

Ralphson George Harvey

Over There with the Canadians at Vimy Ridge



George Ralphson
Over There with the
Canadians at Vimy Ridge

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23146795

Over There with the Canadians at Vimy Ridge:

ISBN <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/46348>

Содержание

CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	8
CHAPTER III	12
CHAPTER IV	17
CHAPTER V	22
CHAPTER VI	25
CHAPTER VII	29
CHAPTER VIII	34
CHAPTER IX	37
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	47

George H. Ralphson Over There with the Canadians at Vimy Ridge

CHAPTER I SHELLS AND MINNENWERFER

"Look out! There she comes."

These words were whispered, for it would have been a serious military offense if the speaker had lifted his voice to a resonant tone in addressing his companion. Both were in khaki uniform, and had helmets on their heads. They had been crouching in a camouflaged pit out in No Man's Land in the Vimy Ridge sector of the western battle front in France.

It was dusk of evening, a mist-laden dusk, quite as serviceable for secret movements as the darkness under a clear sky. One could not see an object as large as a man twenty yards away because of the fog.

All day it had been raining, just a slow drizzle, but nevertheless, a good deal of water had fallen, and the chief characteristic of the trenches was mud. "Second Looie" George Tourtelle and Private Irving Ellis had been sent out through the

communication trench to the listening post, in which they were crouched when Irving whispered the words "Look out! There she comes!"

There was really no need of his offering any such warning to his companion, for the latter could hear the whistle of the approaching shell just as well as he, but there was also no call for the punishment that the second lieutenant administered. The shell passed harmlessly over their heads and exploded behind the front line trenches of the Canadian company, of which the occupants of the spy pit were members, and almost simultaneously with the explosion, Lieut. Tourtelle struck Irving a sharp blow in the face with the back of his hand.

"There!" he said viciously, with apparently no effort to subdue the tone of his voice in accord with the strict precautionary rules of such positions. "See that you keep your thoughts to yourself hereafter or I'll send you back to report to the captain."

Irving was astonished, as well as angered at this treatment. He was sure there was no call even for a reprimand, whereas the officer had spoken in tones quite loud enough for the enemy to hear fifty, or possibly a hundred, yards away. In fact, he was sure that if the "second looie" had any reflection in him at all, he must have experienced a thrill of apprehension very soon afterward lest the sound of his voice had been heard by some of his superior officers in the front trenches. If so, an inquiry into its meaning most certainly would follow.

Of course, – Irving resented the uncalled-for exhibition of

brutality just exhibited by Lieut. Tourtelle, but he had too much military sense to show his resentment by look or act. Instead, he decided to take his punishment and the accompanying rebuke as provocative of a little self-discipline and to profit from the experience, in spite of the injustice that went with it.

"I never did like that fellow from the first day I met him," Private Ellis told himself, grinding his teeth with rage under the first impulse of revenge. "Now I know him to be the very sort I thought he was. Nobody but a coward would do what he did. He knows he'd never dare to meet me on even terms. I'd clean him up so thoroughly there wouldn't be anything for a minnenwerfer to smell if one came along and dropped onto the spot where he ought to be. Goodness! there's one now."

The "minnie" referred to in Irving's soliloquy lighted right in the communication trench not more than 200 feet from the outlook pit in which the officer and the private were stationed. The explosion threw up a mass of earth, several bucketfuls of which came down into the pit as if from a giant pepper-box. One stone about the size of two fists struck Irving on his left shoulder, and for several minutes the boy feared some of the bones were broken or the joint dislocated.

But it proved to be only a bruiser and presently the young soldier was using his arm confidently, although with considerable pain. In the excitement that followed almost immediately after the explosion of this shell, he forgot the injury, although under ordinary circumstances, every movement of his left arm must

have been more or less painful.

There was no shriek of warning preceding the next explosion fifty feet to the right, such as had called forth the whispered "look out" from Private Ellis that was rebuked with a blow of the hand and an equally unmilitary reprimand from the second lieutenant. But it was much more mighty in force and sound. It tore up the ground almost, it seemed, to the very edge of the pit in which the outpost was located. Strange enough, too, not nearly as much of the upheaved earth fell back into the pit as had fallen there after the explosion of the first shell. Irving felt that he knew the reason.

"That was a minnie dead sure," he told himself with a shudder. "I like the others much better. You know when they're coming and maybe can dodge 'em. But a minnie never gives any warning. They've spotted this outpost and the next one'll probably wipe us out. We'll never know what hit us."

Evidently something of this sort was going on in the mind of Lieut. Tourtelle, for suddenly he darted back through the communication trench toward the front line.

"That's funny," Irving muttered under his breath. "He's ducked without giving any order to me. What'll I do-stick? I feel like sticking just to show him that I'm made of different stuff. But no, I guess I hadn't better. He's just mean enough to report that he ordered me back, but I disobeyed his order."

CHAPTER II

IRVING'S IDEA

Private Ellis had not been back in the front line trench long before he had good cause to congratulate himself for resisting the temptation to offer himself as an example of bravery in the face of the cowardly actions of the second lieutenant. A second minnenwerfer dropped unannounced right into the pit they had just left and the size of the bowl-shaped listening post was increased many times.

"Now, if I were an officer and in position to make suggestions, I'd advise that that pit be remanned in about half an hour," Irving mused. "The boches, no doubt, have a report of the success of their last shot, and will naturally assume that the place has been put out of commission as a lookout, and the occupants reduced to their original elements. I believe that hole in the ground is just as serviceable as it ever was to play peek-a-boo at Heinie."

Lieut. Tourtelle was in the trench within a few feet of Irving and the latter would have made an effort to get the proposition to him if it had not been for the experience he had had with the insufferable nature of the officer in the listening pit.

"I wish it weren't against orders to whisper in the front trenches—that is, when you have something of importance to communicate to the higher-up," the boy continued to himself.

"I'd really like to go out there and try it again."

At this moment someone took hold of his arm-the sore one, as the pain in his shoulder reminded him-and gave it a pull. This was as much as to say, "Follow me." He obeyed, and soon reached the communication trench that connected the first and second line trenches. His leader, a first lieutenant named Osborne, led the way through this trench back to the second line. During the passage, Irving became conscious of the fact that others were following along behind. What was up, young Ellis wondered. It was not time for him to be relieved, for he had been in the trenches only about fifteen hours.

He was not long kept in doubt. Immediately on their arrival at the second line, Lieut. Osborne gathered them together-one officer and five privates-and gave the following instructions in low tones:

"I want you boys to go out beyond the barbed wire and see what you can find out. Remember your stock instructions. Don't get into any fights. If you meet anybody, retreat. We want to find the location of any patrols of theirs out in No Man's Land. Look out for evidences of their work laying mines, repairing barbed wire, sinking listening pits, or anything of the sort. Then get back as soon as possible, keeping your bearings and the locations of your discoveries well in mind. If any 'very lights' go up, you must lie or stand still, or remain unwaveringly in your positions and attitudes until they go out, unless the light is directly between you and our trenches. In that case, you must duck and make

the best of your way back under a hail of bullets, for you'll be seen. You will be armed only with pistols, hand grenades, and trench knives. Use the bombs or pistols only to save yourselves from death or capture. Remember it is information we want from you, not scalps. You will be under charge of Second Lieutenant Tourtelle."

Irving's heart went "way down" in his hob-nailed shoes at this latter announcement. He had had no idea who his companions during this patrol excursion were to be, for the night had fallen heavy and it was difficult for those in the group to recognize identities in one another's dimly silhouetted forms. The last information handed to them was almost enough to cause Private Ellis to do something desperate. As a substitute for the impulse he did the thing that had been uppermost in his mind most of the time since he left the listening post out in No Man's Land.

"Lieutenant," he said; "may I offer a suggestion which, it seems to me, would be of service to us right now?"

"Certainly, Ellis," the officer responded encouragingly. "What is it?"

"It seems to me that that pit that was increased to the size of a small volcano crater since Lieut. Tourtelle and I left it could be used with almost perfect safety now," the boy said eagerly. "The boches won't be expecting anybody to use it now. They, no doubt, think they've settled the question of its usefulness for all time to come. Now, if you'd send a couple of machine guns out there with some men to operate them, we could report back

at that point to them and they could do quick execution. After they'd done their work, they could run back to our front line and the boches 'u'd have a merry time dropping some more minnies into an empty bowl."

Lieut. Osborne was quick to see the value of the suggestion.

"That's a good idea, Ellis," he said in tone of hearty approval, "and I'm going to do that very thing. Lieut. Tourtelle, see that these men are supplied with pistols, grenades and trench knives, or persuasion sticks, as they prefer, while I get the machine gunners."

CHAPTER III

IN NO MAN'S LAND

Private Ellis felt fully compensated for the treatment he had received from the second lieutenant by the recognition and adoption of his suggestion to utilize the "minnenwerfered listening pit" for the purpose for which it was originally intended. Fully an hour had elapsed since this pit had been converted into a miniature crater, and not another explosion had taken place in the vicinity. It seemed, indeed, that he had not erred in his surmise that the enemy had checked up the results of their firing and concluded that any more shells dropped at this point would be a waste of ammunition.

But Irving was not without misgiving as the party started out through the communication trench for their patrolling and machine gun battery headquarters out in No Man's Land. The fact that Lieut. Tourtelle had been put in command of this expedition dampened his spirits and caused him to fear disaster. He fought hard against this apprehension. It had been too dark for him to discern from the "second looie's" countenance how that officer received the adoption of Private Ellis' suggestion, but he was certain it was not accepted with the best of grace. He could well picture in his mind a darkening of the countenance of "the turtle," a clenching of his hands, and a dogged sullenness of

demeanor as the ill-natured officer contemplated the favor shown the boy whom he evidently hated for no good reason whatever.

Irving renamed the second lieutenant "the turtle" in a kind of subconscious way. It was not done with malice aforethought. The term just came to his mind, like a flash, and was inspired, no doubt, by the contemptible conduct of the "shave-tail," as flippant military fancy has dubbed the "second looie," and by the play of idea suggested in the spelling of his name.

The communication trench was partly a tunnel. From the front line as far as the barbed-wire entanglements it was just a plain trench, seven or eight feet deep. Then it became a subterranean passage with about two feet of earth overhead, continuing thus until beyond the wire belt, when it opened overhead again. When the patrol reached the spot where the first "minnie" exploded, they found it necessary to proceed with special caution, for the passage was blocked there on both sides of the crater with heaps of earth. However, they managed to pass this place safely, and presently were in the listening pit that had recently been very much increased in capacity with minnenwerfer aid.

A period of waiting and listening followed the arrival at this "crater." Not a word was uttered, not even a whisper. Everybody gave the keenest attention of which his senses were capable to everything that offered stimulation to eye or ear. However, their careful looking and listening was unrewarded with aught save what appeared to be the most unwarlike silence and inactivity in the immediate vicinity. Now and then in the distance could

be heard the thunder of heavy cannon or the nasty spit-snap of machine guns.

Conditions appearing to be satisfactory, Lieut. Tourtelle gave the agreed signal, which consisted of placing one hand on the left shoulder of each of the scouts, and the latter climbed up over the sloping embankment at several points in the big cup and crept cautiously out over No Man's Land.

By this time the fog had lifted, and stars were beginning to peep out through rifts in the cloud-swept sky. Added to the muddiness of the ground, the chill of the atmosphere rendered life in this sector exceedingly uncomfortable.

Each member of this patrol went alone out over the rising slope of land that lay between the front line trenches of the Canadians and the common enemy of the Allies. They either crouched low or crawled on all fours. Each scout was assigned to a section of the territory as clearly defined as possible in order that there might be no crossing of paths or mistaking one another for members of a boche patrol.

Irving took a course to the right, advancing with a cautious, low crouch. His instructions were to proceed about 100 yards along a line parallel to the trenches and then advance toward the enemy line to see what he could discover.

He proceeded the distance stipulated southward as nearly as he could estimate over a half-mud and half-sod surface and then found himself close to a thicket of low bushes, the extent of which he knew to be not very great, for he had observed this

feature of the terrain in the daylight. He decided that he ought to examine these bushes carefully, but realized that he must not take much time for the investigation, as each member of the patrol had been limited to half an hour in which to gather material for his report.

Private Ellis, therefore, decided to make a detour around the bushes, listening meanwhile for any sound of moving bodies among the leaves and twigs. The detection of such sounds would be ample reason for sweeping the patch with machine gun bullets.

He made almost the entire circuit without detecting the faintest noise that could command the respect of his suspicion, and was about to turn around and creep back toward the enemy lines, when a bunch of "very lights," fired from boche pistols, threw their brilliance over the scene. The unwelcome illumination was prolonged in a manner that Irving had not witnessed before. The lights floated down slowly, being suspended in the air by small parachute arrangements that opened out with the increasing resistance of the air.

But something else startled the boy even more than these lights. Instinctively he remained stock still in the crouching position in which the illumination caught him. But right in front of him, not more than twenty feet away were the figures of two soldiers. They were standing erect and facing each other. One of the faces was turned well toward Private Ellis, who could hardly smother an exclamation of astonishment as he recognized him.

It was Lieut. Tourtelle!

"What in the world does he think he's doing?" Irving questioned to himself. "He doesn't seem to be very anxious to protect himself. He hasn't a pistol, knife or bomb in his hand."

The lights went out, and presently a new cause for wonder came to the ears of the crouching boy.

"Kamerad!"

Could he believe his senses? No, he wouldn't. It came to him very clearly, that utterance, from the spot where Lieut. Tourtelle stood. And yet, this was impossible. It must surely have been the enemy soldier who uttered the word of friendly greeting.

CHAPTER IV

"KAMERAD!"

"That's a piece of boche treachery as sure as I'm a Yank fighting with the Canadians," was Irving's speedy conclusion after witnessing the scene exposed by the lights and hearing the salute which he decided must have come from the enemy scout. "That's the way they work it! They're noted for treachery of that very sort."

"Kamerad!"

The salute was repeated, scarcely above a whisper, but clear enough for Irving to hear it distinctly. And with the utterance of that word another thrill of apprehension, doubt, confusion, electrified the mind and body of the listening scout, who had not been discovered by Tourtelle and the boches when the lights illuminated the field, undoubtedly, because he happened to be crouching close to a bush large enough to cast a shadow about him.

"My!" exclaimed the boy under his breath; "I'd 'ave sworn that word came from the very spot where Tourtelle was standing. They can't 'ave changed positions so quickly. And yet, I must be mistaken. Common sense tells me it must 'ave been the boche who gave that salute. I wonder what's the matter with my hearing.

"But I'll have to go to that miserable 'shave-tail's' rescue if the

other fellow plays a trick on him. I think I'll get close and see what's going on."

Irving crept cautiously toward the spot where he had seen the second lieutenant when the lights blazed forth. The distance was so short that he fancied he ought to have been able to see both the officer and the enemy scout from his position near the bush. The boche, unless he had moved since the lights went out, was a similar distance away from the watcher and about twenty-five feet to Private Ellis' right.

In a few seconds Irving reached approximately the spot where he had seen Lieut. Tourtelle, when the "very lights" illuminated the vicinity, and was surprised and just a little worried on failing to find him still there. Then he began to look around him to see if his eyes could not pierce the surrounding darkness far enough to discover the form of the officer. His search was interrupted by another startling incident.

Something struck the calf of his right leg a rather severe blow, and the boy gripped his trench-knife in one hand and his pistol in the other, ready to defend himself if attacked. Nothing further of disturbing nature followed immediately, and Irving stooped down to examine the object that had struck him. It was a short, stout club of the kind known in No Man's Land as a "persuader stick," which can be used effectively, like a policeman's billy, in the dark.

"Who in the world threw that? – not the boche, surely," the boy muttered. "It's like the one I've seen in 'the turtle's"

possession; but what could he want to throw it back here for?"

"Kamerad!"

"There it goes again," buzzed through Irving's head. "I don't believe it's a trap set for me, but maybe it is for the 'looie,' and he may be just fool enough to fall for it. I owe it to-to-Uncle Sam to save him, if I can, though I'm afraid Uncle Sam 'u'd be better off without 'im."

Private Ellis put his knife and pistol away, gripped his club, and advanced toward the spot whence the last "kamerad" seemed to have come. As he moved ahead slowly he became conscious gradually that a dark object stood before him a few yards away. Would he be able to determine whether it was friend or foe? He was in doubt on this question and determined to exercise the greatest care and caution.

He moved around in a semi-circular path to the other side of the object that had attracted his attention. But he had scarcely done this when the presence of another and similar obstruction to his vision caused him to stop and remain motionless.

This object was moving slowly and with seeming caution toward the other one. His attitude and manner were not clear because of the darkness, so that Irving could not interpret his purpose from any such indication.

"Kamerad!"

This time there could be no mistake from whom of the two scouts the salute came. It was from the one who apparently had thrown his "persuader stick" away, the one who was nearer the

spot where he had seen Lieut. Tourtelle during the illumination.

"What's he doing-surrendering?"

Irving might have suspected that the officer in charge of this patrol was working a "boche trick" on a boche if it had not been for the fact that he had thrown his stick away. But this act made it appear that a panic had seized him and he was signaling his desire to surrender because he feared to enter into mortal combat with the enemy scout.

"Why doesn't he retreat if he's afraid to fight?" Irving wondered. "He could do that with perfect grace, for he's under orders not to fight unless he has to. But he seems to be advancing right toward Heinie without any reason for doing it. Maybe he's going to shove a pistol in that fellow's face, but it looks to me more as if he's lost 'is senses from fright. Anyway, I'm goin' to help 'im just for the sake of Uncle Sam. I'll hit that boche a tap on the head that'll make 'im see the Star Spangled Banner."

The boy with the club quickened his steps silently, for he was skilled with the "moccasin tread" even on hobnails. Moreover, the softness of the wet earth was in his favor. In about a minute he had stolen around behind the boche, who was advancing cautiously toward the "kamerad saluter."

He was morally certain that the soldier now within ten feet of him was an enemy, but he resolved to be very careful lest he attack one of his own comrades. So he continued to approach with the utmost caution, hoping to identify the fellow by an inspection of his uniform. In the darkness this was an exceedingly

difficult thing to do, for there is a general similarity in the make of the uniforms of soldiers of most nations, so that when silhouetted they differ very little to any but a keenly observing expert.

But Irving was not forced to depend alone upon his vision in the darkness of the night to verify his identification of the two patrol scouts. There was another salute in low tone, and this time an answer was given.

"Kamerad!"

"Was willst du, hund?"

Crack!

The "persuader stick" in the hand of the Yank swung with sharp impact against the head of the boche just under his helmet. The "Canadian-hund" hater dropped in his tracks.

CHAPTER V

"THE TURTLE" IS WOUNDED

The next instant Lieut. Tourtelle turned and scuttled away as fast as he could scuttle. Irving's first impulse was to follow him, but he checked it.

However, knowing well the pyramid fashion in which boche patrols work in No Man's Land, the boy governed his next actions with caution that took this into consideration. The man he had just put hors de combat may have been the "apex" of such a "pyramid," which is a very treacherous sort of trap. It is the game of the "apex" to retreat and induce a lone enemy scout to follow him if possible. A short distance on toward the boche trenches, perhaps twenty or thirty feet apart, the distance depending upon the darkness of the night, are two more Heinies, who close in behind like a pair of pincers as the intended victim passes the line of their positions. Still a little farther on are two other soldiers, the "cornerstones" of the "pyramid," who also close in upon the victim just as the attack is made. His capture is inevitable.

Irving did not purpose to be caught in any such trap; so he moved away twenty or thirty feet from the scene of his victorious exploit and waited and watched for developments.

They were not long coming. Apparently the Yank's suspicion of a "pyramid trick" was not in error. Apparently also the other

component parts of the man-trap had heard the crack of Private Ellis's club on the head of the "apex" of the "pyramid," for they soon were gathered around the unconscious form of their comrade and muttering a torrent of "hund curses."

"Gee! I must get back in a hustle and we'll get those Huns," was Irving's next thought. "No doubt they'll carry that fellow to their trench, and necessarily they'll go pretty slow."

He scuttled back to the listening pit even more rapidly, if possible, than "the turtle" had scuttled, and soon was with his comrade scouts.

"Is everybody here?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes, you're the last one out," Lieut. Tourtelle replied in, Irving fancied, a sneering tone.

"Then sweep that section right over there" – indicating with his right hand. "There are several boches 200 yards in that direction carrying in a comrade that I cracked on the head."

The other scouts had returned with information of interest to the machine gunners, and presently the "typewriters" were rattling away with a hail of steel-jacketed messages. Cries and groans from several quarters of the arc swept by the guns indicated the effectiveness of the firing. Irving was rewarded for his evening's work by hearing several evidences of hits from the neighborhood of the scene of his adventure.

After the firing, there was a quick retreat to the Canadian front line. They got back before the Heinies were able to collect their wits and concentrate an answering fire upon the pit which

undoubtedly they thought they had recently converted into a combined shambles and tomb.

This last statement is true, but misleading. The patrol did not get back without some punishment. One machine gun of the enemy got busy just before the scouts leaped back into their trench. Again we are misleading. One of the returning scouts did not leap into the trench—he fell. It was Lieut. Tourtelle.

Irving sprang to his aid, lifting the officer to his feet and supporting him thus. But his efforts were of little use. The wounded man had fainted.

Another soldier offered assistance, and together they carried him to a lighted dugout. There speedy first-aid remedies brought the wounded soldier back to consciousness, but it was evident that he was severely injured.

A telephone call in the dugout soon brought a team of stretcher bearers, and in a short time Lieut. Tourtelle was being conveyed to a Red Cross ambulance.

Next day Irving's left shoulder was so sore that he was unable to use the arm. He tried to conceal his embarrassment, but it was observed by Sergt. MacDonald, who reported it to Lieut. Osborne. Then followed an examination, which proved that the young American's shoulder was discolored and swollen as a result of the wound he received following the explosion of minnenwerfer No. 1 near the listening pit early in the evening, and he was ordered behind the lines for treatment.

CHAPTER VI

A LITTLE HISTORY

Irving was not confined to an invalid's couch at the hospital behind the Canadian lines. His left arm was put in a sling and his shoulder bandaged in hot cloths, frequently changed. It was found that the stone that struck him had strained and bruised the muscles and ligaments severely, so that the subsequent use of the arm had brought about a condition resembling results of a bad sprain.

He was in the hospital a little over a week, and although he was not subjected to any of the heroic treatment that is administered to many of the wounded, yet the exciting thrills that had filled his short experience in trench and No Man's Land with "lots of pep and pepper" had a very fitting sequel in his hospital sojourn, very much unlike the usual wearisome wait of the wounded.

As we have intimated, Private Irving Ellis was an American of the United States brand. His home was in Buffalo, N.Y. His father was a ship captain employed by a company that operated a line of passenger and freight steamers on the Great Lakes. As a result the boy grew up a "fresh water tar." He worked with his father on the latter's boat most of the time during the summer vacations after he reached his teens.

The steamer of which Mr. Ellis had charge touched at several

Canadian as well as United States ports. In one of these lived an uncle of Irving's, John Douglas, and the latter's family.

Mr. Ellis had married a Scotch Canadian bride, and as both families lived near Lake Erie, there was frequent visiting between them back and forth across the mid-water line.

As a result, Irving's best chum of his schoolboy days was his cousin, Bob Douglas. They were about the same age, and both were fond of life on the lake. Bob also was given work under Mr. Ellis's command in the summer when he became old enough to be of service on board.

Soon after England declared war against Germany, Canada began the organization of an army to aid her mother country in the great fight, and Bob was one of the first to enlist. On the day of his enlistment he wrote a long letter full of fiery patriotism to his cousin over in the United States, and perhaps you can imagine the sensation this communication created in the family of the steamboat captain.

But no, you can't, for the big sensation was not immediate. Of course, there was a good deal of excitement among Irving's brothers and sisters—two boys and two girls, all younger than he. Cousin Bob was a real hero in their minds, and Irving envied him. The violation of the Belgian treaty, the storming of Liege and the invasion of France across the Belgian frontier were still fresh in the minds of the people everywhere. The "scrap of paper" was still waving like a red flag in the face of popular demand for the inviolability of international honor.

Well, two days later, Irving electrified the family circle at the breakfast table with the announcement that he wished to enlist. Nobody protested; nobody approved. In fact, Mr. Ellis had paved the way for his oldest son's wish by expressing the opinion that the United States would be drawn into the war before it was over. Even the younger children were so imbued with a sense of the seriousness of the great struggle as a result of things they had heard father, mother, and older brother say, that they just looked awed when Irving's announcement came.

Mr. and Mrs. Ellis had too good sense of the logic of things to start an argument to dissuade their son from his unexpected desire. They rather decided upon a plan of silence, which put an end to discussion of the war in their household. The radical change that suddenly transformed the family conversations was almost grewsome in its emptiness; the substitution of silence for talk frequently became embarrassing. But there was one thing that did not stop; that was the arrival of letters from Bob. They came almost with every mail, and Irving devoured them eagerly.

At last the boy was able to stand the embarrassing silence no longer, for the desire to take part in the great struggle against the hosts of a hated military power was growing every day. Mr. and Mrs. Ellis saw the inevitable coming. They knew that they would not forbid their son to enlist when once they were convinced of his deep-seated desire to do so. They could sacrifice their son for a great cause just as well as for country.

"Father, mother, I want to go," the boy said one day.

It was an isolated statement, that would have been Greek to one not intimately familiar with the campaign of silence that had preceded. The consent was given in silence and the subject was not discussed again until Irving began to make preparations for his departure.

He went to Canada and enlisted. Partly through a deliberately planned purpose and partly by good fortune, he was able to get into the regiment with which his cousin was training and a few months later was aboard a transport on a zig-zag, submarine-dodging course for England. After their arrival in France, Irving because of his training in certain technical lines was put in the engineering service, but shortly before the occurrence of the events already related herein, he succeeded in getting a transfer back to his regiment on the plea that he wished to do some real fighting.

Then for the first time he learned that his cousin had been severely wounded and sent back to Canada incapacitated for further service several months before. This information came in a letter from Bob written at home. Two weeks later, while Irving was in the hospital recovering from the injury he received in the listening pit in No Man's Land, another letter came from his cousin, communicating a seemingly innocent but strange bit of news which was destined to have an important bearing on Private Ellis's future experiences as a soldier.

CHAPTER VII

TOURTELLE APOLOGIZES

But something remarkable and of great importance, affecting Irving's soldier career, took place between the time when he entered the hospital and the time when he received the second letter from his cousin at home. The deep significance of the event did not develop at once, but the novelty of the thing kept the attention of interest upon it until the real meaning was uncovered. From that time on the young American soldier's war experiences were a succession of thrills, surprises, and dangerously interesting work.

The field hospital to which he was taken consisted in part of a group of farm buildings that might have served as the nucleus of a village a short distance behind the rear battle line. Everything was slow and uninteresting to him during his first two days at this place. Then came the first incident in the chain of events that was to mean so much to Private Ellis as an American fighter in France.

He received a message from one of the guards patrolling the grounds that a wounded officer in one of the buildings wished to see him. No explanation as to why he had been sent for was given by the bearer of the message. The head nurse of the building would direct him to the man who wished to see him, he was

informed.

Wondering a little who the officer could be and what was the nature of his interest in him, Irving hastened to answer the call. He was conducted by a nurse upstairs in a former rural residence and into a small room, little larger than a closet and occupied by a single patient on an army cot.

On the way he ran over, in his mind, the list of officers with whom he could claim anything in the nature of a personal acquaintance and found it very small. Moreover, he had not known that any of these had been wounded. In this review of acquaintances of both commissioned and non-commissioned rank, however, he missed one who should not have been disregarded, although their intimacy had been of anything but friendly nature. This officer he found lying on the cot in the little room which he now entered. It was Second Lieut. Tourtelle.

The surprise became almost startling when Irving saw the face of the "shavetail" brighten up with a look of apparent eagerness as he recognized the caller. The nurse withdrew immediately and the American soldier was left alone with his strange "comrade enemy" of No Man's Land.

"Hello, Ellis," the "second looie" greeted, extending his right hand to his visitor and making an effort to smile pleasantly. "I sent for you because I wanted to have a talk with you. Sit down on the edge of the cot. Sorry there's no chair here, but I'm not the housekeeper."

This latter "breath of levity" didn't sound bad at all, and Irving

began to have a vague suspicion that there might be an intelligent side to the nature of this young officer who had behaved so brutally toward him. However, he indicated that he preferred to stand and waited patiently for Tourtelle to continue.

"I called you to ask you to do me a favor," the wounded officer continued; "but first I want to apologize for the way I treated you. I won't attempt to explain why I did it because I don't know. But I acted like a bum scoundrel and ought to have been reported for it. The fact that you made no complaint against me shows that you're a real man and makes me feel ashamed of myself."

Irving was rather embarrassed by this unexpected speech on the part of his supposed "comrade-enemy." He could not well reject the profession of humility, and yet he was uncertain just how to take it. Lieut. Tourtelle apparently desired to convey the impression that he was suffering from pangs of deep regret, but although the "pangs" twisted the muscles of his countenance the visitor was unable to convince himself as to the depth of the patient's mental suffering.

"I hope you will forgive me, Ellis," the injured soldier said after a few moments' silence. "I had a spell of very bad temper that night and have regretted my actions ever since. If there's anything I can do to make it right, I'll do it."

This seemed to be as much as any reasonable person could ask under the circumstances; so Irving replied:

"I'm sure I don't bear you any ill will under the circumstances, lieutenant. I admit I was pretty much offended by what you did,

but I'm sure, after what you've just said, I can let bygones be bygones. We must remember that we are fighting a common enemy and it is ridiculous for us to be fighting one another. We ought rather to be helping one another."

"That's an excellent idea," Tourtelle declared. "Now what would you say if I should ask you to do something for me? Would you resent it?"

"I couldn't very well, after the principle I just laid down," Irving answered with the shadow of a smile; "provided it were reasonable," he added.

"Oh, I don't see how there's anything unreasonable in it," the officer replied quickly. "The only thing is, you may think it a very odd request, freakish perhaps. But I think I can explain it satisfactorily. First, let me enlist your sympathy a little by informing you that my wound is more severe than was thought at first. I'm going to lose my left arm. One of the doctors told me today that it would have to be amputated between the elbow and the shoulder."

"That's too bad," Irving said with evidence of fellow feeling for the second lieutenant. "If there were anything I could do to save your arm for you I'd surely do it. But what's the matter?"

"A bad compound fracture and gangrene. The doctor said he'd have to cut it off today or my whole system might be poisoned. But here's the favor I want you to do for me:

"When the doctor told me my arm would have to be cut off, I asked him if it would be possible to save the limb, so I could

take it back home with me."

Irving interrupted this statement with a start of surprise.

"That's what the doctor did when I suggested the idea to him," Tourtelle continued, noting the effect of his suggestion. "He wanted to know why I wished to save the arm, and I replied that it was for two reasons: first, because I thought it would make an excellent souvenir; second, because it was tattooed in a very artistic manner and I don't want to lose the art. I'm of an artistic temperament, and it would break my heart more to lose that bit of tattooing on my arm than to lose the arm and keep the art."

"I think I get you," said Irving with a smile. "You want me to put the arm in alcohol and preserve it, tattooing and all?"

"That's a clever inference, but not quite to the point," Tourtelle commented without much change of expression on his face. "The doctor offered a substitute suggestion, and that's what I'm going to put to you now."

The patient paused a moment or two, and Irving waited expectantly for the next development in the strange narrative of novel events.

CHAPTER VIII

CUBIST ART

"Yes, I am of an artistic temperament," Lieut. Tourtelle continued in a sort of dreamy way, which tended rather to give his audience-of-one "the creeps" than to "soften his soul," as art is supposed to do.

"If he's an artist, he ought to be painting kaisers, crown princes, Hindenburgs, and Ludendorfs with horns on their heads and arrow-tipped tails," he thought grimly. "But maybe he means it all right. Perhaps he really believes he has artistic temperament, but hasn't sized himself up right. A few years ago I thought I could write poetry, but found I couldn't even write an acceptable advertisement in verse for sentimental candy or floating soap. I'll humor 'im a while and see what's on 'is mind."

Tourtelle's mind was wandering now, either with a purpose in view or because of a real genius delusion. He rambled along thus:

"I made a study of art ever since I was old enough to daub with a little box of colors and a paint brush. When I was old enough to attempt something better than a smear, I went to an art school and there made quite a hit with the professors with some of my novel ideas. Then when that craze of the cubists and the futurists swept the country a few years ago, I took it up and made quite a hit with some of my paintings. One painting in particular,

a cubist production representing a basket of eggs spilling down a stairway, was regarded as a student masterpiece. The praise I received over that work intoxicated me, I guess, for I caused a copy of it to be tattooed on my arm by a fellow student.

"Well, the original was lost and I had only the copy on my arm. So, you see, I became very fond of that copy, as the original was acknowledged to be worthy of exhibition along with masterpieces of well known painters. By the way, you remember something of that cubist craze a few years ago, don't you?"

"Yes," Irving replied, "I remember something about it. There was a good deal about it in the magazines. I suppose I recall it because it was so perfectly crazy. Those artists seemed to take great delight in making a human being look as if he had gone through a threshing machine and afterwards raided a hornet's nest."

"You've got the idea exactly-I mean the layman's idea," said the self-styled cubist enthusiastically. "And I don't blame you, in a way. But if you could only have got an artist's view of the idea, you'd look at life a good deal differently. But that's neither here nor there. Oh, yes, it is, too-I forgot myself on the moment. It's here-on my arm-and I want to save it. Now, this is what the doctor told me to do. He told me to peel off the skin where the tattooing is, as soon as the arm is sawed off. That is, he didn't tell me to do it myself, for I'd be in no condition to perform such an operation on my amputated limb. He meant that's the way it should be done. But I don't believe he'd ever look after the job

himself. He'd cut the arm off while I'm under the influence of ether, and that 'u'd be the last I'd ever see of it, including the miniature copy of my painting.

"So I decided to get somebody else to look after the matter, and that's what I called you here for. It isn't much of a job. All you have to do is to cut the skin around the tattooing and peel it off, then pack it in salt to preserve it. The doctor said it would peel off easily and that salt packing would keep the skin and the tattooed colors in good condition. The nurse got me a little box and some salt, so everything is ready as soon as the doctor comes along with his saw."

"When is he coming?" Irving inquired.

"Sometimes this afternoon, he said," Tourtelle replied. "What do you think about it, Ellis? Will you do me the favor?"

"Sure," the private answered with a smile. "I'm sorry you're going to lose your arm, but I'll take care of your cubist art for you with pleasure. I'm really very curious to see what it looks like."

"I'd roll up my sleeve and show you, but I'm afraid I'd hurt my arm," the "second looie" said in response.

"Oh, no," Irving returned hurriedly, "I wouldn't have you do that for anything. But I'll kind o' hang around until the surgeon comes. If I'm not here right on the dot, the nurse'll be able to find me without much trouble."

CHAPTER IX

BOB'S LETTER

Irving almost forgot that there had ever been any difficulty between him and Lieut. Tourtelle in contemplation of the novel service he had promised to perform. Perhaps his remembrance of that trouble had been smothered by his curiosity as to the character of this tattooed copy of a "Basket of Eggs Spilling Down Stairs."

The surgeon came at 3 o'clock in the afternoon and got busy at once. However, before administering the ether, he acknowledged an introduction to Private Ellis and promised to "skin the tattoo off the arm" after the amputation and turn it over to its delegated caretaker.

Irving was permitted to be present during the operation. He watched with a good deal of curiosity for a first vision of the cubist art on the patient's arm, and was not at all disappointed. It surely was a clever piece of work, from the point of view of a votary of this sort of art. This was the conclusion of all who saw the operation, and it was the general subject of conversation until the arm was removed.

The surgeon took more interest in the subject now than he had taken at any time previously. This doubtless was due to the special preparations made by the patient for the preservation of

the tattooed skin. While the ether was being administered by a nurse, he bared the wounded arm and examined the "copy of quaint art" with interest.

"What does he call this picture?" the "military sawbones" asked as he gazed at the seemingly unmethodical arrangement of distorted "cubes" of all sorts of shapes and angles.

The patient was not yet unconscious, although the nurse was dropping ether into the mask covering his mouth and nose. In a low dreamy voice he answered the question thus:

"It's 'The Basket of Eggs Spilling Down Stairs.'"

The surgeon and the two attending nurses laughed at this answer.

"His mind is wandering under the anæsthetic," said the surgeon.

"No, it isn't," Irving interposed. "He told you the same thing he told me. You see, he's a cubist. That's his idea of art. That tattooing on his arm is a copy of a picture painted by him when he was a student in an art school. That's the story he told me this morning."

The expression on the surgeon's face went through a motion-picture metamorphosis while the boy onlooker was making his statement. First it indicated a kind of professional resentment at the contradiction; then followed a wave of incredulity, succeeded by an enigmatical smirk. As he cast a glance of still-smirking amusement at young Ellis, the latter interpreted it to mean that he questioned the sanity of the patient.

"If I were to perform this operation in the manner that cubists execute their art, he'd probably want to sue me for malpractice," said the scientific man as he finished preparation for the use of the knife.

The operation was quickly performed, and the surgeon obligingly peeled off the portion of skin containing the cubist tattooing and handed it to Irving. The latter proceeded at once to pack it in the box of salt provided for the purpose, and said to the nurse in charge:

"I'll lay it here on the bed beside his pillow, so that he'll find it when he wakes up. Will you please call his attention to it?"

The nurse promised to do as requested, and Irving left the building and heard nothing more of the incident for several days. At last his shoulder recovered from its lameness and he was ordered back to the front.

Before returning to the trenches, however, he received a letter from his cousin, Bob, that stirred in him a thrill of excitement that no sensational activities of battle could have aroused. The affair thus revealed over a distance of thousands of miles confronted Irving with what seemed at first a most remarkable coincidence. But the boy was unable to accept it as such without first making an inquiry about certain suspicious circumstances. He suspected at once that something was doing that ought to be laid before army officials for investigation.

"I'm getting along first rate, Irving," Bob wrote. "My wounds have all healed. I was pretty badly shot to pieces. One of the

bones of my left leg was pretty much shattered. They thought, at first they'd have to amputate the limb, but it was saved, thank goodness, although the knee will always be stiff. I had half a dozen shell and machine gun wounds in my body, too, though fortunately all of them were well removed from vital spots. But, although these injuries were as bad as one would care to receive, all of them together were not nearly as dangerous or uncomfortable as the dose of gas I got. Believe me, Irving, I don't want any more of that. If you want my opinion of it, I'll tell you I think it's more cruel than submarine warfare where they sink passenger ships without warning. The doctors thought for a while that I was going to have the 'con,' but I'm about over the effects of my dose now."

"Well, while I was convalescing, I had to have some amusement-I mean after I was able to be up and around, but hardly strong enough to shovel snow. Say, we've had some awful heavy snow storms this winter. Regular blizzards, with snow over your shoetops when you're standing on your head. That's snowing some, isn't it?

"Well, about the time I was able to get around without doing myself any harm-the gas effects kept me pretty weak quite a while, - I went up to Toronto to visit some friends. I was invited up there by one of the boys who was gassed at the same time I was. He and others had organized a 'Gas club,' consisting of fellows who had been gassed in the war. Grewsome idea, wasn't it? But it took famously. They wanted me to join, and I went up

there and was initiated.

"Well, while I was up there, I saw considerable outdoor life. Several of us went hunting on snowshoes one day, and that capped the climax of my physical exertions. I ought to have been more careful, for I was not strong enough yet for such life. Well, I became ill on the way, and the boys got me to a hospital in the outskirts of the city and a physician examined me. The doctor said there was nothing serious the matter with me, only over-exertion in my weakened condition, so I did not notify father and mother.

"Two days later the doctor said I was in good enough condition to leave the hospital, but advised me to go straight home and not try any more such vigorous exercise until I was in condition to return to the trenches. This was in the evening, and I decided to remain in the hospital until morning. I was sitting up when the doctor called, and after he left I went out into the hall to find a telephone to call up my friend and tell him of my plan to return home next day.

"The building is an old brick structure that undoubtedly would have been condemned for hospital purposes if the interior woodwork had not been of the best material and well put together. However, the layout was decidedly old-fashioned and confusing to one accustomed to modern architecture. Anyway, I got lost, so to speak, in the hall while trying to find my way to the stairway.

"I found a stairway, but soon realized that it was not the one

I wanted, and was about to turn back, when something caught my attention and held it for several minutes. I was on a kind of half-floor landing before an entrance into a low rear addition, and from that position found myself gazing into a laboratory in which something very strange was going on. Three men were in the room, one of them little more than a boy and in the khaki uniform of a soldier; the other two in civilian clothes. In the upper half of the door were two glass panels, through which I could see very clearly, and the transom over the door was swung partly open.

"There was something peculiar about the two older men which almost fascinated me. Both had a decidedly foreign look. One was smooth-shaven, except for a heavy kaiser mustache; the other, the older of these two, wore a full beard.

"The young fellow in khaki was seated on a chair, with his left arm bared above the elbow, resting on a table. The other two men were working over the arm in a most studious manner. Over them was a brilliant calcium light which illuminated their work. I could see the arm very plainly and it took me only a minute or two to determine what the two older men were doing to it.

"They were tattooing the arm, and a most remarkable kind of tattooing it was. They were extremely careful with their work and progressed slowly. Judging from the care they took and the slowness with which they progressed, they must have worked on that arm several days. Also, spread out before them, was a small sheet of white paper, to which they referred frequently.

"It is hard to describe to you the appearance of the result of their work, but I'll send you a copy of the original they were working from and explain how I got it. I think you'll agree with me that it looks more like a piece of kindergarten patchwork than anything else imaginable.

"While I was gazing in a kind of fascination at the strange scene, the man with the kaiser mustache turned suddenly and saw me. His next movement was just as sudden and much more astonishing. He sprang to the door, flung it open, and before I could realize what was taking place he had seized me by the arm and was dragging me into the laboratory. I struggled to prevent him from getting me inside, but, because of my weakened condition, was unsuccessful. My next impulse was to cry out for help, but the situation seemed to me so ridiculous that I decided I would only make myself look foolish by so doing. This hospital was surely a highly respectable institution, I reasoned, and the misunderstanding of which I was a victim would soon be cleared up. Perhaps these men thought I was a spying meddler bent on some malicious mischief.

"After they got me inside-for the other men sprang to my captor's assistance-they closed and locked the door, also the transom, and began to quiz me as to what I was doing out in the hall. I was too sore at their treatment of me to give an explanation and demanded what they meant by their actions. I saw that they were very uneasy about something and that made me bolder. It soon dawned upon me that they had been doing something

that they wanted to keep secret. That resolved me to get back at them with interest, and while they were busy with their excited demands, I got my wits together to devise some sort of trick that would show them it wasn't quite so easy to browbeat me as they seemed to imagine.

"All three of them huddled together right in front of me and rained questions at me excitedly. This suited me first rate as soon as I had decided what to do. I wasn't afraid of any desperate violence on their part; the place was too public for that. I retreated slowly to the table at which they had been working and leaned back resting my hands on it. They never caught on to what I was up to, but pressed close to me with their excited questions. I met these with noncommittal replies, and at the same time got one hand closer and closer to the mysterious slip of paper on the table. It was not more than six inches long and three wide, and I figured that if I could get one hand on it I might crumple it in my fist without their observing what I was doing. After I had been dragged into the room, I saw the young fellow hurriedly draw down the sleeve of his shirt over the tattooed portion of his forearm. He seemed so nervous while doing this that my suspicion of something wrong became very acute; and yet, the mystery could hardly have been more baffling.

"Well, I got my hand on the paper and crumpled it in my fist, and they never got onto my trick, at least, not until I got out of that room and away from them. I was now ready to answer their questions. I told them I was a patient in the hospital and was just

trying to find my way to the office and started down the wrong stairway-that was all there was to it. I then demanded that they release me at once or I would make serious trouble for them. They asked me my name, and I told them. Then the bearded man left the laboratory, and I presume he went to the office to make inquiry about me, for he came back in a few minutes and reported that he guessed I was all right. But they held a whispered conversation in German-I caught enough of their words to be sure of that-and then told me I might go. But before the door was unlocked, the bearded man apologized, as nearly as I can remember, in the following words:

"I hope you will forgive our rough conduct, but we are engaged in very important government work, and when we saw you looking through the glass at us and apparently listening to our conversation, we presumed you were a German spy. You have satisfied us that you are all right, and we recommend that, as you love your country and wish to aid us to win the war, you keep this affair strictly to yourself."

"I was astonished and more confused than ever. That statement convicted them of something on the face of it, but of what I could not conjecture. The idea that a responsible secret agent of the government should make such a speech as that under any circumstances was simply ridiculous. I was mighty sure they were not doing work for the government. They were trying to cover something up, but what I could make no rational guess.

"I decided not to remain in the hospital any longer than it

would take to get my few belongings together and pay my bill. I was afraid they would discover the loss of the paper I had stolen. Well, I got out of that place so rapidly that I had everybody staring at me who beheld my movements.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.