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THE FOREST OF SWORDS:
A STORY OF PARIS AND
THE MARNE

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Story of Paris and the Marne**

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FOREWORD

"The Forest of Swords," while an independent story, based upon the World War, continues the fortunes of John Scott, Philip Lannes, and their friends who have appeared already in "The Guns of Europe." As was stated in the first volume, the author was in Austria and Germany for a month after the war began, and then went to England. He saw the arrival of the Emperor, Francis Joseph, in Vienna, the first striking event in the gigantic struggle, and witnessed the mobilization of their armies by three great nations.

CHAPTER I

IN PARIS

John Scott and Philip Lannes walked together down a great boulevard of Paris. The young American's heart was filled with grief and anger. The Frenchman felt the same grief, but mingled with it was a fierce, burning passion, so deep and bitter that it took a much stronger word than anger to describe it.

Both had heard that morning the mutter of cannon on the horizon, and they knew the German conquerors were advancing. They were always advancing. Nothing had stopped them. The metal and masonry of the defenses at Liège had crumbled before their huge guns like china breaking under stone. The giant shells had scooped out the forts at Maubeuge, Maubeuge the untakable, as if they had been mere eggshells, and the mighty Teutonic host came on, almost without a check.

John had read of the German march on Paris, nearly a half-century before, how everything had been made complete by the genius of Bismarck and von Moltke, how the ready had sprung upon and crushed the unready, but the present swoop of the imperial eagle seemed far more vast and terrible than the earlier rush could have been.

A month and the legions were already before the City of Light. Men with glasses could see from the top of the Eiffel Tower the gray ranks that were to hem in devoted Paris once more, and the government had fled already to Bordeaux. It seemed that everything was lost before the war was fairly begun. The coming of the English army, far too small in numbers, had availed nothing. It had been swept up with the others, escaping from capture or destruction only by a hair, and was now driven back with the French on the capital.

John had witnessed two battles, and in neither had the Germans stopped long. Disregarding their own losses they drove forward, immense, overwhelming, triumphant. He felt yet their very physical weight, pressing upon him, crushing him, giving him no time to breathe. The German war machine was magnificent, invincible, and for the fourth time in a century the Germans, the exulting Kaiser at their head, might enter Paris.

The Emperor himself might be nothing, mere sound and glitter, but back of him was the greatest army that ever trod the planet, taught for half a century to believe in the divine right of kings, and assured now that might and right were the same.

Every instinct in him revolted at the thought that Paris should be trodden under foot once more by the conqueror. The great capital had truly deserved its claim to be the city of light and leading, and if Paris and France were lost the whole world would lose. He could never forget the unpaid debt that his own America owed to France, and he felt how closely interwoven the two republics were in their beliefs and aspirations.

"Why are you so silent?" asked Lannes, half angrily, although John knew that the anger was not for him.

"I've said as much as you have," he replied with an attempt at humor.

"You notice the sunlight falling on it?" said Lannes, pointing to the Arc de Triomphe, rising before them.

"Yes, and I believe I know what you are thinking."

"You are right. I wish he was here now."

John gazed at the great arch which the sun was gilding with glory and he shared with Lannes his wish that the mighty man who had built it to commemorate his triumphs was back with France—for a while at least. He was never able to make up his mind whether Napoleon was good or evil.

Perhaps he was a mixture of both, highly magnified, but now of all times, with the German millions at the gates, he was needed most.

"I think France could afford to take him back," he said, "and risk any demands he might make or enforce."

"John," said Lannes, "you've fought with us and suffered with us, and so you're one of us. You understand what I felt this morning when on the edge of Paris I heard the German guns. They say that we can fight on, after our foes have taken the capital, and that the English will come in greater force to help us. But if victorious Germans march once through the Arc de Triomphe I shall feel that we can never again win back all that we have lost."

A note, low but deep and menacing, came from the far horizon. It might be a German gun or it might be a French gun, but the effect was the same. The threat was there. A shudder shook the frame of Lannes, but John saw a sudden flame of sunlight shoot like a glittering lance from the Arc de Triomphe.

"A sign! a sign!" he exclaimed, his imaginative mind on fire in an instant. "I saw a flash from the arch! It was the soul of the Great Captain speaking! I tell you, Philip, the Republic is not yet lost! I've read somewhere, and so have you, that the Romans sold at auction at a high price the land on which Hannibal's victorious army was camped, when it lay before Rome!"

"It's so! And France has her glorious traditions, too! We won't give up until we're beaten—and not then!"

The gray eyes of Lannes flamed, and his figure seemed to swell. All the wonderful French vitality was personified in him. He put his hand affectionately upon the shoulder of his comrade.

"It's odd, John," he said, "but you, a foreigner, have lighted the spark anew in me."

"Maybe it's because I *am* a foreigner, though, in reality, I'm now no foreigner at all, as you've just said. I've become one of you."

"It's true, John, and I won't forget it. I'm never going to give up hope again. Maybe somebody will arrive to save us at the last. Whatever the great one, whose greatest monument stands there, may have been, he loved France, and his spirit may descend upon Frenchmen."

"I believe it. He had the strength and courage created by a republic, and you have them again, the product of another republic. Look at the flying men, Lannes!"

Lannes glanced up where the aeroplanes hovered thick over Paris, and toward the horizon where the invisible German host with its huge guns was advancing. The look of despair came into his eyes again, but it rested there only a moment. He remembered his new courage and banished it.

"Perhaps I ought to be in the sky myself with the others," he said, "but I'd only see what I don't like to see. The *Arrow* and I can't be of any help now."

"You brought me here in the *Arrow*, Lannes," said John, seeking to assume a light tone. "Now what do you intend to do with me? As everybody is leaving Paris you ought to get me out of it."

"I hardly know what to do. There are no orders. I've lost touch with the commander of our flying corps, but you're right in concluding that we shouldn't remain in Paris. Now where are we to go?"

"We'll make no mistake if we seek the battle front. You know I'm bound to rejoin my company, the Strangers, if I can. I must report as soon as possible to Captain Colton."

"That's true, John, but I can't leave Paris until tomorrow. I may have orders to carry, I must obtain supplies for the *Arrow*, and I wish to visit once more my people on the other side of the Seine."

"Suppose you go now, and I'll meet you this afternoon in the Place de l'Opéra."

"Good. Say three o'clock. The first to arrive will await the other before the steps of the Opera House?"

John nodded assent and Lannes hurried away. Young Scott followed his figure with his eyes until it disappeared in the crowd. A back may be an index to a man's strength of mind, and he saw that Lannes, head erect and shoulders thrown back, was walking with a rapid and springy step. Courage was obviously there.

But John, despite his own strong heart, could not keep from feeling an infinite sadness and pity, not for Lannes, but for all the three million people who inhabited the City of Light, most of whom were fleeing now before the advance of the victorious invader. He could put himself in their place. France held his deepest sympathy. He felt that a great nation, sedulously minding its own business, trampled upon and robbed once before, was now about to be trampled upon and robbed again. He could not subscribe to the doctrine, that might was right.

He watched the fugitives a long time. They were crowding the railway stations, and they were departing by motor, by cart and on foot. Many of the poorer people, both men and women, carried packs on their backs. The boulevards and the streets were filled with the retreating masses.

It was an amazing and stupefying sight, the abandonment by its inhabitants of a great city, a city in many ways the first in the world, and it gave John a mighty shock. He had been there with his uncle and Mr. Anson in the spring, and he had seen nothing but peace and brightness. The sun had glittered then, as it glittered now over the Arc de Triomphe, the gleaming dome of the Invalides and the golden waters of the Seine. It was Paris, soft, beautiful and bright, the Paris that wished no harm to anybody.

But the people were going. He could see them going everywhere. The cruel, ancient times when cities were destroyed or enslaved by the conqueror had come back, and the great Paris that the world had known so long might become lost forever.

The stream of fugitives, rich and poor, mingled, poured on without ceasing. He did not know where they were going. Most of them did not know themselves. He saw a great motor, filled high with people and goods, break down in the streets, and he watched them while they worked desperately to restore the mechanism. And yet there was no panic. The sound of voices was not high. The Republic was justifying itself once more. Silent and somberly defiant, the inhabitants were leaving Paris before the giant German guns could rain shells upon the unarmed.

It was three or four hours until the time to meet Lannes, and drawn by an overwhelming curiosity and anxiety he began the climb of the Butte Montmartre. If observers on the Eiffel Tower could see the German forces approaching, then with the powerful glasses he carried over his shoulder he might discern them from the dome of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart.

As he made his way up the ascent through the crooked and narrow little streets he saw many eyes, mostly black and quick, watching him. This by night was old Paris, dark and dangerous, where the Apache dwelled, and by day in a fleeing city, with none to restrain, he might be no less ruthless.

But John felt only friendliness for them all. He believed that common danger would knit all Frenchmen together, and he nodded and smiled at the watchers. More than one pretty Parisian, not of the upper classes, smiled back at the American with the frank and open face.

Before he reached the Basilica a little rat of a young man stepped before him and asked:

"Which way, Monsieur?"

He was three or four years older than John, wearing uncommonly tight fitting clothes of blue, a red cap with a tassel, and he was about five feet four inches tall. But small as he was he seemed to be made of steel, and he stood, poised on his little feet, ready to spring like a leopard when he chose.

The blue eyes of the tall American looked steadily into the black eyes of the short Frenchman, and the black eyes looked back as steadily. John was fast learning to read the hearts and minds of men through their eyes, and what he saw in the dark depths pleased him. Here were cunning and yet courage; impudence and yet truth; caprice and yet honor. Apache or not, he decided to like him.

"I'm going up into the lantern of the Basilica," he said, "to see if I can see the Germans, who are my enemies as well as yours."

"And will not Monsieur take me, too, and let me have look for look with him through those glasses at the Germans, some of whom I'm going to shoot?"

John smiled.

"If you're going out potting Germans," he said, "you'd better get yourself into a uniform as soon as you can. They have no mercy on *franc tireurs*."

"I'll chance that. But you'll take me with you into the dome?"

"What's your name?"

"Pierre Louis Bougainville."

"Bougainville! Bougainville! It sounds noble and also historical. I've read of it, but I don't recall where."

The little Frenchman drew himself up, and his black eyes glittered.

"There is a legend among us that it was noble once," he said, "but we don't know when. I feel within me the spirit to make it great again. There was a time when the mighty Napoleon said that every soldier carried a marshal's baton in his knapsack. Perhaps that time has come again. And the great emperor was a little man like me."

John began to laugh and then he stopped suddenly. Pierre Louis Bougainville, so small and so insignificant, was not looking at him. He was looking over and beyond him, dreaming perhaps of a glittering future. The funny little red cap with the tassel might shelter a great brain. Respect took the place of the wish to laugh.

"Monsieur Bougainville," he said in his excellent French, "my name is John Scott. I am from America, but I am serving in the allied Franco-British army. My heart like yours beats for France."

"Then, Monsieur Jean, you and I are brothers," said the little man, his eyes still gleaming. "It may be that we shall fight side by side in the hour of victory. But you will take me into the lantern will you not? Father Pelletier does not know, as you do, that I'm going to be a great man, and he will not admit me."

"If I secure entrance you will, too. Come."

They reached side by side the Basilique de Sacré-Coeur, which crowns the summit of the Butte Montmartre, and bought tickets from the porter, whose calm the proximity of untold Germans did not disturb. John saw the little Apache make the sign of the cross and bear himself with dignity. In some curious way Bougainville impressed him once more with a sense of power. Perhaps there was a spark of genius under the red cap. He knew from his reading that there was no rule about genius. It passed kings by, and chose the child of a peasant in a hovel.

"You're what they call an Apache, are you not?" he asked.

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Well, for the present, that is until you win a greater name, I'm going to call you Geronimo."

"And why Zhay-ro-nee-mo, Monsieur?"

"Because that was the name of a great Apache chief. According to our white standards he was not all that a man should be. He had perhaps a certain insensibility to the sufferings of others, but in the Apache view that was not a fault. He was wholly great to them."

"Very well then, Monsieur Scott, I shall be flattered to be called Zhay-ro-nee-mo, until I win a name yet greater."

"Where is the Father Pelletier, the priest, who you said would bar your way unless I came with you?"

"He is on the second platform where you look out over Paris before going into the lantern. It may be that he has against me what you would call the prejudice. I am young. Youth must have its day, and I have done some small deeds in the quarter which perhaps do not please Father Pelletier, a strict, a very strict man. But our country is in danger, and I am willing to forgive and forget."

He spoke with so much magnanimity that John was compelled to laugh. Geronimo laughed, too, showing splendid white teeth. The understanding between them was now perfect.

"I must talk with Father Pelletier," said John. "Until you're a great man, as you're going to be, Geronimo, I suppose I can be spokesman. After that it will be your part to befriend me."

On the second platform they found Father Pelletier, a tall young priest with a fine but severe face, who looked with curiosity at John, and with disapproval at the Apache.

"You are Father Pelletier, I believe," said John with his disarming smile. "These are unusual times, but I wish to go up into the lantern. I am an American, though, as you can see by my uniform, I am a soldier of France."

"But your companion, sir? He has a bad reputation in the quarter. When he should come to the church he does not, and now when he should not he does."

"That reputation of which you speak, Father Pelletier, will soon pass. Another, better and greater will take its place. Our friend here, and perhaps both of us will be proud to call him so some day, leaves soon to fight for France."

The priest looked again at Bougainville, and his face softened. The little Apache met his glance with a firm and open gaze, and his figure seemed to swell again, and to radiate strength. Perhaps the priest saw in his eyes the same spark that John had noticed there.

"It is a time when France needs all of her sons," he said, "and even those who have not deserved well of her before may do great deeds for her now. You can pass."

Bougainville walked close to Father Pelletier, and John heard him say in low tones:

"I feel within me the power to achieve, and when you see me again you will recognize it."

The priest nodded and his friendly hand lay for a moment on the other's shoulder.

"Come on, Geronimo," said John cheerfully. "As I remember it's nearly a hundred steps into the lantern, and that's quite a climb."

"Not for youth like ours," exclaimed Bougainville, and he ran upward so lightly that the American had some difficulty in following him. John was impressed once more by his extraordinary strength and agility, despite his smallness. He seemed to be a mass of highly wrought steel spring. But unwilling to be beaten by anybody, John raced with him and the two stood at the same time upon the utmost crest of the Basilique du Sacré-Coeur.

They paused a few moments for fresh breath and then John put the glasses to his eye, sweeping them in a slow curve. Through the powerful lenses he saw the vast circle of Paris, and all the long story of the past that it called up. Two thousand years of history rolled beneath his feet, and the spectacle was wholly magnificent.

He beheld the great green valley with its hills, green, too, the line of the Seine cutting the city apart like the flash of a sword blade, the golden dome of the Hotel des Invalides, the grinning gargoyles of Notre Dame, the arches and statues and fountains and the long green ribbons that marked the boulevards.

Although the city stood wholly in the sunlight a light haze formed on the rim of the circling horizon. He now moved the glasses slowly over a segment there and sought diligently for something. From so high a point and with such strong aid one could see many miles. He was sure that he would find what he sought and yet did not wish to see. Presently he picked out intermittent flashes which he believed were made by sunlight falling on steel. Then he drew a long and deep breath that was almost like a sigh.

"What is it?" asked Bougainville who had stood patiently by his side.

"I fear it is the glitter of lances, my friend, lances carried by German Uhlans. Will you look?"

Bougainville held out his hands eagerly for the glasses, and then drew them back a little. In his new dignity he would not show sudden emotion.

"It will give me gladness to see," he said. "I do not fear the Prussian lances."

John handed him the glasses and he looked long and intently, at times sweeping them slowly back and forth, but gazing chiefly at the point under the horizon that had drawn his companion's attention.

John meanwhile looked down at the city glittering in the sun, but from which its people were fleeing, as if its last day had come. It still seemed impossible that Europe should be wrapped in so great a war and that the German host should be at the gates of Paris.

His eyes turned back toward the point where he had seen the gleam of the lances and he fancied now that he heard the far throb of the German guns. The huge howitzers like the one Lannes and he had blown up might soon be throwing shells a ton or more in weight from a range of a dozen miles into the very heart of the French capital. An acute depression seized him. He had strengthened the heart of Lannes, and now his own heart needed strengthening. How was it possible to stop the German army which had come so far and so fast that its Uhlans could already see Paris? The unprepared French had been defeated already, and the slow English, arriving to find France under the iron heel, must go back and defend their own island.

"The Germans are there. I have not a doubt of it, and I thank you, Monsieur Scott, for the use of these," said Bougainville, handing the glasses back to him.

"Well, Geronimo," he said, "having seen, what do you say?"

"The sight is unpleasant, but it is not hopeless. They call us decadent. I read, Monsieur Scott, more than you think! Ah, it has been the bitterness of death for Frenchmen to hear all the world say we are a dying race, and it has been said so often that some of us ourselves had begun to believe it! But it is not so! I tell you it is not so, and we'll soon prove to the Germans who come that it isn't! I have looked for a sign. I sought for it in all the skies through your glasses, but I did not find it there. Yet I have found it."

"Where?"

"In my heart. Every beat tells me that this Paris of ours is not for the Germans. We will yet turn them back!"

He reminded John of Lannes in his dramatic intensity, real and not affected, a true part of his nature. Its effect, too, upon the American was powerful. He had given courage to Lannes, and now Bougainville, that little Apache of the Butte Montmartre, was giving new strength to his own weakening heart. Fresh life flowed back into his veins and he remembered that he, too, had beheld a sign, the flash of light on the Arc de Triomphe.

"I think we have seen enough here, Geronimo," he said lightly, "and we'll descend. I've a friend to meet later. Which way do you go from the church?"

"To the army. I shall be in a uniform tonight, and tomorrow maybe I shall meet the Germans."

John held out his hand and the Apache seized it in a firm clasp.

"I believe in you, as I hope you believe in me," said young Scott. "I belong to a company called the Strangers, made up chiefly of Americans and English, and commanded by Captain Daniel Colton. If you're on the battle line and hear of the Strangers there too I should like for you to hunt me up if you can. I'd do the same for you, but I don't yet know to what force you will belong."

Bougainville promised and they walked down to the second platform, where Father Pelletier was still standing.

"What did you see?" he asked of John, unable to hide the eagerness in his eyes.

"Uhlans, Father Pelletier, and I fancied that I heard the echo of a German forty-two centimeter. Would you care to use the glasses? The view from this floor is almost as good as it is from the lantern."

John distinctly saw the priest shudder.

"No," he replied. "I could not bear it. I shall pray today that our enemies may be confounded; tomorrow I shall throw off the gown of a priest and put on the coat of a soldier."

"Another sign," said John to himself, as they continued the descent. "Even the priests will fight."

When they were once more in the narrow streets of Montmartre, John said farewell to Bougainville.

"Geronimo," he said, "I expect to see you leading a victorious charge directly into the heart of the German army."

"If I can meet your hopes I will, Monsieur Scott," said the young Frenchman gayly, "and now, *au revoir*, I depart for my uniform and arms, which must be of the best."

John smiled as he walked down the hill. His heart had warmed toward the little Apache who might not be any Apache at all. Nevertheless the name Geronimo seemed to suit him, and he meant to think of him by it until his valor won him a better.

He saw from the slopes the same endless stream of people leaving Paris. They knew that the Germans were near, and report brought them yet nearer. The tale of the monster guns had traveled fast, and the shells might be falling among them at any moment. Aeroplanes dotted the skies, but they paid little attention to them. They still thought of war under the old conditions, and to the great mass of the people flying machines were mere toys.

But John knew better. Those journeys of his with Lannes through the heavens and their battles in the air for their lives were unforgettable. Stopping on the last slope of Montmartre he studied space with his glasses. He was sure that he saw captive balloons on the horizon where the German army lay, and one shape larger than the rest looked like a Zeppelin, but he did not believe those monsters had come so far to the south and west. They must have an available base.

His heart suddenly increased its beat. He saw a darting figure and he recognized the shape of the German Taube. Then something black shot downward from it, and there was a crash in the streets of Paris, followed by terrible cries.

He knew what had happened. He caught another glimpse of the Taube rushing away like a huge carnivorous bird that had already seized its prey, and then he ran swiftly down the street. The bomb had burst in a swarm of fugitives and a woman was killed. Several people were wounded, and a panic had threatened, but the soldiers had restored order already and ambulances soon took the wounded to hospitals.

John went on, shocked to the core. It was a new kind of war. The flying men might rain death from the air upon a helpless city, but their victims were more likely to be women and children than armed men. For the first time the clean blue sky became a sinister blanket from which dropped destruction.

The confusion created by the bomb soon disappeared. The multitude of Parisians still poured from the city, and long lines of soldiers took their place. John wondered what the French commanders would do. Surely theirs was a desperate problem. Would they try to defend Paris, or would they let it go rather than risk its destruction by bombardment? Yet its fall was bound to be a terrible blow.

Lannes was on the steps of the Opera House at the appointed time, coming with a brisk manner and a cheerful face.

"I want you to go with me to our house beyond the Seine," he said. "It is a quaint old place hidden away, as so many happy homes are in this city. You will find nobody there but my mother, my sister Julie, and a faithful old servant, Antoine Picard, and his daughter, Suzanne."

"But I will be a trespasser?"

"Not at all. There will be a warm welcome for you. I have told them of you, how you were my comrade in the air, and how you fought."

"Pshaw, Lannes, it was you who did most of the fighting. You've given me a reputation that I can't carry."

"Never mind about the reputation. What have you been doing since I left you this morning?"

"I spent a part of the time in the lantern of the Basilica on Montmartre, and I had with me a most interesting friend."

Lannes looked at him curiously.

"You did not speak of any friend in Paris at this time," he said.

"I didn't because I never heard of him until a few hours ago. I made his acquaintance while I was going up Montmartre, but I already consider him, next to you, the best friend I have in France."

"Acquaintanceship seems to grow rapidly with you, Monsieur Jean the Scott."

"It has, but you must remember that our own friendship was pretty sudden. It developed in a few minutes of flight from soldiers at the German border."

"That is so, but it was soon sealed by great common dangers. Who is your new friend, John?"

"A little Apache named Pierre Louis Bougainville, whom I have nicknamed Geronimo, after a famous Indian chief of my country. He has already gone to fight for France, and, Philip, he made an extraordinary impression upon me, although I don't know just why. He is short like Napoleon, he has the same large and beautifully shaped head, and the same penetrating eyes that seem able to look you through and through. Maybe it was a spark of genius in him that impressed me."

"It may be so," said Lannes thoughtfully. "It was said, and said truly that the First Republic meant the open career to all the talents, and the Third offers the same chance. One never can tell where military genius is going to appear and God knows we need it now in whatever shape or form it may come. Did you hear of the bomb?"

"I saw it fall. But, Phil, I don't see the object in such attacks. They may kill a few people, nearly always the unarmed, but that has no real effect on a war."

"They wish to spread terror, I suppose. Lend me your glasses, John."

Lannes studied the heavens a long time, minutely examining every black speck against the blue, and John stood beside him, waiting patiently. Meanwhile the throng of fleeing people moved on as before, silent and somber, even the children saying little. John was again stirred by the deepest emotion of sympathy and pity. What a tremendous tragedy it would be if New York were being abandoned thus to a victorious foe! Lannes himself had seemed to take no notice of the flight, but John judged he had made a powerful effort of the will to hide the grief and anger that surely filled his heart.

"I don't see anything in the air but our own machines," said Lannes, as he returned the glasses. "It was evidently a dash by the Taube that threw the bomb. But we've stayed here long enough. They're waiting for us at home."

He led the way through the multitude, relapsing into silence, but casting a glance now and then at his own peculiar field, the heavens. They reached the Place de la Concorde, and stopped there a moment or two. Lannes looked sadly at the black drapery hanging from the stone figure that typified the lost city of Strassburg, but John glanced up the great sweep of the Place to the Arc de Triomphe, where he caught again the glittering shaft of sunlight that he had accepted as a sign.

"We may be looking upon all this for the last time," said Lannes, in a voice of grief. "Oh, Paris, City of Light, City of the Heart! You may not understand me, John, but I couldn't bear to come back to Paris again, much as I love it, if it is to be despoiled and ruled by Germans."

"I do understand you, Philip," said John cheerfully, "but you mustn't count a city yours until you've taken it. The Germans are near, but they're not here. Now, lead on. It's not like you to despair!"

Lannes shook himself, as if he had laid violent hands upon his own body, and his face cleared.

"That was the last time, John," he said. "I made that promise before, but I keep it this time. You won't see me gloomy again. Henceforward it's hope only. Now, we must hurry. My mother and Julie will be growing anxious, for we are overdue."

They crossed the Seine by one of the beautiful stone bridges and entered a region of narrow and crooked streets, which John thought must be a part of old Paris. In an American city it would necessarily have been a quarter of the poor, but John knew that here wealth and distinction were often hidden behind these modest doors.

He began to feel very curious about Lannes' family, but he was careful to ask no questions. He knew that the young Frenchman was showing great trust and faith in him by taking him into his home. They stopped presently before a door, and Lannes rang a bell. The door was opened cautiously in a few moments, and a great head surmounted by thick, gray hair was thrust out. A powerful neck and a pair of immense shoulders followed the head. Sharp eyes under heavy lashes peered forth, but in an instant, when the man saw who was before him, he threw open the door and said:

"Welcome, Monsieur."

John had no doubt that this was the Antoine Picard of whom Lannes had spoken, and he knew at the first glance that he beheld a real man. Many people have the idea that all Frenchmen are little, but John knew better.

Antoine Picard was a giant, much over six feet, and with the limbs and chest of a piano-mover. He was about sixty, but age evidently had made no impression upon his strength. John judged from his fair complexion that he was from Normandy. "Here," young Scott said to himself, "is one of those devoted European family servants of whom I've heard so often."

He regarded the man with interest, and Picard, in return, measured and weighed him with a lightning glance.

Lannes laughed.

"It's all right, Antoine," he said. "He's the young man from that far barbarian country called America, who escaped from Germany with me, only he's no barbarian, but a highly civilized being who not only likes France, but who fights for her. John, this is Antoine Picard, who rules and protects this house."

John held out his hand, American fashion, and it was engulfed in the mighty grasp of the Norseman, as he always thought of him afterward.

"Madame, your mother, and Mademoiselle, your sister, have been anxious," said Picard.

"We were delayed," said Lannes.

They stepped into a narrow hall, and Picard shut the door behind them, shooting into place a heavy bolt which sank into its socket with a click like the closing of the entrance to a fortress. In truth, the whole aspect of the house reminded John of a stronghold. The narrow hall was floored with stone, the walls were stone and the light was dim. Lannes divined John's thoughts.

"You'll find it more cheerful, presently," he said. "As for us, we're used to it, and we love it, although it's so old and cold and dark. It goes back at least five centuries."

"I suppose some king must have slept here once," said John. "In England they point out every very old house as a place where a king passed the night, and make reverence accordingly."

Lannes laughed gayly.

"No king ever slept here so far as I know," he said, "but the great Marshal Lannes, whose name I am so proud to bear, was in this house more than once, and to me, a staunch republican, that is greater than having had a king for a tenant. The Marshal, as you may know, although he took a title and served an Emperor, was always a republican and in the early days of the empire often offended Napoleon by his frankness and brusque truths. But enough of old things; we'll see my mother."

He led the way up the steps, of solid stone, between walls thick enough for a fortress, and knocked at a door. A deep, full voice responded "Enter!" and pushing open the door Lannes went in, followed by John.

It was a large room, with long, low windows, looking out over a sea of roofs toward the dome of the Invalides and Napoleon's arch of triumph. A tall woman rose from a chair, and saying "My son!" put her hands upon Lannes shoulders and kissed him on the forehead. She was fair like her son, and much less than fifty years of age. There was no stoop in her shoulders and but little gray in her hair. Her eyes were anxious, but John saw in them the Spartan determination that marked the women of France.

"My friend, John Scott, of whom I have already spoken to you, Madame my mother," said Lannes.

John bowed. He knew little of French customs, particularly in the heart of a French family, and he was afraid to extend his hand, but she gave him hers, and let it rest in his palm a moment.

"Philip has told me much of you," she said in her deep, bell-like voice, "and although I know little of your far America, I can believe the best of it, if its sons are like you."

John flushed at the compliment, which he knew to be so sincere.

"Thank you, Madame," he said. "While my country can take no part in this war, many of my countrymen will fight with you. France helped us once, and some of us, at least, will help France now."

She smiled gravely, and John knew that he was welcome in her house. Lannes would see to that anyhow, but he wished to make a good impression on his own account.

"I know that Philip risks his life daily," she said. "He has chosen the most dangerous of all paths, the air, but perhaps in that way he can serve us most."

She spoke with neither complaint nor reproach, merely as if she were stating a fact, and her son added briefly:

"You are right, mother. In the air I can work best for our people. Ah, John, here is my sister, who is quite curious about the stranger from across the sea."

A young girl came into the room. She was tall and slender, not more than seventeen, very fair, with blue eyes and hair of pure gold. John was continually observing that while many of the French were dark and small, in accordance with foreign opinion that made them all so, many more were blonde and tall. Lannes' sister was scarcely more than a lovely child, but his heart beat more quickly.

Lannes kissed her on the forehead, just as he kissed his mother.

"Julie," he said lightly and yet proudly, "this is the young American hero of whom I was telling you, my comrade in arms, or rather in the air, and adopted brother. Mr. John Scott, my sister, Mademoiselle Julie Lannes."

She made a shy curtsy and John bowed. It was the first time that he was ever in the heart of an old French home, and he did not know the rules, but he felt that he ought not to offer his hand. Young girls, he had always heard, were kept in strict seclusion in France, but the great war and the approach of the German army might make a difference. In any event, he felt bold enough to talk to her a little, and she responded, a beautiful color coming into her face.

"Dinner is ready for our guest and you," said Madame Lannes, and she led the way into another apartment, also with long, low windows, where the table was set. The curtains were drawn from the windows, and John caught through one of them a glimpse of the Seine, of marching troops in long blue coats and red trousers, and of the great city, massing up beyond like a wall.

He felt that he had never before sat down to so strange a table. The world without was shaking beneath the tread of the mightiest of all wars, but within this room was peace and quiet. Madame was like a Roman matron, and the young Julie, though shy, had ample dignity. John liked Lannes' manner toward them both, his fine subordination to his mother and his protective air toward his sister. He was glad to be there with them, a welcome guest in the family.

The dinner was served by a tall young woman. Picard's daughter Suzanne, to whom Lannes had referred, and she served in silence and with extraordinary dexterity one of the best dinners that he ever ate.

As the dinner proceeded John admired the extraordinary composure of the Lannes family. Surely a woman and a girl of only seventeen would feel consternation at the knowledge that an overwhelming enemy was almost within sight of the city they must love so much. Yet they did not refer to it, until nearly the close of the dinner, and it was Madame who introduced the subject.

"I hear, Philip," she said, "that a bomb was thrown today from a German aeroplane into the Place de l'Opéra, killing a woman and injuring several other people."

"It is true, mother."

John glanced covertly at Julie, and saw her face pale. But she did not tremble.

"Is it true also that the German army is near?" asked Madame Lannes, with just the faintest quiver in her voice.

"Yes, mother. John, standing in the lantern of the Basilique du Sacré-Coeur, saw through his glasses the flash of sunlight on the lances of their Uhlans. A shell from one of their great guns could fall in the suburbs of Paris."

John's covert glance was now for Madame Lannes. How would the matron who was cast in the antique mold of Rome take such news? But she veiled her eyes a little with her long lashes, and he could not catch the expression there.

"I believe it is not generally known in Paris that the enemy is so very near," said Philip, "and while I have not hesitated to tell you the full truth, mother, I ask you and Julie not to speak of it to others."

"Of course, Philip, we would add nothing to the general alarm, which is great enough already, and with cause. But what do you wish us to do? Shall we remain here, or go while it is yet time to our cousins, the Menards, at Lyons?"

Now it was the mother who, in this question of physical peril, was showing deference to her son, the masculine head of the family. John liked it. He remembered an old saying, and he felt it to be true, that they did many things well in France.

Lannes glanced at young Scott before replying.

"Mother," he said, "the danger is great. I do not try to conceal it from you. It was my intention this morning to see you and Julie safe on the Lyons train, but John and I have beheld signs, not military, perhaps, but of the soul, and we are firm in the belief that at the eleventh hour we shall be saved. The German host will not enter Paris."

Madame Lannes looked fixedly at John and he felt her gaze resting like a weight upon his face. But he responded. His faith had merely grown stronger with the hours.

"I cannot tell why, Madame," he said, "but I believe as surely as I am sitting here that the enemy will not enter the capital."

Then she said decisively, "Julie and I remain in our own home in Paris."

CHAPTER II

THE MESSENGER

There was little more talk. The dignified quiet of the Lannes family remained unchanged, and John imitated it. If they could be so calm in the face of overwhelming disaster it should be no effort for him to remain unmoved. Yet he glanced often, though covertly, at Julie Lannes, admiring her lovely color.

When dinner was over they returned to the room in which Madame Lannes had received them. The dark had come already, and Suzanne had lighted four tall candles. There was neither gas nor electricity.

"Mr. Scott will be our guest tonight, mother," said Lannes, "and tomorrow he and I go together to the army."

John raised his hand in protest. It had not been his intention when he came to remain until morning, but Lannes would listen to no objection; nor would his mother.

"Since you fight for our country," she said, "you must let us give you shelter for at least one night."

He acquiesced, and they sat a little while, talking of the things furthest from their hearts. Julie Lannes withdrew presently, and before long her mother followed. Lannes went to the window, and looked out over Paris, where the diminished lights twinkled. John stood at the other window and saw the great blur of the capital. All sounds were fused into one steady murmur, rather soothing, like the flowing of a river.

He seemed to hear presently the distant thunder of German guns, but reason told him it was only a trick of the imagination. Nerves keyed high often created the illusion of reality.

"What are you thinking about, Lannes?" he asked.

"Of my mother and sister. Only the French know the French. The family tie is powerful with us."

"I know that, Phil."

"So you do. You're an adopted child of France. Madame Lannes is a woman of great heart, John. I am proud to be her son. I have read of your civil war. I have read how the mothers of your young soldiers suffered and yet were brave. None can know how much Madame, my mother, has suffered tonight, with the Germans at the gates of Paris, and yet she has shown no sign of it."

John was silent. He did not know what to say, but Lannes did not pursue the subject, remaining a full five minutes at the window, and not speaking again, until he turned away.

"John," he said then, "let's go outside and take a look about the quarter. It's important now to watch for everything."

John was full willing. He recognized the truth of Lannes' words and he wanted air and exercise also. A fortress was a fortress, whether one called it a home or not, Lannes led the way and they descended to the lower hall, where the gigantic porter was on watch.

"My friend and I are going to take a look in the streets, Antoine," said Lannes. "Guard the house well while we are gone."

"I will," replied the man, "but will you tell me one thing, Monsieur Philip? Do Madame Lannes and Mademoiselle Julie remain in Paris?"

"They do, Antoine, and since I leave tomorrow it will be the duty of you and Suzanne to protect them."

"I am gratified, sir, that they do not leave the capital. I have never known a Lannes to flee at the mere rumor of the enemy's coming."

"And I hope you never will, Antoine. I think we'll be back in an hour."

"I shall be here, sir."

He unbolted the door and Lannes and John stepped out, the cool night air pouring in a grateful flood upon their faces. Antoine fastened the door behind them, and John again heard the massive bolt sink into its place.

"The quarter is uncommonly quiet," said Lannes. "I suppose it has a right to be after such a day."

Then he looked up, scanning the heavens, after the manner that had become natural to him, a flying man.

"What do you see, Philip?" asked John.

"A sky of dark blue, plenty of stars, but no aeroplanes, Taubes or other machines of man's making."

"I fancy that some of them are on the horizon, but too far away to be seen by us."

"Likely as not. The Germans are daring enough and we can expect more bombs to be dropped on Paris. Our flying corps must organize to meet theirs. I feel the call of the air, John."

Young Scott laughed.

"I believe the earth has ceased to be your natural element," he said. "You're happiest when you're in the *Arrow* about a mile above our planet."

Lannes laughed also, and with appreciation. The friendship between the two young men was very strong, and it had in it all the quality of permanence. Their very unlikeness in character and temperament made them all the better comrades. What one could not do the other could.

As they walked along now they said but little. Each was striving to read what he could in that great book, the streets of Paris. John believed Lannes had not yet told him his whole mission. He knew that in their short stay in Paris Philip had spent an hour in the office of the military governor of the city, and his business must be of great importance to require an hour from a man who carried such a fearful weight of responsibility. But whatever Lannes' secret might be, it was his own and he had no right to pry into it. If the time came for his comrade to tell it he would do so.

When they reached the Seine the city did not seem so quiet. They heard the continuous sound of marching troops and people were still departing through the streets toward the country or the provincial cities. The flight went on by night as well as day, and John again felt the overwhelming pity of it.

He wondered what the French generals and their English allies would do? Did they have any possible way of averting this terrible crisis? They had met nothing but defeat, and the vast German army had crashed, unchecked, through everything from the border almost to the suburbs of Paris.

They stood in the Place Valhubert at the entrance to the Pont d'Austerlitz, and watched a regiment crossing the river, the long blue coats and red trousers of the men outlined against the white body of the bridge. The soldiers were short, they looked little to John, but they were broad of chest and they marched splendidly with a powerful swinging stride.

"From the Midi," said Lannes. "Look how dark they are! France is called a Latin nation, but I doubt whether the term is correct. These men of the Midi though are the real Latins. We of northern France, I suspect, are more Teutonic than anything else, but we are all knitted together in one race, heart and soul, which are stronger ties than blood."

"We are to go early in the morning, are we not, Philip?"

"Yes, early. The *Arrow* is at the hangar, all primed and eager for a flight, fearful of growing rusty from a long rest."

"I believe you actually look upon your plane as a human being."

"A human being, yes, and more. No human being could carry me above the clouds. No human being could obey absolutely and without question the simplest touch of my hand. The *Arrow* is not human, John, it is superhuman. You have seen its exploits."

The dark emitted a figure that advanced toward them, and took the shape of a man with black hair, a short close beard and an intelligent face. He approached John and Lannes and looked at them closely.

"Mr. Scott!" he exclaimed, with eagerness, "I did not know what had become of you. I was afraid you were lost in one of the battles!"

"Why, it's Weber!" said John, "our comrade of the flight in the automobile! And I was afraid that you too, were dead!"

The two shook hands with great heartiness and Lannes joined in the reunion. He too at once liked Weber, who always made the impression of courage and quickness. He wore a new uniform, olive in color with dark blue threads through it, and it became him, setting off his trim, compact figure.

"How did you get here, Mr. Weber?" asked John.

"I scarcely know," he replied. "My duties are to a certain extent those of a messenger, but I was caught in the last battle, wounded slightly, and separated from the main French force. The little company which I had formed tried to break through the German columns, but they were all killed or captured except myself, and maybe two or three others. I hid in a wood, slept a night there, and then reached Paris to see what is going to happen. Ah, it is terrible! terrible! my comrades! The Germans are advancing in five great armies, a million and a half strong, and no troops were ever before equipped so magnificently."

"Do you know positively that they have a million and a half?" asked Lannes.

"I did not count them," replied Weber, smiling a little, "but I have heard from many certain sources that such are their numbers. I fear, gentlemen, that Paris is doomed."

"Scott and I don't think so," said Lannes firmly. "We've gained new courage today."

Weber was silent for a few moments. Then he said, giving Lannes his title as an officer:

"I've heard of you, Lieutenant Lannes. Who does not know the name of France's most daring aviator? And doubtless you have information which is unknown to me. It is altogether likely that one who pierces the air like an eagle should bear messages between generals of the first rank."

Lannes did not answer, but looked at Weber, who smiled.

"Perhaps our trades are not so very different," said the Alsatian, "but you shoot through clouds while I crawl on the ground. You have a great advantage of me in method."

Lannes smiled back. The little tribute was pleasing to the dramatic instinct so strong in him.

"You and I, Mr. Weber," he said, "know enough never to speak of what we're going to do. Now, we'll bid you good night and wish you good luck. I'd like to be a prophet, even for a day only, and tell what the morrow would bring."

"So do I," said Weber, "and I must hurry on my own errand. It may not be of great importance, but is vital to me that I do it."

He slid away in the darkness and both John and Lannes spoke well of him as they returned to the house. Picard admitted them.

"May I ask, sir, if there is any news that favors France?" he said to Philip.

"Not yet, my good Antoine, but it is surely coming."

John heard the giant Frenchman smother a sigh, but he made no comment, and walked softly with Lannes to the little room high up that had been assigned to him. Here when he was alone with his candle he looked around curiously.

The room was quite simple, not containing much furniture, in truth, nothing of any note save on the wall a fine picture of the great Marshal Lannes, Napoleon's dauntless fighter, and stern republican,

despite the ducal title that he took. It was a good portrait, painted perhaps by some great artist, and John holding up the candle, looked at it a long time.

He thought he could trace some likeness to Philip. Lannes' face was always stern, in repose, far beyond his years, although when he became animated it had all the sunniness of youth. But he noticed now that he had the same tight lips of the Marshal, and the same unfaltering eyes.

"Duke of Montebello!" said John to himself. "Well, you won that title grandly, and while the younger Lannes may do as well, if the chance comes to him, the new heroes of France will be neither dukes nor princes."

Then, after removing all the stiff pillows, inclines, foot pieces and head pieces that make European beds so uncomfortable, he slipped between the covers, and slid quickly into a long and soothing sleep, from which he was awakened apparently about a minute later by Lannes himself, who stood over him, dressed fully, tall and serious.

"Why, I just got into bed!" exclaimed John.

"You came in here a full seven hours ago. Open your window and you'll see the dawn creeping over Paris."

"Thank you, but you can open it yourself. I never fool with a European window. I haven't time to master all the mechanism, inside, outside and between, to say nothing of the various layers of curtains, full length, half length and otherwise. Nothing that I can conceive of is better fitted than the European window to keep out light and air."

Lannes smiled.

"I see that you're in fine feather this morning," he said, "I'll open it for you."

John jumped up and dressed quickly, while Lannes, with accustomed hand, laid back shutters and curtains.

"Now, shove up the window," exclaimed John as he wielded towel and brush. "A little fresh air in a house won't hurt you; it won't hurt anybody. We're a young people, we Americans, but we can teach you that. Why, in the German hotels they'd seal up the smoking-rooms and lounges in the evenings, and then boys would go around shooting clouds of perfume against the ceilings. Ugh! I can taste now that awful mixture of smoke, perfume and thrice-breathed air! Ah! that feels better! It's like a breath from heaven!"

"Ready now? We're going down to breakfast with my mother and sister."

"Yes. How do I look in this uniform, Lannes?"

"Very well. But, Oh, you Americans! we French are charged with vanity, but you have it."

John had thought little of his raiment until he came to the house of Lannes, but now there was a difference. He gave the last touch to his coat, and he and Philip went down together. Madame Lannes and Julie received them. They were dressed very simply, Julie in white and Madame Lannes in plain gray. Their good-morning to John was quiet, but he saw that it came from the heart. They recognized in him the faithful comrade in danger, of the son and brother, and he saw once more that French family affection was very powerful.

It was early, far earlier than the ordinary time for the European breakfast, and he knew that it had been served so, because he and Lannes were to depart. He sat facing a window, and he saw the dawn come over Paris in a vast silver haze that soon turned to a cloud of gold. He again stole glances at Julie Lannes. In all her beautiful fairness of hair and complexion she was like one of the blonde American girls of his own country.

When breakfast was over and the two young men rose to go John said the first farewell. He still did not know the French custom, but, bending over suddenly, he kissed the still smooth and handsome hand of Madame Lannes. As she flushed and looked pleased, he judged that he had made no mistake. Then he touched lightly the hand of the young girl, and said:

"Mademoiselle Julie, I hope to return soon to this house with your brother."

"May it be so," she said, in a voice that trembled, "and may you come back to a Paris still French!"

John bowed to them both and with tact and delicacy withdrew from the room. He felt that there should be no witness of Philip's farewell to his mother and sister, before going on a journey from which the chances were that he would never return.

He strolled down the hall, pretending to look at an old picture or two, and in a few minutes Lannes came out and joined him. John saw tears in his eyes, but his face was set and stern. Neither spoke until they reached the front door, which the giant, Picard, opened for them.

"If the worst should happen, Antoine," said Lannes, "and you must be the judge of it when it comes, take them to Lyons, to our cousins the Menards."

"I answer with my life," said the man, shutting together his great teeth, and John felt that it was well for the two women to have such a guardian. Under impulse, he said:

"I should like to shake the hand of a man who is worth two of most men."

Whether the French often shake hands or not, his fingers were enclosed in the mighty grasp of Picard, and he knew that he had a friend for life. When they went out Lannes would not look back and was silent for a long time. The day was warm and beautiful, and the stream of fugitives, the sad procession, was still flowing from the city. Troops too were moving, and it seemed to John that they passed in heavier masses than on the day before.

"I went out last night while you slept," said Lannes, when they were nearly at the hangar, "and I will tell you that I bear a message to one of our most important generals. I carry it in writing, and also in memory in case I lose the written word. That is all I feel at liberty to tell you, and in truth I know but little more. The message comes from our leader to the commander of the army at Paris, who in turn orders me to deliver it to the general whom we're going to seek. It directs him with his whole force to move forward to a certain point and hold fast there. Beyond that I know nothing. Its whole significance is hidden from me. I feel that I can tell you this, John, as we're about to start upon a journey which has a far better prospect of death than of life."

"I'm not afraid," said John, and he told the truth. "I feel, Philip, that great events are impending and that your dispatch or the effect of it will be a part in some gigantic plan."

"I feel that way, too. What an awful crisis! The Germans moved nearer in the dark. I didn't sleep a minute last night. I couldn't. If the signs that you and I saw are to be fulfilled they must be fulfilled soon, because when a thing is done it's done, and when Paris falls it falls."

"Well, here we are at the hangar, and the *Arrow* will make you feel better. You're like the born horseman whose spirits return when he's on the back of his best runner."

"I suppose I am. The air is now my proper medium, and anyway, John, my gallant Yankee, for a man like me the best tonic is always action, action, and once more action."

The *Arrow* was in beautiful condition, smooth, polished and fitted with everything that was needed. They put on their flying clothes, drew down their visors, stowed their automatics in handy pockets, and took their seats in the aeroplane. Then, as he put his hand on the steering rudder and the attendants gave the *Arrow* a mighty shove, the soul of Lannes swelled within him.

They rose slowly and then swiftly over Paris, and his troubles were left behind him on the earth. Up, up they went, in a series of graceful spirals, and although John, at first, felt the old uneasy feeling, it soon departed. He too exulted in their mounting flight and the rush of cold air.

"Use your glasses, John," said Lannes, "and tell me what you can see."

"Some captive balloons, five other planes, all our own, and on the horizon, where the German army lies, several black specks too vague and indefinite for me to make out what they are, although I've no doubt they're German flyers."

"I'd like to have a look at the Germans, but our way leads elsewhere. What else do you see, John?"

"I look downward and I see the most magnificent and glittering city in the world."

"And that's Paris, our glorious Paris, which you and I and a million others are going to save. I suppose it's hope, John, that makes me feel we'll do something. Did you know that the Germans dropped two more bombs on the city last night? One, luckily, fell in the Seine. The other struck near the Madeleine, close to a group of soldiers, killing two and wounding four more."

"Bombs from the air can't do any great damage to a city."

"No, but they can spread alarm, and it's an insult, too. We feel as the Germans would if we were dropping bombs on Berlin. I wish you'd keep those glasses to your eyes all the time, John, and watch the skies. Let me know at once, if you see anything suspicious."

John, continually turning in his seat, swept the whole curve of the world with the powerful glasses. Paris was now far below, a blur of white and gray. Above, the heavens were of the silkiest blue, beautiful in their infinite depths, with tiny clouds floating here and there like whitecaps on an ocean.

"What do you see now, John?"

"Nothing but one of the most beautiful days that ever was. It's a fine sun, that you've got over here, Philip. I can see through these glasses that it's made out of pure reddish gold."

"Never mind about that sun, John. America is a full partner in its ownership and you're used to it. I've heard that you have more sunshine than we do. Watch for our companions of the air, friend or foe."

"I see them flying; over Paris, but none is going in our direction. How far is our port of entry, Lannes?"

"We should be there in two hours, if nothing happens. Do we still have the course to ourselves or is anything coming our way now?"

"No company at all, unless you'd call a machine about three miles off and much lower down, a comrade."

"What does it look like?"

"A French aeroplane, much resembling the *Arrow*."

"Is it following us?"

"Not exactly. Yes, it is coming our way now, although it keeps much lower! A scout, I dare say."

Lannes was silent for a little while, his eyes fixed on his pathway through the blue. Then he said:

"What has become of that machine, John?"

"It has risen a little, but it's on our private course, that is, if we can claim the right of way all down to the ground."

Lannes glanced backward and downward, as well as his position would allow.

"A French plane, yes," he said thoughtfully. "There can be no doubt of it, but why should it follow us in this manner? You do think it's following us, don't you, John?"

"It begins to look like it, Phil. It's rising a little now, and is directly in our wake."

"Take a long look through those glasses of yours."

John obeyed, and the following aeroplane at once increased in size tenfold and came much nearer.

"It's French. There cannot be any doubt of it," he said, "and only one man is in it. As he's hidden by his flying-suit I can't tell anything about him."

"Watch him closely, John, and keep your hand on the butt of your automatic. I don't like that fellow's actions. Still, he may be a Frenchman on an errand like ours. We've no right to think we're the only people carrying important messages today."

"He's gaining pretty fast. Although he keeps below us, it looks as if he wanted to communicate with us."

The second aeroplane suddenly shot forward and upward at a much greater rate of speed. John, still watching through his glasses, saw the man release the steering rudder for an instant, snatch a rifle from the floor of his plane, and fire directly at Lannes.

John uttered a shout of anger, and in action, too, he was as quick as a flash. His automatic was out at once and he rained bullets upon the treacherous machine. It was hard to take aim, firing from one flying target, at another, but he saw the man flinch, turn suddenly, and then go rocketing away at a sharp angle.

Blazing with wrath John watched him, now far out of range, and then reloaded his automatic.

"Did you get him, John?" asked Lannes.

"I know one bullet found him, because I saw him shiver and shrink, but it couldn't have been mortal, as he was able to fly away."

"I'm glad that you at least hit him, because he hit me."

"What!" exclaimed John. Then he looked at his comrade and saw to his intense horror that black blood was flowing slowly down a face deadly pale.

"His bullet went through my cap and then through my head," said Lannes. "Oh, not through my skull, or I wouldn't be talking to you now. I think it glanced off the bone, as I know it's gone out on the other side. But I'm losing much blood, John, and I seem to be growing numb."

His voice trailed off in weakness and the *Arrow* began to move in an eccentric manner. John saw that Lannes' hand on the rudder was uncertain and that he had been hard hit. He was aghast, first for his friend, to whom he had become so strongly attached, and then for the *Arrow*, their mission and himself. Lannes would soon become unconscious and he, no flying man at all, would be left high in air with a terrible weight of responsibility.

"We must change seats," said Lannes, struggling against the dimness that was coming over his eyes and the weakness permeating his whole body. "Be careful, Oh, be careful as you can, and then, in your American language, a lot more. Slowly! Slowly! Yes, I can move alone. Drag yourself over me, and I can slide under you. Careful! Careful!"

The *Arrow* fluttered like a wounded bird, dropping, darting upward, and careering to one side. John was sick to his soul, both physically and mentally. His head became giddy and the wind roared in his ears, but the exchange of seats was at last, successfully accomplished.

"Now," said Lannes, "you're a close observer. Remember all that you've seen me do with the plane. Resolve to yourself that you do know how to fly the *Arrow*. Fear nothing and fly straight for our destination. Don't bother about the bleeding of my wound. My thick hair and thick cap acting together as a heavy bandage will stop it. Now, John, our fate rests with you."

The last words were almost inaudible, and John from the corner of his eye saw his comrade's head droop. He knew that Lannes had become unconscious and now, appalling though the situation was, he rose to the crisis.

He knew the immensity of their danger. A sudden movement of the rudder and the aeroplane might be wrecked. And in such a position the nerves of a novice were subject at any time to a jerk. They might be assailed by another treacherous machine, the dangers, in truth, were uncountable, but he was upborne by a tremendous desire to carry the word and to save Lannes and himself.

In the face of intense resolve all obstacles became as nothing and his hand steadied on the rudder. He knew that when it came to the air he was no Lannes and never could be. The solid earth, no matter how much it rolled around the sun or around itself, was his favorite field of action, but he felt that he must make one flight, when he carried with him perhaps the fate of a nation.

The *Arrow* was still rocking from side to side and dipping and jumping. Slowly he steadied it, handling the rudder as if it were a loaded weapon, and gradually his heart began to pound with triumph. It was no such flying as the hand of Lannes drew from the *Arrow*, but to John it seemed splendid for a first trial. He let the machine drop a little until it was only six or seven hundred yards above the earth, and took wary glances from side to side. He feared another pursuer, but the air seemed clear.

Lannes had sunk a little further forward. John saw that the bleeding from his head had ceased. There was a dark stain down either cheek, but it was drying there, and as Lannes had foreseen, his

hair and the cap had acted as a bandage, at last checking the flow effectively. His breathing was heavy and jerky, but John believed that he would revive before long. It was not possible that one so vital as Lannes, so eager for great action, could die thus.

Now he looked ahead. Their landmarks as Lannes had told him before the fight, were to be a high hill, a low hill, and a small stream flowing between. Just behind it they would find a great French army marching northward and their errand would be over. He did not yet see the hills, but he was sure that he was still in the pathway of the air.

He had left Paris far behind, but when he looked down he saw a beautiful country, a fertile land upon which man had worked for two thousand years, too beautiful to be trodden to pieces by armies. He saw the cultivated fields, varying in color like a checker board, and the neat villages with trees about them. Here and there the spire of a church rose high above everything. Churches and wars were so numerous in Europe!

John checked the speed of the *Arrow*. He was afraid, despite all his high resolve, to fly fast, and then he must not go beyond the army for which he was looking. He dropped a little lower as he was passing over a wood, and then he heard the crack of rifles beneath him. Bullets whizzed and sang past his ears and he took one fearful glance downward.

He saw men, spiked helmets on their heads, galloping among the trees, and he knew that they were a daring band of Uhlans, actually scouting inside the French lines. They were shooting at the *Arrow* and firing fast.

He attempted to rise so suddenly that the plane gave a violent jerk and quivered in every fiber. He thought for a moment they were going to fall, and the sickening sensation at his heart was overpowering. But the trusty *Arrow* ceased quivering, and then rose swiftly at an angle not too great.

Bullets still whizzed around the plane, and one glanced off its polished side, but John's first nervous jerkiness in handling the machine had probably saved him. The target had been so high in air, and of such a shifting nature that the Uhlans had little chance to hit it.

He was now beyond the range of any rifle, and he drew a long breath of relief that was like a deep sigh. Then he took a single downward glance, and caught a fleeting glimpse of the Uhlans galloping away. Doubtless they were making all speed back to their own army.

He flew on for a minute or two, searching the horizon eagerly, and at last, he saw a tall hill, a low hill and a flash of water between. He felt so much joy that he uttered a cry, and an echo of it came from a point almost by his side.

"Did I hear firing, John?"

It was Lannes' voice, feeble, but showing all the signs of returning strength, and again John uttered a joyous shout.

"You did," he replied. "It was Uhlans in a grove. I was flying low and their bullets whistled around us. But the *Arrow* has taken no harm. I see, too, the hills and the stream which are our landmarks. We're about to arrive, Philip, with our message, but there's been treachery somewhere. I wish I knew who was in that French plane."

"So do I, John. It certainly came out of Paris. In my opinion it meant to destroy us and keep our message from reaching the one for whom it was intended. Who could it have been and how could he have known!"

"Feeling better now, aren't you, Phil?"

"A lot better. My head aches tremendously, but the dimness has gone from before my eyes, and I'm able to think, in a poor and feeble way, perhaps, but I'm not exactly a dumb animal. Where are the hills?"

John pointed.

"I can see them," said Lannes exultantly. "Since they did no harm I'm glad the Uhlans fired at the *Arrow*. Their shots aroused me from stupor and as we're to reach the army I want to be in possession of my five senses when I get there."

John understood perfectly.

"It's your message and you deliver it," he said.

Lannes' strength continued to increase, and his mind cleared rapidly. His head ached frightfully, but he could think with all his usual swiftness and precision. He sat erect in his seat.

"Pass me your glasses, John," he said.

"Now I see the troops," he said, after a long look. "Frenchmen, Frenchmen, Frenchmen, infantry in thousands and scores of thousands, big guns in scores and hundreds, cuirassiers, hussars, cannoneers! Ah! It's a sight to kindle a dead heart back to life! John, this is one of the great wheels in the mighty machine that is to move forward! Here come two aeroplanes, scouts sent forward to see who and what we are."

"You are sure they contain genuine Frenchmen? Remember the fellow who shot you."

"Frenchmen, good and true. I can see them for myself."

He moved his hand, and in a few moments John heard hissing and purring near, as if great birds were flying to meet him. The outlines of the hovering planes showed by his side, and Lannes called in a loud voice to shrouded and visored men.

"Philip Lannes and his comrade, John Scott, with a message from Paris to the commander!" he exclaimed.

He was his old self again, erect, intense, dramatic. He evidently expected the name Philip Lannes to be known well to them, and it was, as a cheer followed high in air.

"Now, John," said Lannes, "Be careful! Your hardest task is before you, to land. But I've noticed that with you the harder the task the better you do it. Make for that wide green space to the left of the stream and come down as slowly and gently as you can. Just slide down."

John had a fleeting glimpse of thousands of faces looking upward, but he held a true course for the grassy area, and with a multitude looking on his nerve was never steadier. Amid great cheering the *Arrow* came safely to rest at her appointed place. John and Lannes stepped forth, as an elderly man in a quiet uniform came forward to meet them.

Lannes, holding himself stiffly erect, drew a paper from his pocket and extended it to the general.

"A letter, sir, from the commander-in-chief of all our armies," he said, saluting proudly.

As the general took the letter, Lannes' knees bent beneath him, and he sank down on his face.

CHAPTER III

IN THE FRENCH CAMP

John rushed forward and grasped his comrade. The sympathetic hands of others seized him also, and they raised him to his feet, while an officer gave him stimulant out of a flask, John meanwhile telling who his comrade was. Lannes' eyes opened and he flushed through the tan of his face.

"Pardon," he said, "it was a momentary weakness. I am ashamed of myself, but I shall not faint again."

"You've been shot," said the officer, looking at his sanguinary cap and face.

"So I have, but I ask your pardon for it. I won't let it occur again."

Lannes was now standing stiffly erect, and his eyes shone with pride, as the general, a tall, elderly man, rapidly read the letter that Philip had delivered with his own hand. The officer who had spoken of his wound looked at him with approval.

"I've heard of you, Philip Lannes," he said, "you're the greatest flying man in the world."

Lannes' eyes flashed now.

"You do me too much honor," he said, "but it was not I who brought our aeroplane here. It was my American friend, John Scott, now standing beside me, who beat off an attack upon us and who then, although he had had no practical experience in flying, guided the machine to this spot. Born an American, he is one of us and France already owes him much."

John raised his hand in protest, but he saw that Lannes was enjoying himself. His dramatic instinct was finding full expression. He had not only achieved a great triumph, but his best friend had an important share in it. There was honor for both, and his generous soul rejoiced.

Both John and Lannes stood at attention until the general had read the letter not once but twice and thrice. Then he took off his glasses, rubbed them thoughtfully a moment or two, replaced them and looked keenly at the two. He was a quiet man and he made no gestures, but John met his gaze serenely, read his eyes and saw the tremendous weight of responsibility back of them.

"You have done well, you two, perhaps far better than you know," said the general, "and now, since you are wounded, Philip Lannes, you must have attention. De Rougemont, take care of them."

De Rougemont, a captain, was the man to whom they had been talking, and he gladly received the charge. He was a fine, well built officer, under thirty, and it was obvious that he already took a deep interest in the two young aviators. Noticing Lannes' anxious glances toward his precious machine, he promptly detailed two men to take care of the *Arrow* and then he led John and Lannes toward the group of tents.

"First I'll get a surgeon for you," he said to the Frenchman, "and after that there's food for you both."

"I hope you'll tell the surgeon to be careful how he takes off my cap," said Lannes, "because it's fastened to my head now by my own dried blood."

"Trust me for that," said de Rougemont. "I'll bring one of our best men."

Then, unable to suppress his curiosity any longer, he added:

"I suppose the message you brought was one of life or death for France."

"I think so," said Lannes, "but I know little of its nature, myself."

"I would not ask you to say any more. I know that you cannot speak of it. But you can tell me this. Are the Germans before Paris?"

"As nearly as I could tell, their vanguard was within fifteen miles of the capital."

"Then if we strike at all we must strike quickly. I think we're going to strike."

Lannes was silent, and they entered the tent, where blankets were spread for him. A surgeon, young and skillful, came promptly, carefully removed the cap and bound up his head. John stood by and handed the surgeon the bandages.

"You're not much hurt," he said to Lannes as he finished. "Your chief injury was shock, and that has passed. I can keep down the fever and you'll be ready for work very soon. The high powered bullet makes a small and clean wound. It tears scarcely at all. Nor will your beauty be spoiled in the slightest, young sir. Both orifices are under the full thickness of your hair."

"I'm grateful for all your assurances," said Lannes, his old indomitable smile appearing in his eyes, "but you'll have to cure me fast, faster than you ever cured anybody before, because I'm a flying man, and I fly again tomorrow."

"Not tomorrow. In two or three days, perhaps—"

"Yes, tomorrow, I tell you! Nothing can keep me from it! This army will march tonight! I know it! and do you think such a wound as this can keep me here, when the fate of Europe is being decided? I'd rise from these blankets and go with the army even if I knew that it would make me fall dead the next day!"

He spoke with such fierce energy that the surgeon who at first sternly forbade, looked doubtful and then acquiescent.

"Go, then," he said, "if you can. The fact that we have so many heroes may save us."

He left John alone in the tent with Lannes. The Frenchman regarded his comrade with a cool, assured gaze.

"John," he said, "I shall be up in the *Arrow* tomorrow. I'm not nervous and excited now, and I'll not cause any fever in my wound. Somebody will come in five minutes with food. I shall eat a good supper, fall quietly to sleep, sleep soundly until night, then rise, refreshed and strong, and go about the work for which I'm best fitted. My mind shall rule over my body."

"I see you're what we would call at home a Christian Scientist, and in your case when a mind like yours is brought to bear there's something in it."

The food appeared within the prescribed time, and both ate heartily. John watched Lannes. He knew that he would suffer agonies of mortification if he were not able to share in the great movement which so obviously was about to take place, and, as he looked, he felt a growing admiration for Philip's immense power of self-control.

Mind had truly taken command of body. Lannes ate slowly and with evident relish. From without came many noises of a great army, but he refused to be disturbed or excited by them. He spoke lightly of his life before the war, and of a little country home that the Lannes family had in Normandy.

"We own the two places, that and the home in the city," he said. "The house in Normandy is small, but it's beautiful, hidden by flower gardens and orchards, with a tiny river just back of the last orchard. Julie has spent most of her life there. She and my mother would go there now, but it's safer at Lyons or in the Midi. A wonderful girl, Julie! I hope, John, that you'll come for a long stay with us after the war, among the Normandy orchards and roses."

"I hope so," said John. He was dreaming a little then, and he saw young Julie sitting at the table with them back in Paris. Truly, her golden hair was the purest gold he had ever seen, and there was no other blue like the blue of her blue eyes.

"Now, John," said Lannes, "I'll resume my place on the blankets and in ten minutes I'll be asleep."

He lay down, closed his eyes and three minutes short of the appointed time slept soundly. John gazed at him for a moment in wonder and admiration. The triumph of will over body had been complete. He touched Lannes' head. It was normally cool. Either the surgeon's skill had been great or the very strength of his resolve had been so immense that he had kept nerves and blood too quiet for fever to rise.

John left the tent, feeling for the time a personal detachment from everything. He had no position in this army, and no orders had been given to him by anybody. But he knew that he was among friends, and while he stood looking about in uncertainty Captain de Rougemont appeared.

"How is young Lannes?" he asked.

"Sleeping and free from fever. He will move with the army, or rather he will be hovering over it in his aeroplane. I never before saw such extraordinary power of will."

"He's a wonderful fellow. Of course, most of us have heard of him through his marvelous flying exploits, but it's the first time that I've ever seen him. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I seem to be left high and dry for the present, at least. My company is with one of the armies, but where that army is now is more than I can tell."

"Nor do I know either. We're all in the dark here, but any young strong man can certainly get a chance to fight in this war. I'm on the staff of General Vaugirard, a brigade commander, and he needs active young officers. You speak good French, and the fact that you came with Lannes will be a great recommendation, I'll provide you with a horse and all else necessary."

John thanked him with great sincerity. The offer was in truth most welcome. He knew that Lannes would willingly take him in the *Arrow*, but he felt that he would be in the way there and, as he had said to his friend, the rolling earth rather than the air around it was his true field of action. His first enrollment in the French army had been hurried and without due forms, but war had made it good.

"I'll not come back for you until afternoon," said de Rougemont, "because we're already making preparations to advance, and I shall have much to do meanwhile. You can watch over Lannes and see that he's not interrupted in his sleep. He'll need it."

"Yes, I have reason to know that he did not sleep at all last night, and he must be in a state of complete exhaustion. But, just as he predicted, he'll rise, his old self again."

Captain de Rougemont hurried away, and John was left alone in the midst of a great army. He stood before Lannes' tent, which was in the midst of a grassy and rather elevated opening, and he heard once more the infinite sounds made by two hundred thousand armed men, blending into one vast, fused note.

The army, too, was moving, or getting ready to move. Batteries of the splendid French artillery passed before him, squadrons of horsemen galloped by, and regiments of infantry followed. It all seemed confused, aimless to the eye, but John knew that nevertheless it was proceeding with order and method, directed by a master mind.

Often trumpets sounded and the motion of the troops seemed to quicken. Now he beheld men from the lands of the sun, the short, dark, fierce soldiers of the Midi, youths of Marseilles and youths of the first Roman province, whose native language was Provençal and not French. He remembered the men of the famous battalion who had marched from Marseilles to Paris singing Rouget de Lisle's famous song, and giving it their name, while they tore down an ancient kingdom. Doubtless, spirits no less ardent and fearless than theirs were here now.

He saw the Arabs in turbans and flowing robes, and black soldiers from Senegal, and seeing these men from far African deserts he knew that France was rallying her strength for a supreme effort. The German Empire, with the flush of unbroken victory in war after war, could command the complete devotion of its sons, but the French Republic, without such triumphs as yet, could do as well. John felt an immense pride because he, too, was republican to the core, and often there was a lot in a name.

It was about noon now, and the sun was shining with dazzling brilliancy. The tall hill and the low hill were clothed in deep green, and the waters of the little river that ran between, sparkled in the light. The air was crisp with a cool wind that blew from the west, and John felt that the omens were good for the great mysterious movement which he believed to be at hand.

He looked into the tent and saw that Lannes was sleeping soundly, with a good color in his face. A powerful constitution aided by a strong will had done its work and he was sure that on the morrow Lannes would again be the most daring French scout of the air.

John found the waiting hard work. There was so much movement and action that he wanted to be a part of it. He had thrown in his lot with this army and he wanted to share its work at once. Yet much time passed, and de Rougemont did not return. The evidences that the great French army was marching to the point designated in the note brought by Lannes multiplied. From the crest of the hill he already saw large bodies of troops marching forward steadily, their long blue coats flapping awkwardly about their legs. He wondered once more why they wore such an inharmonious and conspicuous uniform as blue frock coats and baggy red trousers.

He heard presently the martial sounds of the Marseillaise, and the regiment singing it passed very close to him. The men were nearly all short, dark, and very young. But the spring and fire with which they marched were magnificent. As they thundered out the grand old tune their feet seemed scarcely to touch the earth, and fierce eyes glowed in dark faces.

John, with a start, recognized one, a petty officer, a sergeant it seemed, who marched beside the line. He was the most eager of them all, and his face was tense and wrapt. It was Geronimo, the little Apache, in whom the spark of patriotism had lit the fire of genius. His call had come and it had drawn him from a half savage life into one of glorious deeds for his country.

"He'll be a general if he isn't killed first," murmured John, with absolute conviction.

Geronimo, at that moment, looked his way and recognized him. His hand flew to his head in a military salute, which John returned in kind, and his eyes plainly showed pleasure at sight of this new friend whom he had made in a few minutes on the Butte Montmartre.

"We meet again," he said, "and before the week is out it will be victory or death."

"I think so, too," said John.

"I know it," said Geronimo, and, saluting once more, he marched on with his regiment. John saw them pass across the valley and join the great mass of troops that filled the whole northern horizon. About an hour later a cheerful voice called to him, and he beheld Lannes standing in the door of the tent, his head well bandaged, but his eyes clear and strong and the natural color in his face.

"What has happened, John?" he asked.

"You've slept six or seven hours."

"And while I slept, the army, as I can see, has begun its march according to the order we brought. I'm sorry I had to miss any of it, but I was bound to sleep."

"You're a marvel."

"No marvel at all. I'm merely one of a million Frenchmen molded on the same model. An army can't move fast and tonight the *Arrow* and I will be hovering over its front. There's your old place for you in the plane."

"I'd only be in your way, Philip. But can't you wait until tomorrow? Don't rush yourself while you've got a new wound."

"The wound is nothing. I'm bound to go tonight with the *Arrow*. But what are you going to do if you don't go with me?"

"A new friend whom I've made while you slept has found a place for me with him, on the staff of General Vaugirard, a brigade commander. I shall serve there until I'm able to rejoin the Strangers."

"General Vaugirard! I've seen him. An able man, and a most noticeable figure. You've fared well."

"I hope so. Here comes Captain de Rougemont."

The captain showed much pleasure at seeing Lannes up and apparently well.

"What! Has our king of the air revived so soon!" he exclaimed.

"The dead themselves would rise when we're about to strike for the life of France," said Lannes, his dramatic quality again coming to the front.

"Well spoken," said de Rougemont, the color flushing into his face.

"I return to my aeroplane within two hours," said Lannes. "I hold a commission from our government which allows me to operate somewhat as a free lance, but, of course, I shall conform for the present to the wishes of the man who commands the flying corps of this army. Meanwhile, I leave with you my young Yankee friend here, John Scott. For some strange reason I've conceived for him a strong brotherly affection. Kindly see that he doesn't get killed unless it's necessary for our country, and this, I think, is a long enough speech for me to make now."

"I'll do my best for him," said de Rougemont earnestly. "I've come for you, Scott."

"Good-bye, Philip," said John, extending his hand.

"Good-bye, John," said Lannes, "and do as I tell you. Don't get yourself killed unless it's absolutely necessary."

Usually so stoical, his voice showed emotion, and he turned away after the strong pressure of the two hands. John and de Rougemont walked down the valley, where they joined General Vaugirard and the rest of his staff.

As soon as John saw the general he knew what Lannes meant by his phrase "a noticeable figure." General Vaugirard was a man of about sixty, so enormously fat that he must have weighed three hundred pounds. His face was covered with thick white beard, out of which looked small, sharp red eyes. He reminded John of a great white bear. The little red eyes bored him through for an instant, and then their owner said briefly:

"De Rougemont has vouched for you. Stay with him. An orderly has your horse."

A French soldier held for him a horse bearing all the proper equipment, and John, saluting the general, sprang into the saddle. He was a good horseman, and now he felt thoroughly sure of himself. If it came to the worst, and he was unseated, the earth was not far away, but if he were thrown out of the *Arrow* he would have a long and terrible time in falling.

General Vaugirard had not yet mounted, but stood beside a huge black horse, fit to carry such a weight. He was listening and looking with the deepest attention and his staff was silent around him. John saw from their manner that these men liked and respected their immense general.

More trumpets sounded, much nearer now, and a messenger galloped up, handing a note to General Vaugirard, who glanced at it hastily, uttered a deep Ah! of relief and joy and thrust it into his pocket.

Then saying to his staff, "Gentlemen, we march at once," he put one hand on his horse's shoulder, and, to John's immense surprise, leaped as lightly into the saddle as if he had been a riding master. He settled himself easily into his seat, spoke a word to his staff, and then he rode with his regiments toward that great mass of men on the horizon who were steadily marching forward.

John kept by the side of de Rougemont. There were brief introductions to some of the young officers nearest him, and he felt an air of friendliness about him. As de Rougemont told them he had already given ample proof of his devotion to the cause, and he was accepted promptly as one of them.

John was now conscious how strongly he had projected himself into the life of the French. He was an American for generations back and his blood by descent was British. He had been among the Germans and he liked them personally, he had served already with the English, and their point of view was more nearly like the American than any other. But he was here with the French and he felt for them the deepest sympathy of all. He was conscious of a tie like that of blood brotherhood.

He knew it was due to the old and yet unpaid help France had given to his own country, and above all to the conviction that France, minding her own business, had been set upon by a greater power, with intent to crush and destroy. France was attacked by a dragon, and the old similes of mythology floated through his mind, but, oftenest, that of Andromeda chained to the rock. And the figure that typified France always had the golden hair and dark blue eyes of slim, young Julie Lannes.

They advanced several hours almost in silence, as far as talk was concerned, but two hundred thousand men marching made a deep and steady murmur. General Vaugirard kept well in front of his

staff, riding, despite his immense bulk, like a Comanche, and occasionally putting his glasses to those fiery little red eyes. At length he turned and beckoned to John, who promptly drew up to his side.

"You speak good French?" he said in his native tongue.

"Yes, sir," replied John promptly.

"I understand that you came with the flying man, Lannes, who brought the message responsible for this march, and that it is not the only time you've done good service in our cause?"

John bowed modestly.

"Did you see any German troops on the way?"

"Only a band of Uhlans."

"A mere scouting party. It occurred to me that you might have seen masses of troops belonging to the foe, indicating perhaps what is awaiting us at the end of our march."

"I know nothing, sir. The Uhlans were all the foes we saw from the air, save the man who shot Lannes."

"I believe you. You belong to the youngest of the great nations. Your people have not yet learned to say with the accents of truth the thing that is not. I am sixty years old, and yet I have the curiosity to know where I am going and what I am expected to do when I get there. Behold how I, an old man, speak so frankly to you, so young."

"When I saw your excellency leap into the saddle you did not seem to me to be more than twenty."

John called him "your excellency" because he thought that in the absence of precise knowledge of what was fitting the term was as good as another.

A smile twinkled in the eyes of General Vaugirard. Evidently he was pleased.

"That is flattery, flattery, young man," he said, "but it pleases me. Since I've drawn from you all you know, which is but little, you may fall back with your comrades. But keep near; I fancy I shall have much for you to do before long. Meanwhile, we march on, in ignorance of what is awaiting us. Ah, well, such is life!"

He seemed to John a strange compound of age and youth, a mixture of the philosopher and the soldier. That he was a real leader John could no longer doubt. He saw the little red eyes watching everything, and he noticed that the regiments of Vaugirard had no superiors in trimness and spirit.

They marched until sundown and stopped in some woods clear of undergrowth, like most of those in Europe. The camp kitchens went to work at once, and they received good food and coffee. As far as John could see men were at rest, but he could not tell whether the whole army was doing likewise. It spread out much further to both right and left than his eyes could reach.

The members of the staff tethered their horses in the grove, and after supper stood together and talked, while the fat general paced back and forth, his brow wrinkled in deep thought.

"Good old Papa Vaugirard is studying how to make the best of us," said de Rougemont. "We're all his children. They say that he knows nearly ten thousand men under his command by face if not by name, and we trust him as no other brigade commander in the army is trusted by his troops. He's thinking hard now, and General Vaugirard does not think for nothing. As soon as he arrives at what seems to him a solution of his problem he will begin to whistle. Then he will interrupt his whistling by saying: 'Ah, well, such is life.'"

"I hope he'll begin to whistle soon," said John, "because his brow is wrinkling terribly."

He watched the huge general with a sort of fascinated gaze. Seen now in the twilight, Vaugirard's very bulk was impressive. He was immense, strong, primeval. He walked back and forth over a line about thirty feet long, and the deep wrinkles remained on his brow. Every member of his staff was asking how long it would last.

A sound, mellow and soft, but penetrating, suddenly arose. General Vaugirard was whistling, and John's heart gave a jump of joy. He did not in the least doubt de Rougemont's assertion that an answer to the problem had been found.

General Vaugirard whistled to himself softly and happily. Then he said twice, and in very clear tones: "Ah, well, such is life!" He began to whistle again, stopped in a moment or two and called to de Rougemont, with whom he talked a while.

"We're to march once more in a half-hour," said de Rougemont, when he returned to John and his comrades. "It must be a great converging movement in which time is worth everything. At least, General Vaugirard thinks so, and he has a plan to get us into the very front of the action."

"I hope so," said John. "I'm not anxious to get killed, but I'd rather be in the battle than wait. I wonder if I'll meet anywhere on the front that company to which I belong, the Strangers."

"I think I've heard of them," said de Rougemont, "a body of Americans and Englishmen, volunteers in the French service, commanded by Captain Daniel Colton."

"Right you are, and I've two particular friends in that company—I suppose they've rejoined it—Wharton, an American, and Carstairs, an Englishman. We went through a lot of dangers together before we reached the British army near Mons, and I'd like to see them again."

"Maybe you will, but here comes an extraordinary procession."

They heard many puffing sounds, uniting in one grand puffing chorus, and saw advancing down a white road toward them a long, ghostly train, as if a vast troop of extinct monsters had returned to earth and were marching this way. But John knew very well that it was a train of automobiles and raising the glasses that he now always carried he saw that they were empty except for the chauffeurs.

General Vaugirard began to whistle his mellowest and most musical tune, stopping only at times to mutter a few words under his breath. John surmised that he was expressing deep satisfaction, and that he had been waiting for the motor train. War was now fought under new conditions. The Germans had thousands and scores of thousands of motors, and perhaps the French were provided almost as well.

"I fancy," said de Rougemont, who was also watching the arrival of the machines, "that we'll leave our horses now and travel by motor."

De Rougemont's supposition was correct. The line of automobiles began to mass in front, many rows deep, and all the chauffeurs, their great goggles shining through the darkness, were bent over their wheels ready to be off at once with their armed freight. It filled John with elation, and he saw the same spirit shining in the eyes of the young French officers.

General Vaugirard began to puff like one of the machines. He threw out his great chest, pursed up his mouth and emitted his breath in little gusts between his lips, "Very good! Very good, my children!" he said, "Oil and electricity will carry us now, and we go forward, not backward!"

True to de Rougemont's prediction, the horses were given to orderlies, and the staff and a great portion of the troops were taken into the cars. General Vaugirard and several of the older officers occupied a huge machine, and just behind him came de Rougemont, John and a half-dozen young lieutenants and captains in another. Before them stretched a great white road. Far overhead hovered many aeroplanes. John had no doubt that the *Arrow* was among them, or rather was the farthest one forward. Lannes' eager soul, wound or no wound, would keep him in front.

They now moved rapidly, and John's spirits continued to rise. There was something wonderful in this swift march on wheels in the moonlight. As far back as he could see the machines came in a stream, and to the left and right he saw them proceeding on other roads also. All the country was strange to John. He could not remember having seen it from the aeroplane, and he was sure that the army, instead of going to Paris, was bound for some point where it would come in instant contact with the German forces.

"Do you know the road?" he asked of de Rougemont.

"Not at all. I'm from the Gironde country. I've been in Paris, but I know little of the region about it. A good way to reach the front, is it not, Mr. Scott?"

"Fine. I fancy that we're hurried forward to make a link in a chain, or at least to stop a gap."

"And those large birds overhead are scouting for us."

"Look! One of them is dropping down. I dare say it's making a report to some general higher in rank than ours."

He pointed with a long forefinger, and John watched the aeroplane come down in its slanting course like a falling star. It was a beautiful night, a light blue sky, with a fine moon and hosts of clear stars. One could see far, and soon after the plane descended John saw it rise again from the same spot, ascend high in air, and shoot off toward the east.

"That may have been Lannes," he said.

"Likely as not," said de Rougemont.

John now observed General Vaugirard, who sat erect in the front of his automobile, with a pair of glasses, relatively as huge as himself, to his eyes. Occasionally he would purse his lips, and John knew that his favorite expression was coming forth. To the young American's imaginative mind his broad back expressed rigidity and strength.

The great murmuring sound, the blended advance of so many men, made John sleepy by-and-by. In spite of himself his heavy eyelids drooped, and although he strove manfully against it, sleep took him. When he awoke he heard the same deep murmur, like the roll of the sea, and saw the army still advancing. It was yet night, though fine and clear, and there before him was the broad, powerful back of the general. Vaugirard was still using the glasses and John judged that he had not slept at all. But in his own machine everybody was asleep except the man at the wheel.

The country had grown somewhat hillier, but its characteristics were the same, fertile, cultivated fields, a small wood here and there, clear brooks, and church spires shining in the dusk. Both horse and foot advanced across the fields, but the roads were occupied by the motors, which John judged were carrying at least twenty thousand men and maybe forty thousand.

He was not sleepy now, and he watched the vast panorama wheel past. He knew without looking at his watch that the night was nearly over, because he could already smell the dawn. The wind was freshening a bit, and he heard its rustle in the leaves of a wood as they pushed through it.

Then came a hum and a whir, and a long line of men on motor cycles at the edge of the road crept up and then passed them. One checked his speed enough to run by the side of John's car, and the rider, raising his head a little, gazed intently at the young American. His cap closed over his face like a hood, but the man knew him.

"Fortune puts us on the same road again, Mr. Scott," he said.

"I don't believe I know you," said John, although there was a familiar note in the voice.

"And yet you've met me several times, and under exciting conditions. It seems to me that we're always pursuing similar things, or we wouldn't be together on the same road so often. You're acute enough. Don't you know me now?"

"I think I do. You're Fernand Weber, the Alsatian."

"And so I am. I knew your memory would not fail you. It's a great movement that we've begun, Mr. Scott. France will be saved or destroyed within the next few days."

"I think so."

"You've deserted your friend, Philip Lannes, the finest of our airmen."

"Oh, no, I haven't. He's deserted me. I couldn't afford to be a burden on his aeroplane at such a time as this."

"I suppose not. I saw an aeroplane come down to earth a little while ago, and then rise again. I'm sure it was his machine, the *Arrow*."

"So am I."

"Here's where he naturally would be. Good-bye, Mr. Scott, and good luck to you. I must go on with my company."

"Good-bye and good luck," repeated John, as the Alsatian shot forward. He liked Weber, who had a most pleasing manner, and he was glad to have seen him once more.

"Who was that?" asked de Rougemont, waking from his sleep and catching the last words of farewell.

"An Alsatian, named Fernand Weber, who has risked his life more than once for France. He belongs to the motor-cycle corps that's just passing."

"May he and his comrades soon find the enemy, because here is the day."

The leaves and grass rippled before the breeze and over the eastern hills the dawn broke.

CHAPTER IV

THE INVISIBLE HAND

It was a brilliant morning sun, deepening the green of the pleasant land, lighting up villages and glinting off church steeples. In a field a little distance to their right John saw two peasants at work already, bent over, their eyes upon the ground, apparently as indifferent to the troops as the troops were to them.

It was very early, but the sun was rising fast, unfolding a splendid panorama. The French army with its blues and reds was more spectacular than the German, and hence afforded a more conspicuous target. John was sure that if the war went on the French would discard these vivid uniforms and betake themselves to gray or khaki. He saw clearly that the day of gorgeous raiment for the soldier had passed.

The great puffing sound of primeval monsters which had blended into one rather harmonious note ceased, as if by signal, and the innumerable motors stopped. As far as John could see the army stretched to left and right over roads, hills and fields, but in the fields behind them the silent peasants went on with their work—in fields which the Republic had made their own.

"I think we take breakfast here," said Rougemont. "War is what one of your famous American generals said it was, but for the present, at least, we are marching *de luxe*. Here comes one of those glorious camp-kitchens."

An enormous motor vehicle, equipped with all the paraphernalia of a kitchen, stopped near them, and men, trim and neatly dressed, served hot food and steaming coffee. General Vaugirard had alighted also, and John noticed that his step was much more springy and alert than that of some officers half his age. His breath came in great gusts, and the small portion of his face not covered by thick beard was ruddy and glowing with health. He drank several cups of coffee with startling rapidity, draining each at a breath, and between times he whistled softly a pleasing little refrain.

The march must be going well. Undoubtedly General Vaugirard had received satisfactory messages in the night, while his young American aide, and other Frenchmen as young, slept.

"Well, my children," he said, rubbing his hands after his last cup of coffee had gone to its fate, "the day dawns and behold the sun of France is rising. It's not the sun of Austerlitz, but a modest republican sun that can grow and grow. Behold we are at the appointed place, set forth in the message that came to us from the commander-in-chief through Paris, and then by way of the air! And, look, my children, the bird from the blue descends once more among us!"

There were flying machines of many kinds in the air, but John promptly picked out one which seemed to be coming with the flight of an eagle out of its uppermost heights. He seemed to know its slim, lithe shape, and the rapidity and decision of its approach. His heart thrilled, as it had thrilled when he saw the *Arrow* coming for the first time on that spur of the Alps near Salzburg.

"It's for me," said General Vaugirard, as he looked upward. "This flying demon, this man without fear, was told to report directly to me, and he conies at the appointed hour."

Something of the mystery that belongs to the gulf of the infinite was reflected in the general's eyes. He, too, felt that man's flight in the heavens yet had in it a touch of the supernatural. Lannes' plane had seemed to shoot from white clouds, out of unknown spaces, and the general ceased to whistle or breathe gustily. His chest rose and fell more violently than usual, but the breath came softly.

The plane descended rapidly and settled down on the grass very near them. Lannes saluted and presented a note to General Vaugirard, who started and then expelled the breath from his lungs in two or three prodigious puffs.

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