fight against us once more."

"I beg your pardon, General," said John, "but I'm no Yankee."

"What, denying your birthright! I never heard an American do that before! Everybody knows you're a Yankee."

"Pardon me. General, you and all other Europeans make a mistake about the Yankees. At home the people of the Southern States generally apply it to those living in the Northern states, but in the North it is carried still further and is properly applied to the residents of the six New England states. I don't come from one of those states, and so I'm not in a real sense a Yankee."

"What, sir, have I, a Frenchman, to do with your local distinctions? Yankees you all are and Yankee you shall remain. It's a fine name, and from what I've seen in this war you're great fighting men, worthy to stand with Frenchmen."

"Thank you for the compliment, General," said John, smiling. "Hereafter I shall always remain a Yankee."

"And now do you and your friends take your food there with

de Rougemont. I've had my breakfast, and a big and good one it was. I'm going to the edge of the hill and use my glasses."

He waddled away, looking more than ever an enormous, good-natured bear. John's heart, as always, warmed to him. Truly he was the father of his children, ten thousand or more, who fought around him, and for whose welfare he had a most vigilant eye and mind.

The three joined a group of the Strangers, Captain Colton at their head, and they stood there together, eating and drinking, their appetites made wonderfully keen by the sharp morning and a hard life in the open air. Bougainville, the little colonel, came from the next valley and remained with them awhile. He was almost the color of an Indian now, but his uniform was remarkably trim and clean and he bore himself with dignity. He was distinctly a personality and John knew that no one would care to undertake liberties with him.

In the long months following the battle on the Marne Bougainville had done great deeds. Again and again he had thrown his regiment into some weak spot in the line just at the right moment. He seemed, like Napoleon and Stonewall Jackson, to have an extraordinary, intuitive power of divining the enemy's intentions, and General Vaugirard, to whose command his regiment belonged, never hesitated to consult him and often took his advice. "Ah, that child of Montmartre!" he would say. "He will go far, if he does not meet a shell too soon. He keeps a hand of steel on his regiment, there is no discipline sterner than

his, and yet his men love him."

Bougainville showed pleasure at seeing John again, and gave him his hand American fashion.

"We both still live," he said briefly.

"And hope for complete victory."

"We do," said Bougainville, earnestly, "but it will take all the strength of the allied nations to achieve it. Much has happened, Monsieur Scott, since we stood that day in the lantern of Basilique du Sacré-Coeur on the Butte Montmartre and saw the Prussian cavalry riding toward Paris."

"But what has happened is much less than that which will happen before this war is over."

"You speak a great truth, Monsieur Scott. And now I must go. Hearing that the Strangers were in this valley I wished to come and see with my own eyes that you were alive and well. I have seen and I am glad."

He saluted, Captain Colton and the others saluted in return, and then he walked over the hill to his own "children."

"An antique! An old Roman! Spirit defying death," said Captain Colton looking after him.

"He has impressed me that way, too, sir," said John. But his mind quickly left Bougainville, and turned to the message that Weber had brought the night before. He was glad that Julie Lannes would be so near again, and yet he was sorry. He had not been sorry when he first heard it, but the apprehension had come later. He tried to trace the cause, and then he remembered the

name of Auersperg, the prince whom his cousin, the Austrian captive, had said was near. He sought to laugh at himself for his fears. The mental connection was too vague, he said, but the relieving laughter would not come.

John hoped that a lucky chance might bring Lannes, and involuntarily he looked up at the heavens. But they were clear of aeroplanes. The heavy snow of the night before had driven in the hosts of the air, and they had not reappeared.

Then John resolved to go to Chastel himself. He did not know how he would go or what he would do when he got there, but the impulse was strong and it remained with him.

CHAPTER III
JULIE'S COMING

That day, the next night and the next day passed without any event save the usual desultory firing of cannon and rifles. Many men were killed and more were wounded by the sharpshooters. Little battles were fought at distant points along the lines, the Allies winning some while the Germans were victorious in others, but the result was nothing. The deadlock was unbroken.

Meanwhile the weather turned somewhat warmer and the melting snow poured fresh deluges of water into the trenches. Most of it was pumped out, but it would sink back into the ground and return. John again gave thanks for the splendid pair of high boots that he wore, and also he often searched the air for Lannes. But he saw no sign of the lithe and swift *Arrow* and his anxiety for Julie increased steadily. She must now be at Chastel, but he had not yet found any excuse that would release him from the trenches and let him go there.

He inquired for Weber, but no one had seen or heard of him again. No doubt he was far away on some perilous mission, serving France on the ground as Lannes served her in the air.

Young Kratzek in the hospital was improving fast and John secured leave of absence long enough to see him once. He was fervent in his gratitude and renewed his promises that somehow

and somewhere he would surely repay young Scott. News that he was alive, but a prisoner, had reached the German lines and already an exchange for him had been arranged, the Germans, owing to his rank, being willing to return a French brigadier in his place. The prospect filled him with happiness and he talked much. John noticed once more how very young he was, not much more than seventeen, and with manners decidedly boyish. He had the utmost confidence in the success of Germany and Austria, despite the check at the Marne, and talked freely of another advance. John led him adroitly to his cousin of Auersperg, of whom he wished to hear more. He soon discovered that Auersperg was a very great prince to Kratzek.

"I stand in some awe of him. I need scarcely tell you that Herr Scott, my captor," he said, "because he represents so much. Ah, the history and the legends clustering about our house, that goes far back into the dim ages! The Auerspergs were counts and princes of the Holy Roman Empire, and they have been grand dukes. They have decided the choice of more than one emperor at Frankfort, and they have stood with the highest when they were crowned at Augsburg. Please don't think I am boasting for myself, Herr Scott, it is only for my cousin, the august Prince Karl, *hochwohlgeboren*!"

"I understand," said John, smiling. "But I want to tell you, Leopold Kratzek, that I'm *hochwohlgeboren* myself."

"Why, how is that? You are neither German nor Austrian."

"No, I'm American, but I'm very highborn nevertheless. There

are a hundred millions of us and all of us are very highborn not excepting our colored people, many of whom are descended from African princes who have a power over their people not approached by either of the kaisers."

The boy smiled.

"Now, I know you jest," he said. "You have no classes, but I've heard that all of you claim to be kings."

John saw that he had made no impression upon him. Frank, honest and brave, an Auersperg was nevertheless in the boy's mind an Auersperg, something superior, a product of untold centuries, a small and sublimated group of the human race to which nothing else could aspire, not even talent, learning, courage and honesty. To all Auerspergs, Napoleon and Shakespeare were mere men of genius, to be patronized. John smiled, too. He did not feel hurt at all. In his turn he felt a superiority, a superiority of perception, and a superiority in the sense of proportion.

"Prince Karl of Auersperg is always resolved to maintain his pride of blood, is he not?" he asked.

"He considers it his duty. The head of a house that has been princely for fifteen centuries could not do less. He could never forget or forgive an insult to his person."

"If he were insulted he would hold that all the Auerspergs who were now living and all who had lived in the last fifteen hundred years were insulted also."

"Undoubtedly!" replied Kratzek, with great emphasis.

"I merely wished to know," said John, gravely, "in order that I may know how to bear myself in case I should meet Prince Karl of Auersperg"—he had not told that he had met him already—"and now I'm going to tell you good-by, Leopold. I think it likely that I shall be sent away on a mission and before I return it is probable that you will be exchanged."

"Good-by, Mr. Scott. Don't forget my promise. If you should ever fall into our hands please try to communicate with me."

John returned to his trench. He had been very thoughtful that day, and he had evolved a plan. A considerable body of wounded soldiers were to be sent to Chastel, and as they must have a guard he had asked Captain Colton to use his influence with General Vaugirard and have him appointed a member of the guard.

Now he found Captain Colton sitting in his little alcove smoking one of his eternal cigarettes and looking very contented. He took an especially long puff when he saw John and looked at him quizzically.

"Well, Scott!" he said.

"Well, sir!" said John.

"General Vaugirard thinks your desire to guard wounded, see to their welfare, great credit to you."

"I thank him, sir, through you."

"Approve of such zeal myself."

"I thank you in person."

"Did not tell him—French girl, Mademoiselle Julie Lannes, also going to Chastel to attend to wounded. Handsome girl,

wonderfully handsome girl, don't you think so, Scott?"

"I do, sir," said John, reddening.

"You and she—going to Chastel about same time. Remarkable coincidence, but nothing in it, of course, just coincidence."

"It's not a coincidence, sir. You've always been a friend to me. Captain Colton, and I'm willing to tell you that I've sought this mission to Chastel because Mademoiselle Julie Lannes is there, or is going there, and for no other reason whatever. I'm afraid she's in danger, and anyway I long for a sight of her face as we long for the sun after a storm."

Captain Colton, with his cigarette poised between his thumb and forefinger, looked John up and down.

"Good!" he said. "Frank statement of truth—I knew already. Nothing for you to be ashamed of. If girl beautiful and noble as Mademoiselle Julie Lannes looked at me as she has looked at you I'd break down walls and run gantlets to reach her. Go, John, boy. Luck to you in all the things in which you wish luck."

He held out his hand and John wrung it. And so, the terse captain himself had a soft heart which he seldom showed!

The convoy started the next morning, John with five soldiers in an armored automobile bringing up the rear. There were other men on the flank and in front, and a captain commanded. The day was wintry and gloomy. Heavy clouds obscured the sky, and the slush was deep in the roads. A desolate wind moaned through the leafless trees, and afar the cannon grumbled and groaned.

But neither the somber day nor the melancholy convoy affected John's spirits. Chastel, a village of light—light for him—would be at the end of his journey.

Despite mud, slush and snow, traveling was pleasant. The automobile had made wonderful changes. One could go almost anywhere in it, and its daring drivers whisked it gaily over fields, through forests and up hills, which in reality could be called mountains. War had merely increased their enterprise, and they took all kinds of risks, usually with success.

John was very comfortable now, as he leaned back in the armored car, driven by a young Frenchman. He wore a heavy blue overcoat over his uniform, and his only weapon was a powerful automatic revolver in his belt, but it was enough. The ambulances, filled with wounded, stretched a half-mile in front of him, but he had grown so used to such sights that they did not move him long. Moreover in this war a man was not dead until he *was* dead. The small bullets of the high-powered rifle either killed or harmed but little. It was the shrapnel that tore.

The road led across low hills, and down slopes which he knew were kissed by a warm sun in summer. It was here that the vines flourished, but the snow could not hide the fact that it was torn and trampled now. Huge armies had surged back and forth over it, and yet John, who was of a thoughtful mind, knew that in a few more summers it would be as it had been before. In this warm and watered France Nature would clothe the earth in a green robe which winter itself could not wholly drive away.

A reader of history, he knew that Europe had been torn and ravaged by war, times past counting, and yet geologically it was among the youngest and freshest of lands. Everything would pass and new youth would take the place of the youth that the shells and bullets were now carrying away.

He shook himself. Reflections like these were for men of middle years. The tide of his own youth flowed back upon him and the world, even under snow and with stray guns thundering behind him, was full of splendor. Moreover, there was the village of Chastel before him! Chastel! Chastel! He had never heard of it until two or three days ago, and yet it now loomed in his mind as large as Paris or New York. Julie must have arrived already, and he would see her again after so many months of hideous war, but deep down in his mind persisted the belief that she should not have come. Lannes must have had some reason that he could not surmise, or he would not have written the letter asking her to meet him at Chastel.

The village, he learned from one of the men in the automobile, was only ten miles away and it was built upon a broad, low hill at the base of which a little river flowed. It was very ancient. A town of the Belgæ stood there in Cæsar's time, but it contained not more than two thousand inhabitants, and its chief feature was a very beautiful Gothic cathedral.

John's automobile could have reached Chastel in less than an hour, despite the snow and the slush, but the train of the wounded was compelled to move slowly, and he must keep with

it. Meanwhile he scanned the sky with powerful glasses, which he had been careful to secure after his escape from Auersperg. Nearly all officers carried strong glasses in this war, and yet even to the keenest eyes the hosts of the air were visible only in part.

John now and then saw telephone wires running through the clumps of forest and across the fields. There was a perfect web of them, reaching all the way from Alsace and the Forest of Argonne to the sea. Generals talked to one another over them, and over these wires the signal officers sent messages to the men in the batteries telling them how to fire their guns.

The telegraph, too, was at work. The wires were clicking everywhere, and the air was filled also with messages which went on no wires at all, but which took invisible wings unto themselves. The wireless, despite its constant use, remained a mystery and wonder to John. One of his most vivid memories was that night on the roof of the château, when Wharton talked through space to the German generals, and learned their plans.

He looked up now and his eyes were shut, but he almost fancied that he could see the words passing in clouds over his head, written on nothing, but there, nevertheless, the most mysterious and, in some ways, the most powerful part of the hosts of the air, the hosts that within a generation had changed the ways of armies and battles. He opened his eyes and found himself searching for aeroplanes, the most tangible portion of those hosts of the air, with which man had to fight. He saw several behind him, where the French and German lines almost met, but there

was no shape resembling the *Arrow*.

The aeroplanes and Zeppelins had been much less active since winter had come in full tide. They were essentially birds of sunshine and fair weather, liking but little clouds and storms. And as the skies still looked very threatening John judged that they would not be abroad much that day. The conditions were far from promising, as a heavy massing of the clouds in the southwest indicated more snow.

"There is Chastel, sir," said Mallet, his chauffeur. "You can see the steeple of the cathedral shining through the clouds."

John's eyes followed the pointing finger, and he caught a high gleam, although all beneath was a mass of floating gray mist. But he knew it was a few beams of the sun piercing through the clouds and striking upon some solid object. He put the glasses to his eyes and then he was able to discern an old, old town, standing on a cliff above a stream that he would have called a creek at home. Some of the houses were of stone, and others were of timber and concrete, but it was evident that war had passed already over Chastel. As he rode nearer he beheld buildings ruined by shells or fire. Many of them seemed to be razed almost level with the ground. The evidences of battle were everywhere. He surmised that it had been held for a while by the Germans on their retreat from the Marne, and that the lighting there had been desperate.

In the lower ground on the near side of the stream were many small board houses arranged in a square, and these he knew were the hospital. He would remain there until the last of the

wounded were discharged, and then he would enter Chastel. Mallet informed him that his surmises were correct and he saw for himself that the head of the train had already turned into the square around which the little board houses were built.

The transferring of the hurt, took nearly all the morning, and John faithfully performed his part. There was Chastel only a few hundred yards away, now clearly visible despite the massive clouds that floated persistently across the sky. Yet he made no attempt to reach it until his work was done, nor did he speak of it, not even to the chauffeur, Mallet, of whom he had made a good friend.

Near noon, the task finished, he ate luncheon and started toward Chastel. His orders from Captain Colton allowed him much liberty, and he was not compelled to account to anyone, when he chose to enter the town. He crossed the stream, muddy from the melting snow, on a small stone bridge, which he believed from its steep arch must date almost back to the time of the Romans, and pausing on the other side looked up once more at Chastel. He had no doubt that, seen in the sunshine and as it was, it had been both picturesque and beautiful. But now it lay half in ruins, under a sullen sky, and he beheld no sign of life. Just above him within its grounds stood a large château, that had been riven through and through by shells. The walls looked as if they were ready to fall apart and John shivered a little. Farther on was a public building of some kind, destroyed by fire, all save the walls which stood, blackened and desolate, and now he saw that the

cathedral too had been damaged.

A flake of snow, large and damp, settled on his hand. The clouds were massing, directly over his head, and he feared another fall. It was unfortunate, but nothing could drive him back, and finding a flight of stone steps he ascended them and entered the village.

Chastel had looked somber from the plain below, where some of the effect, John had thought, might be due to distance, but here it was a silent ruin, tragic and terrible. Over this village, once so neat and trim, as he could easily see, war had swept in its most hideous fashion. Houses were riddled and the gray light showed through them from wall to wall where the great shells had passed. A bronze statue standing in a fountain in the center of the little place or square had been struck, and it lay prone and shattered in the water.

The first flakes of the new snow began to fall, and the sinister sky, heavy with clouds, took on the darkness of twilight, although night was far away. Yet the huge rents and holes in the houses and the fallen masonry seemed to grow more distinct in the gloom. The village consisted chiefly of one long street, and as John looked up and down it, he did not see a single human being. Nothing was visible to him but the iron hoof of war crushing everything under it, and he shuddered violently.

The snow began to drive, whipped by a bitter wind, and he drew the heavy blue overcoat closely about him. The shuddering which was not of the snow and the cold, passed, but his heart

was ice. The abandoned town over which Germans and French had fought oppressed him like a nightmare. What had become of Julie? Why had Philip asked her to meet him at such a place? There was the hospital, but it was in the plain below, where lights now shone faintly through the heavy gray air and the driving snow.

Surely Lannes could not have made any mistake! John had learned to trust his judgment thoroughly and Philip, too, knew the country so well. If he had sent for Julie to come to Chastel he must have had a good reason for it, although the snow was bound to delay the coming of the *Arrow* to meet her. If she had reached Chastel she would remain there, and not go to the hospital in the plain below. She trusted her brother as implicitly as John did.

John, taking thought with himself, concluded that she must be now in the village. It was not possible that Chastel, silent as it was and desolate as it seemed, could be entirely deserted. Although leaving ruin behind, the fury of battle had passed and some of the people would return to their homes. Chastel lay behind the French lines, a great hospital camp was not far away, and the fear of further German invasion could not be present now.

He put one hand in his overcoat pocket over the butt of the automatic, and then, remembering how General Vaugirard whistled, he too whistled, not for want of thought but to encourage himself, to make his heart beat a little less violently, and to hear a cheerful sound where there was nothing else but the soft swish of the snow and the desolate moaning of the wind

among the ruins.

He walked down the main street, and unconsciously stopped whistling. Then the awful silence and desolation brooded over him again. The storm was thickening, and the lights in the plain below were entirely gone now. He was not yet able to find any proof of human life in Chastel, and, after all, the fighting in the town might have been so recent and so fierce that not one of the inhabitants yet dared to return. The thought made his heart throb painfully. What, then, had become of Julie?

He stopped before the cathedral, and looked up at the lofty Gothic spire which seemed to tower above the whirling snow. As well as he could see some damage had been done to the roof by shells, but the beautiful stained-glass windows were uninjured. He stood there gazing, and he knew in his heart that he was looking for a sign, like that which he and Lannes had seen on the Arc de Triomphe when the fortunes of France seemed lost forever.

A stalwart figure suddenly emerged from the white gloom and heavy hands were laid upon him. John's own fingers in his overcoat pocket tightened over the automatic, but the hands on his shoulders were those of friendship.

"Ah, it is thou, Monsieur Scott!" exclaimed a deep voice. "The master has not come but thou art thrice welcome in his place!"

It was Picard, no less than Antoine Picard himself, looming white and gigantic through the storm, and John could not doubt the genuine warmth in his voice. He was in truth welcome and he

knew it. As Picard's hands dropped from his shoulders he seized them in his and wrung them hard.

"Mademoiselle Julie!" he exclaimed. "What of her? Did she come? Or have you only come in her place?"

"She is here, sir! In the church with Suzanne, my daughter. We arrived two hours ago. I wanted to go on to the camp that we could see in the plain below, but Mademoiselle Lannes would not hear of it. It was here that Monsieur Philip wished her to meet him, and if she went on he would miss her. We expected to find food and rooms, but, my God, sir, the town is deserted! Most of the houses have been shot to pieces by the artillery and if people are here we cannot find them. Because of that we have taken shelter, for the present, in the church."

But John in his eagerness was already pushing open one of the huge bronze doors, and Picard, brushing some of the snow from his clothes, followed him. The door swung shut behind them both, and he stood beside one of the pews staring into the dusky interior.

But his eyes became used to the gloom, and soon it did not seem so somber as it was outside. Instead the light from the stained-glass windows made the mists and shadows luminous. A nave, the lofty pillars dividing it from the side aisles, the choir and the altar emerged slowly into view. From the walls pictures of the Madonna and the saints, unstained and untouched, looked down upon him. One of the candles near the altar had been lighted, and it burned with a steady, beckoning flame.

The cathedral, a great building for a small town, as happens so often in Europe, presented a warm and cheerful interior to John. It seemed to him soon after the huge bronze door sank into place behind him that war, cold, desolation and loneliness were shut out. The luminous glow streaming through the stained glass windows and the candle burning near the altar were beacons.

Then he saw Julie, sitting wrapped in a heavy cloak, in one of the pews before the choir, and the grim Suzanne, also shrouded in a heavy cloak, sat beside her. John's heart was in a glow. He knew now that he loved his comrade Philip's sister. Two or three of the golden curls escaping from her hood, fell down her back, and they were twined about his heart. He knew too that it was not the light from the stained windows, but Julie herself who had filled the church with splendor. She was to John a young goddess, perfect in her beauty, one who could do no wrong. His love had all the tenderness and purity of young love, the poetic love that comes only to youth.

But when he realized that Julie Lannes had become so much to him he felt a sudden shyness, and he let the gigantic Picard lead the way. They had made no noise in opening and closing the door, and their boots had been soundless on the stone floor.

"The American, Lieutenant Scott, Mademoiselle," said Picard respectfully.

John saw her little start of surprise, but when she stood up she was quite self-possessed. Her color was a little deeper than usual, but it might be the luminous glow from the stained-glass

windows, or the cloak of dark red which wrapped her from chin to feet may have given that added touch.

She had been weary and anxious, and John thought he detected a gleam of welcome in her glance. At least it pleased him to think so. The stern Suzanne had given him a startled look, but the glance seemed to John less hostile than it used to be.

"I was told, Miss Lannes," said John in English, "that you had received a letter from your brother, Philip, to meet him here in Chastel. One Weber, an Alsatian, an able and trustworthy man whom I know, gave me the news."

It had often been his habit, when speaking his own language, to call her, American fashion, "Miss" instead of "Mademoiselle," and now she smiled at the little, remembered touch.

"It was Mr. Weber who brought the letter to me in Paris, Mr. Scott," she said. "You know it was my wish to serve our brave soldiers hurt in battle, and I was not surprised that the letter from Philip should come."

"In what manner did you arrive here?"

"In a small automobile. It is standing behind the cathedral now. Antoine is an excellent driver. But, Oh, Mr. Scott, it has been a strange and lonely ride! Once we thought we were going to be captured. As we passed through a forest Antoine was quite sure that he caught a gleam of German lances far away, but much too near for assurance, and he drove the motor forward at a great rate."

"And then you arrived in Chastel?"

"Yes, Mr. Scott, then we came to Chastel."

"But you did not see what you expected to see."

She shivered and the brilliant color left her face for a moment.

"No, Mr. Scott, I did not find what I thought would be here. Philip had not come, but that did not alarm me so much, and I knew that for awhile the snow had made the flight of aeroplanes impossible. No, it was not the absence of Philip that filled me with terror. Surely when he sent for me he did not anticipate such fighting as must have occurred here so recently."

"He would never have drawn you into danger."

"I know it, and that is why I am so puzzled and so full of apprehension. The sight of Chastel appalls me and it has had its influence upon Antoine and Suzanne, strong as they are. We saw ruins, Mr. Scott, the terrible path of battle, and no human being until you came."

"I had the same feeling myself, nor did I see life either until I met Antoine, Miss Julie, if I may call you so instead of Miss Lannes?"

"Yes, of course, Mr. Scott. But what does it mean? Why haven't the people come back?"

They were still talking in English, and Suzanne's customary look had returned to her face in all its grimness, but they went on, unmindful of her.

"I confess, Miss Julie, I don't understand it," replied John. "The fighting here seems to have occurred within the last two or three days. It is behind our lines and I did not hear of it, but so

much has happens of which we do not hear, and there has been so much shifting of the lines in recent days that a battle could easily have occurred at Chastel without my knowledge. And the shock of cannon fire with the enormous guns now used is so tremendous that the fleeing people may not have recovered from it yet. Doubtless they will return tomorrow or the next day."

"I hope so, Mr. Scott. A ruined town with nobody in it oppresses terribly."

A sudden thought stabbed at John's heart. It was possible that the people of Chastel did not return because they were fearing another attack. If Antoine had caught the gleam of German lances in the wood then a considerable German force might be behind the French lines. Snowstorms formed a good cover for secret operations.

Julie noticed the passing shadow in his face and she knew it to be the sign of alarm.

"What is it, Mr. Scott?" she asked. "Do you know of any danger?"

"No," he replied truthfully, because he had dismissed his thought as incredible, "but you will not remain here, Miss Julie. You and your servant will go to the hospital camp, will you not? It is not much more than a mile beyond the river."

But to his surprise she shook her head.

"I must stay in Chastel," she said. "It is here that Philip wished me to come, and if I am not here when he arrives he will not know where to find me. And there is no danger. You know that,

Mr. Scott. If Antoine really saw German lances as he claims, it is no proof that German horsemen will come to Chastel, running into danger. What have they to gain by raiding a ruined town?"

"There is much reason in what you say. Certainly it would avail the Germans nothing to gallop through shattered Chastel in a snowstorm. But you can't spend the night in the church. I've no doubt that we can find bed and board for all of us in some abandoned house."

The driving snow had reconciled John somewhat to the idea of Julie passing the night in Chastel. The road leading down to the river was steep and the bridge over which he had crossed was narrow with a very high arch. A motor might easily miss the way in the darkening storm, and then meet disaster.

Julie looked at him inquiringly as if she wished his indorsement of her plan, although her lips were closed tightly.

"Of course you'll stay, Miss Julie," he said, "and I'll stay too, although I'm not invited."

"You're invited now."

"Thanks. Consider me a follower, or rather a dragoman, to use the eastern term."

Then he said to Antoine in French:

"Mademoiselle Lannes is resolved to remain tonight in Chastel. She thinks that if her brother were to come her absence would upset all his plans."

Picard nodded. His was the soul of loyalty.

"It is right," he said. "It is here that Monsieur Philip expects

to find her and we can guard her."

John liked the inclusive "we."

"And now to work, Antoine and Suzanne," he said. "We've agreed that we can't spend the night in the cathedral. Perhaps there is no better refuge so far as the storm is concerned, but a pew is not a good bed, except for hardened old soldiers like you and me, Antoine."

"No, Mr. Scott, it is not."

"Then I suggest that we leave Mademoiselle Lannes and Suzanne here while we look for shelter."

But Julie would not agree. They must all go out together. What was a little snow? Should a Lannes mind it? She drew her great red cloak more closely around her and led the way from the choir to the bronze doors, the others following in silence.

John felt that Julie had shown much decision and firmness. When she had declared that she would not remain in the church her tone and manner were wonderfully like those of her brother Philip. She was altogether worthy of the name of Lannes, and the fact appealed strongly to young Scott, who liked strength and courage.

When they were outside they saw that the storm had increased. The snow was driving so thickly that they could not see fifty yards ahead, and their quest of a house for the night would be difficult. But the lofty steeple of the church with its protecting cross still towered above them and John felt, if their search was vain, that the cathedral would always be there to shelter them. Doubtless

the provident Picard also had provisions in the motor.

"I believe you told me your machine was behind the cathedral, Antoine," he said. "We ought first to take a look at it, and see that it's all right."

"That's very true, sir," replied Picard. "Shall we not go there and see it, Mademoiselle Julie?"

She nodded and they passed to the rear of the cathedral, where the machine stood under a shed. It was a small limousine with a powerful body, and John, although knowing little of automobiles, liked its looks.

"How about the gasoline supply?" he asked Picard.

"Enough, sir, for a long journey."

"You've brought food?"

"Food and wine both, sir, under the seats."

"That's very good, but I knew you'd be far-seeing, Picard. If we don't find a good place we can take the supplies and return to the cathedral."

"But we will find lodgings, Sir Jean the Scott," said Julie, catching the trick of the name from her brother. "I command you to lead the way and discover them."

Her dark red cloak was now white with the driven snow, and her face, rosy with the cold, looked from a dark red hood, also turned white. John saw that her eyes laughed. He realized suddenly that she felt neither fear nor apprehension. He had discovered a new quality, the same heroic soul that her brother Philip had, the unquenchable courage of the great marshal. He

realized that she found a certain enjoyment in the situation, that the spirit of adventure was upon her. His own pulses leaped and his soul responded.

"Come on," he said in a strong voice. "If there's a habitation in this place fit for you I'll find it." John had resumed command, but Julie walked at his elbow, a brave and strong lieutenant. The two Picards followed close behind. Suzanne, at this moment, when the resources of Scott were needed so much, had relaxed somewhat of her grimness. She and Antoine said nothing as they bent their heads to the snow. Unconsciously they had resigned decision and leadership to the young pair who walked before them.

John glanced toward the river and the plain beyond, but he merely looked into a wall, cold, white and impenetrable. No ray of light or life came from it. The hospital camp had been blotted out completely. But from the north came a faint sullen note, and he knew that it was the throb of a great gun. Julie heard it too.

"They're still firing," she said.

"Yes, but it may not be snowing so hard a few miles away from here. I discovered when I was up in the air with Philip that the air moves in eddies and gusts and currents like the ocean, and that it has bays and straits, and this may be a narrow strait of snow that envelops us here. Hear that! Guns to the south, too! One side is shelling the other's trenches. You remember how it was in all the long fighting that we call the Battle of the Marne. Day and night, night and day the guns thundered and crashed. I seemed when I

slept to hear 'em in my dreams. They never stopped."

"It makes me, too, think of that time, Mr. Scott, except that this is winter and that was summer. The cloud of battle is just the same."

"But the results are much less. It's a deadlock, and has been a deadlock for months. I don't expect anything decisive until spring, and maybe not then. Here is a good house, Miss Julie. It looks as if the mayor, or Chastel's banker might have lived here. Suppose we try it."

But the house had been stripped. All the rooms were cold and bare, and in the rear a huge shell had exploded leaving yawning gaps in the walls, through which the snow was driving fast. Julie shivered.

"Let's go away from it," she said. "I couldn't sleep in this house. It's continually talking to us in a language I don't like to hear."

"I don't hear its talk," said John, "but I see its ghosts walking, and I'm as anxious to get away from it as you are."

Nor were Antoine and Suzanne reluctant, and they hurried out to enter another house which had suffered a similar fate. They passed through a half-dozen, all torn and shattered by monster shells, and at last they came to one which had before it a stretch of grass, a pebbled walk, a fountain, now dry, and benches painted green, under their covering of snow.

"An inn!" said John. "This is surely Chastel's hotel. Either the de l'Europe, the Grand or the Hollande, because more than half

the hotels in Europe bear one or the other of those names. Is it not fitting, Miss Julie, that we should enter and take our rest in an inn?"

She looked at it with sparkling eyes. Again the spirit of adventure was high within her.

"It seems to be undamaged," she said. "Perhaps we'll find someone there."

John shook his head.

"No, Miss Julie," he said, "I'm convinced that it's silent and alone. You'll observe that no smoke is rising from any of its chimneys, and every window that we can see is dark."

"What do you say, Antoine, and you Suzanne?" asked Julie.

"It is evident, since the inn has no other guests, that we have been sent here by the Supreme Power, for what purpose I know not," replied Suzanne, devoutly.

"Then there is no need to delay longer," said John, and, leading the way up the pebbled walk, he pushed open the central door.

CHAPTER IV
THE HOTEL AT CHASTEL

John was fast finding that in a crowded country like Europe, suddenly ravaged by war, nothing was more common than abandoned houses. People were continually fleeing at a moment's warning. He had already made use of two or three, at a time when they were needed most, and here was another awaiting him. Before he pushed open the door he had already read above it, despite the incrustations of snow, the sign, "Hôtel de l'Europe," and he felt intuitively that they were coming into good quarters. He was so confident of it that his cheerful mood deepened, turned in fact into joyousness.

As he held open the door he took off his cap, bowed low and said:

"Enter my humble hôtel, Madame la Princesse. Our guests are all too few now, but I promise you, Your Highness, that you and your entourage shall have the best the house affords. Behold, the orchestra began the moment you entered!"

As he spoke the deep thunder of guns came from invisible points along the long battle-line. The firing of the cannon was far away but the jarring of the air was distinct in Chastel, and the windows of the hotel shook in their frames. John and Julie had become so used to it that it merely heightened their fantastic

mood.

"Yours is, in truth, a most welcome hotel," she said, "and I see that we shall not be annoyed by other guests."

She shook the snow from her hood and cloak and entered, and Picard and Suzanne, also divesting themselves of snow coverings, followed her. Then John too went in, and once more closed a door between them and the storm. He noticed that the great Antoine gave him a glance of strong approval, and even the somber Suzanne seemed to be thawing.

John was sorry that the European hotels did not have a big lobby after the American fashion. It would have given them a welcome now, but all was as usual in the Hôtel de l'Europe, Chastel. There was the small office for the cashier, and the smaller one for the bookkeeper. Near them was the bureau and upon it lay an open register. Through an open door beyond, the smoking-room was visible, and from where he stood John could see French and English illustrated weeklies lying upon the tables. Nothing had been taken, nothing was in disorder, the hotel was complete, save that it was as bare as *Crusoe's* deserted island. But John did not feel any loneliness. Julie and the two Picards were with him, and the aspect of the Hôtel de l'Europe changed all at once.

"We'll register first," said John. "I know it's customary to send a waiter to the rooms for the names, but as our waiters have all gone out we'll use the book now."

Pen and ink stood beside the register and he wrote in a bold

hand:

Mademoiselle Julie Lannes, Paris, France.
Mademoiselle Suzanne Picard, Paris, France.
Monsieur Antoine Picard, Paris, France.
Mr. John Scott, New York, U.S.A.

Julie looked over his shoulder.

"It is well," she said. "If Philip arrives perhaps he will come to the hotel and see our names registered here."

"And we'll reserve a good room for him," said John, "but although I don't want to appear a pessimist, Miss Julie, I don't think he'll come just now, at least not in the *Arrow*. All aeroplane, balloon and Zeppelin trains have stopped running during the blizzard. Blizzard is an American word of ours meaning a driving storm. It's expressive, and it can be used with advantage in Europe. What accommodations do you wish, Madame la Princesse?"

"A sitting-room, a bedroom and a bath for myself, and a room each for my maid, Suzanne, and my faithful retainer, her father, Antoine Picard."

"You shall have all that you wish and more," said John, and then dropping into his usual tone he said: "I think we'd better look over the rooms together. It's barely possible some looter may be prowling in the house. Of course, the electric power is cut off, but Suzanne will know where to find candles, and we can provide for all the light we need."

He thought of light, because the heavy storm outside kept the

hotel in shadow, and he knew that when night came, depression and gloom would settle upon them, unless they found some way to dispel the darkness. Despite the silence of the hotel they had a sense of comfort. They had been oppressed in the cathedral by its majesty and religious gloom, but this was the haunt of men and women who used to come in cheerfully from the day's business and who laughed and talked in rooms and on the stairways.

John's imaginative mind was alive at once. He beheld pleasant specters all about him. Chastel was off the great highways, but many quiet tourists must have come here. The beautiful cathedral, the picturesque situation of the little town above the little river and the very ancient Gothic buildings must have been an attraction to the knowing. He could shut his eyes and see them now, many of them his own countrymen and countrywomen, walking in the halls after a day of sightseeing, comparing notes, or looking through the windows down at the little river that foamed below. Yes, Chastel had been a pleasant town and one could pass many days in right company in its Hôtel de l'Europe.

"What are you smiling at, Mr. John?" asked Julie.

It was the first time she had called him "Mr. John," the equivalent for his "Miss Julie," and he liked it. But he hid his pleasure and apparently took no notice of it.

"I was seeing our hotel in times of peace," he said. "It was a sort of mental transference, I suppose, but the place looked good to me. It was crowded with people, many of whom were from America, and some of whom I would like to know. I've never had

a horror of tourists—in fact I think the horror of them that most people pretend to feel is a sort of affectation, a false attempt at superiority—and I always liked, when I was a sightseer myself, to come back to the hotel in the evening and meet the cheerful crowd full of chatter and gossip."

"That is what I should want to do if ever I should go to America. They say that your distances there are great and your hotels large and bright. I shouldn't want to miss seeing the people in the evenings under the blazing electric lights."

"You'll see them, Miss Julie, because I know that you're going to America some time or other."

They were speaking in English again and Suzanne, wrapped in a gray cloak and looking very large, assumed her old grim look. John glanced at her and for the moment he was just a little afraid of her. He saw her eyes saying very plainly: "You're an American and a foreigner and my mistress, Mademoiselle Julie Lannes, a very young girl, is French. You should not be talking together at all, and if you were not so necessary to us in our hour of danger I would see that she was quickly taken far away from you."

He led the way into the smoking-room, where there were many comfortable chairs, and writing-desks with pen, ink and paper at hand. Everything was ready for use, but guests and waiters were lacking.

"Let's go into the main dining-room," said John, who had opened another door. "It's a fine, big place and the windows look directly over the river. Doubtless we'd have a good view from

here if it were not for the driving snow."

It was, in fact, a handsome long room, proving the truth of John's surmise that many guests came at times to Chastel, and, to their great surprise, they found several of the tables fully dressed, as if some of the people had just been sitting down to dinner, when the voice of the shells bade them go.

"You see it's waiting for us," said John. "Why, we'd have done its proprietor a wrong if we'd missed the Hôtel de l'Europe. The table is set and, hospitable Frenchman that he is, he'll be glad to know that somebody is enjoying his house in his absence. The pepper, the salt and the vinegar are there, and I actually see a small bottle of wine on one of the tables."

"Poor man!" said Julie. "It must have cost him much to go. You don't know, Mr. John, how we French love our homes and houses."

"Oh, yes, I do, and we in America, since there's no longer any Wild West in which we can seek romance and change, are settling down into the same habits."

"Would Mademoiselle and Mr. Scott wish us to serve their dinner here?" asked Antoine gravely, the duties of his position ever uppermost in his mind.

"Not now, Antoine," said Julie, "but we will later. I'm glad to see, though, that you are making the best of it. You show a spirit worthy of a Picard."

Picard bowed and smiled with gratification. John suggested that they look upstairs for rooms, and then, after putting them

in order, they could return for dinner. But before ascending the grand stairway, they lighted several candles which Suzanne had found, and put them at convenient places. They were not sufficient to illuminate the interior of the hotel, but they threw a soft glow which John found warm and pleasing.

Above was the main drawing-room, and a great array of guest chambers, continued also on the third floor, which was the last. John selected the best suite, looking over the river, for Julie and also for Suzanne, who, under the circumstances, must remain with her. A running water system had not been installed in the houses of Chastel but the great pitchers were filled, and the stalwart Suzanne could easily bring more. They were good rooms, perhaps with an excess of gilt and glass after the continental fashion, but they were comfortable, and John said to Julie:

"Maybe you'd like to remain here a half-hour or so, while Antoine and I choose a place for ourselves. It's best that the members of our party remain close together in view of possible emergencies."

"Yes, Suzanne and I will stay," said Julie. "I felt no weariness a few moments ago, but I've grown suddenly tired. A short rest will restore me."

"Very well," said John. "I bid you a brief *au revoir*, and when you hear a knock on your sitting-room door don't be alarmed, because it will be Antoine and I returning. Come, Antoine, we'll let the ladies rest while you and I look for the state apartments

for ourselves."

Picard permitted a grin to pass over his broad face. His heart belonged to his daughter Suzanne and the Lannes family, and it was not moved easily by outsiders. Yet, this young John Scott from across the sea was beginning to find a favorable place in his mind. He spoke good French, he fought well for the French, he was highly esteemed by Monsieur Philip, he had done great service for Mademoiselle Julie and in the present crisis he was a tower of strength for them all. His daughter, Suzanne, regarded young Scott with a certain fear, but he, Antoine, could not share it. Henceforth John would have his distinct approval, and he felt a measure of pride in being now his comrade in danger.

When John had closed the door of the sitting-room and he knew that neither Julie nor Suzanne could hear him, he said:

"Picard, have you any weapon?"

Picard drew a heavy automatic revolver from the pocket of his jacket.

"Before I started I provided myself with this, knowing the dangers of the journey," he replied.

"Good, but don't use it, except in the last resort. Remember how near you came to execution as a *franc-tireur*."

"Does Monsieur apprehend an attack?"

"I scarcely know, Antoine. But things have come about too easily. We find here a furnished hotel waiting for us. I've no doubt that the kitchens of the Hôtel de l'Europe are well stocked, and we have all the comforts, even the luxuries sufficient for

a hundred guests. So far as we know there is not a soul in all this town save our four selves. It doesn't look natural, my good Antoine. It's positively uncanny."

"But, sir, if what we want is here waiting for us, why shouldn't we take it?"

"That's true, wise Antoine. 'Take the goods the gods provide thee whilst the lovely Thaïs sits beside thee,' as Mr. Dryden said."

"Who is Mr. Dryden? Must I infer, sir, from his name, that he is one of our brave English allies?"

"Doubtless he would be if he were living, but he has been dead some time, Antoine."

"Alas, sir, the way of all flesh!"

"So it is, Antoine, but I refuse to grieve about it or get morbid over it. I like to live and living I mean to live. What do you think of this big room, Antoine? It has two beds in it, one for you and one for me, and it's near enough to hear any call from the suite, occupied by Mademoiselle Julie and your daughter."

"A wise precaution. Monsieur Scott thinks of everything."

"No, not of everything, Antoine, but the presence of Mademoiselle Lannes is bound to sharpen the wits of anyone who is trying to take care of her."

"Will you make your toilet here, sir? I will call Suzanne and we will prepare dinner. When it is ready we will serve Mademoiselle Lannes and you."

The stalwart Picard had become all at once the discreet and thoughtful servant, and John felt a sudden sense of restfulness.

Intense democrat that he was, he realized in his moment of weariness that all could not be masters.

"Thank you, Picard," he said gratefully. "The afternoon is wearing on and I do need to shake myself up."

"You'll find plenty of water in the pitchers, sir, and there are clean towels on the rack. One would think, sir, that the manager of the Hôtel de l'Europe before taking his departure, made careful preparation for our coming."

"It looks like it, Picard, and it certainly will be true, if you and Suzanne find the well-filled kitchen that you predict."

"Never a doubt of it, sir. The perfect condition in which we find everything above-stairs indicates that we shall find the same below."

He went out, leaving the door open, according to John's wish, and the young American heard his firm step pass down the hall and to the stairway. He drew a deep sigh of content, and lying down on a red plush sofa rested for a little while. It was luck, most wonderful luck, that he had come into Chastel, and had found Julie and her servants, and it was luck, most marvelous luck, that this well-equipped hotel was here waiting for them.

He rose and looped back the heavy lace curtains from the windows which looked over the river. But the snow was falling so fast that he could not see far into the dense, white cataract. The stream was completely hidden, and so, of course, was the hospital camp beyond. Yet through all the driving storm came a faint moan, a light pulsing of the air, which he knew to be the

far throb of the great guns.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.