

Goldfrap John Henry

The Boy Scouts on Belgian Battlefields



John Goldfrap

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CHAPTER I.

ANTWERP, ON THE SCHELDT

"Oh! how glad I am that part of the trip is over, now we've crossed from England to Antwerp without being wrecked!"

"You certainly did seem to have a bad time of it, Tubby, in the wash of the Channel!"

"Bad time did you say, Rob? It was a great deal worse than anything we struck on the voyage between New York and Liverpool, let me tell you."

"But now we want to forget all our troubles of the past, Tubby."

"I know what you mean by that, Merritt; it's just the same as telling me the worst is yet to come."

"Well, I'm a little afraid myself that's going to turn out a fact. Here we are, just landed in a strange country that is being overrun by an army of German invaders; and all of us are bound to push deeper and deeper into the mire."

"Hey, Merritt, you give me a shiver when you say that, don't you know?"

"I guess you must mean a quiver, Tubby; because whenever you laugh or tremble you make me think of a bowl full of jelly!"

"Now you're making sport of me because I'm so pudgy and fat. Just as if I could help that; can I, Rob?"

"To be sure you couldn't, Tubby; and we wouldn't want you to be anything but what you are – the best natured scout in the whole Eagle Patrol, and I'm safe in saying you're the only fellow in the Long Island town of Hampton who hasn't an enemy. Everybody takes a fancy to a jolly rollypoly like you, Tubby."

"What would we do without you?" Merritt added, with real feeling in his voice.

"Well, but it strikes me you tried mighty hard to induce me not to join you two on this wonderful trip abroad," complained the fat boy reproachfully.

"There was a good reason for that, Tubby," defended Merritt quickly. "I could see that with all these Old World countries in a scrap, my job of finding that man who is wanted so badly by my grandfather might take me into the fighting zone. Now Rob, as the leader of the Eagle Patrol, volunteered to stand by me, and I gladly accepted his assistance. When you asked to go along I was afraid the hardships of the trip might be too much for one of your peculiar build. That's all, I give you my word for it, Tubby."

"My 'peculiar build,' as you call it, Merritt," chuckled the other, considerably mollified by the explanation offered, "has gotten me into a peck of trouble, I admit. But you never saw me show the white feather, did you?"

"Never, Tubby!" admitted the boy addressed, who was a rather thoughtful looking young chap, of athletic build, though possibly not quite the equal of Rob Blake, the leader of the scout patrol to which all of them belonged. "It was mighty good of you two to back me up when I'd decided to take the risk alone. But unless that precious paper can be recovered, my grandfather, you know, stands to lose what he says is an enormous amount of money."

"He's got plenty in reserve, I understand, Merritt," observed Blake. "What a grand thing that turned out for your folks when Grandfather Merritt, who had cut your dad out of his will many years ago after he married against his wishes, repented of his cruelty, and paid you an unexpected visit to

get acquainted. Little did you think, when you stood up for that old fellow who was being snowballed so unmercifully by a bunch of village boys, that it was your own grandfather."

"Yes," added Tubby, "you know they say a good action is never thrown away. That's why I'm always watching for my opportunities. Some day I hope to win the admiration of a crank millionaire who should, of course, make me his heir."

"Well, here we are landed in Antwerp, and with a lot of sights to gather in before we set out in the direction of Brussels to find your man. Every minute counts, so let's get busy, and begin to wander around."

"That's right, Rob," said Merritt. "Suppose you lead the way."

These boys, who were all dressed in the well-known khaki that distinguishes scouts in nearly every country of the world, had just landed from a steamer that reached Antwerp from the shores of England.

They had managed to get themselves and few belongings conveyed to a fair hotel by means of a vehicle drawn by a broken-down horse; all of the best animals as well as such automobiles as were deemed worth taking having been commandeered by the Government for cavalry, field and artillery purposes.

While Rob Blake and his two chums, Tubby Hopkins and Merritt Crawford, are thus starting out to secure their first view of the quaint Flanders city, we may take occasion to glance back and see who they are and what they have done.

Those who have had the pleasure of reading previous volumes of this series need no further introduction to the trio; but for the benefit of any who are now making their acquaintance for the first time, a few paragraphs may not come in amiss.

There were other patrols in the Hampton Troop, but as the Eagles had been first in the field, the members of this organization were looked upon as the pioneers of the scout movement in that part of Long Island.

Rob filled the post of patrol leader, and had, on one occasion, even occupied the position of assistant scout-master, being fully qualified for the certificate he had received from Scout Headquarters in New York City.

Merritt, the second in command, filled the position of corporal. Tubby thus far seemed content to remain just a scout, though he had, by dint of hard labor managed to climb into the first grade rank.

Until recently, Merritt's folks had been in just ordinary circumstances. His father was said to be the best wheelwright in the eastern end of the island, and by constant labor kept his little family housed and clothed, and perhaps laid up a little for a rainy day.

Merritt always knew there was some sort of a family skeleton around, and that he had a severe old grandfather somewhere far away; but beyond that he had never been able to probe.

One day, near the end of the preceding winter, had come the singular little incident that wound up in a joyful reunion. Merritt, as one of his chums chanced to remark a little further back in this story, had come upon several village roughs engaged in battering a stranger in town, a little old gentleman who, carrying his grip and finding the hacks all away from the station, had evidently attempted to walk to the hotel.

The cowardly assault aroused the indignation of Merritt, who was a manly boy at all times. He remonstrated with the assailants, and when they continued to pelt the old man, he proceeded to attack them. Whether he could have won out alone and unaided will always be an open question. Fortunately one of the town policemen chanced to come in sight, which event caused the three foes to vanish in hot haste.

Then imagine the astonishment of Merritt when, after giving the old gentleman his name at the other's urgent request, he found himself being hugged by the stranger. He announced himself as Merritt's repentant grandfather who, unable to keep up his bitter feud longer, had sought the forgiveness of his son.

Just what came up later to start these three boys across the water during vacation time, when the Old World was commencing to rock and heave in the throes of the most terrible war ever known, will be made clear as the story progresses.

The first volume in the series, *The Boy Scouts of the Eagle Patrol*, was necessarily confined to the activities of the young organization; but Rob and his mates met and overcame many difficulties that are well worth reading about.

In the second volume, *The Boy Scouts on the Range*, were recounted a series of strange adventures that befell some of the Eagles during a visit to the Far Southwest, where they took part in the wild life of a cattle ranch.

Through the pages of *The Boy Scouts and the Army Airship* the reader will find that Rob and his comrades always bore themselves manfully, no matter the emergency; and that they scrupulously observed "scout law" under any and every occasion, as every true wearer of the khaki makes it a point to do.

After this, followed an account of many remarkable happenings that befell the Eagles when under canvas. *The Boy Scouts' Mountain Camp* has deservedly been reckoned one of the very best scout books ever published for boys, and those who own a copy are likely to read it many times.

Once more, chance allowed some of the leading characters in the Hampton Troop to come in touch with Government officers who were experimenting with a wonderfully designed submarine. It happened that Rob and his friends were enabled to assist Uncle Sam's agents in defeating the plans of foreign spies who tried to steal the design of the new invention. In the pages of *The Boy Scouts for Uncle Sam* are recorded the adventures that accompanied their service, as well as mention of the reward following their victory.

It was a happy chance that allowed some of the boys to pay a visit to the then uncompleted Panama Canal. While in the Canal Zone they again demonstrated that they were always wide-awake and devoted to the service of their country. Much useful information will also be found between the covers of this volume, called *The Boy Scouts at the Panama Canal*.

Once more, Rob and several of his close adherents were unexpectedly allowed to take a trip. Andy Bowles, the bugler of the troop, had an uncle who owned a cattle ranch down in Chihuahua, in Mexico. He was sick, and unable to go down himself to dispose of the stock before the fighting forces of rebels and Federals drove the herds away. Accordingly, he sent his nephew and several of his chums to seek General Villa, whom he had once befriended, and gain his assistance in selling the valuable stock. The wonderful things they saw, and the peculiar adventures that came their way, have all been described in the seventh volume, just preceding this, under the title of *The Boy Scouts Under Fire in Mexico*.

That, telling briefly some of the remarkable things that happened in their career as Boy Scouts, will have to suffice to introduce Rob and his two chums to the reader.

Starting out from their hotel, the three American boys were soon engrossed in their pursuit of seeing some of the strange sights for which this old Flemish city on the Scheldt has always been famous.

While they gazed, and made many amusing comments, Rob could not help noticing that, in turn, they attracted considerable attention. He could give a good guess as to the reason of this.

At that time, with the vast German army spreading out over most of Belgium, and also fighting its way to Paris, the good people of Antwerp were constantly worried over the possibility of an attack. They had many scares, though as yet the invaders, after taking Brussels, had not chosen to invest the big city near the sea. Later on, as we all know, the time came when their heavy artillery was turned on the forts of Antwerp, and before the terrible fire from those colossal German guns, steel domes that had been called invulnerable were easily battered to pulp.

With the assault and fall of Antwerp we have nothing to do, at least at present; but possibly those Flemish people thought the Boy Scouts part of an English army coming to defend Antwerp.

When Rob and his two chums landed from England, after crossing on a small steamer, they found the city choked with fugitives and Belgian soldiers.

Pushing their way along the crowded sidewalks, the boys took in all the sights that were so new to their American eyes. Only Rob had a small smattering of French, while his companions could not speak a word of the language. All of them were utterly ignorant of Flemish, current in half the homes of Belgium.

The way in which the natives made use of sturdy-looking dogs, harnessed in small carts, and trained to do their duty in order to earn their keep, was perhaps the most interesting thing that held their attention.

"Why," remarked Merritt, "they use dogs for nearly everything. Dozens of milk peddlers have teams to drag their big brass cans around. Then there are the hucksters, like we have over in New York, only these fellows peddle from carts drawn by dogs. We saw one poor, four-footed wretch roped to a treadmill, and doing the family churning; so I guess Belgium must make the dog traffic pay right well."

"And think of dogs drawing a quick-firing gun, which we saw in that street where the soldiers were getting ready to go to the front!" exclaimed Tubby. "I think that was the queerest sight ever."

"I can plainly see," Rob told them, "that while we're over here we are bound to keep our eyes wide open all the time because there are so many things that strike us as being queer just because we've been used to other ways. These people would stare at many of the things we think are common."

"What are you looking at now, Tubby?" asked Merritt, seeing that the boy, who had gained his name because after a fashion he resembled a tub of butter, was in the act of stretching his fat neck in order to see something that had attracted his attention.

"Why, I was wondering what made all the people crook their necks like that, and look up in the air. Is there a German Zeppelin heaving in sight? I don't seem to glimpse any big dirigible up there; do you, fellows?"

"What's that moving along away up near the clouds?" demanded Merritt.

"It must be an aëroplane," said Tubby. "I just heard somebody say my name close by; but he pointed up at that flier. What could he have meant, Rob?"

"I think I can tell you," replied the other scout. "German aëroplanes are called Taubes, and it sounded like your name. They say that is an aëroplane spy up there!"

CHAPTER II. THE AERIAL MAP-MAKER

"He's flying pretty high, let me tell you," said Tubby, straining his neck in an endeavor to watch the evolutions of the far-distant object sailing on the border of the cloud, and which looked so much like a great bird with outstretched wings.

"And all the while he is using his powerful field-glass to watch things going on below," added Rob. "I wouldn't be surprised if those chaps make a rough map, as they go over a place, with the position of forts marked, and the disposition of troops. In this war they say aëroplanes and dirigibles are going to play great stunts."

"Think of the nerve of that German aviator, sailing right over Antwerp in broad daylight!" Tubby declared. "It's a dare, all right, and I wonder if any of these Belgian fliers will take him up. I really think I'd like to see a little scrap up in the air. We didn't have a chance for anything of that sort since we were down in Mexico with Villa."

"Well," returned Merritt, "you may see more of that kind of business over here than you want. These fliers don't go circling around just to spy on the enemy. In lots of cases they have another and more terrible mission."

"Oh!" ejaculated the fat scout uneasily, "now you're thinking of that visit paid by a Zeppelin to Antwerp a short time back when it dropped a bomb that smashed things to flinders. They say it was aimed at the king's palace. But you don't think now that fellow away up there in the clouds would bother dropping explosives on our heads, do you, Rob?"

Tubby always appealed to the patrol leader when bothered about anything. To hear him talk you would imagine that he considered Rob Blake a walking encyclopedia, and capable of answering any kind of question.

"No, he's flying too high for that," the other told him confidently. "You see, with the air currents, that we know something about ourselves, no one at that height could count on landing his explosive anywhere near the place he wanted it to go. Chances are that chap is only out on a spying trip. Aëroplane pilots are the scouts of the air these days, you understand. Nothing can be hidden from them."

"I understand," ventured Merritt, as they continued to watch the circling of the lofty observer and map-maker, "that there can be no surprises in this war, because the enemy always knows all about the massing of troops long before an attack can be delivered. An eagle or a hawk, hovering over shallow water, can see every bit of bottom when the surface is still, and so he's able to pounce down on the fish he's selected for dinner. These wonderful air-pilots will bring information of every contemplated move on the part of the enemy."

"Poor old Napoleon would be a back number in these days," Tubby sighed, "because you remember his strongest card was to divide the enemy, and then smash one army and then the other. They'd know all about his game in time to block it. The romance of war has gone glimmering, I'm afraid."

"Listen to all that shouting," said Merritt.

"Seems to be cheers, as well as these people can cheer, which is not like the good old United States way," Tubby commented.

"You can see what it means," remarked Rob. "There goes a Belgian biplane up, to get after the bold German!"

"My stars!" gasped Tubby. "Now we *will* see a circus! Think of two rival pilots maneuvering up there among the clouds, and trying to knock each other out! Whew! But watch him boring up in spirals, would you? Does the German see him, do you think, and is he beginning to skip out?"

"Nothing like that has happened yet, as far as I can see," admitted Rob. "There he starts around again, as if meaning to complete his map, no matter if a dozen Belgian or English airmen come up after him."

"It'll be a fight, then, see if it doesn't!" Tubby affirmed.

"There goes a second aëroplane, and this time a monoplane," Merritt told them, pointing as he spoke. "Unless I miss my guess, there's an English aviator in that machine. It doesn't carry the little Belgian flag the other does, you notice."

"Two against one," muttered the deeply interested Tubby. "Better be making up your mind to turn tail and run, Mr. Deutschland. The odds are against you, and, if you should get tumbled out of your seat a mile high, I'd hate to be under you when you strike the ground."

"They seem to be maneuvering for position," asserted Rob. "Yes, both are circling around now, and going still higher all the time. Before long the German will be hidden in that cloud bank, and that's what he's aiming to have happen."

"I thought I saw something like a little puff of smoke just then!" declared Merritt, who had exceptionally good eyes, strong almost as those of an eagle.

"Then they must be bombarding each other!" Tubby ventured to say, evidently greatly thrilled by the spectacle that could never have been dreamed of a few generations back.

"It's likely they are using their automatics, and trying to disable each other," admitted Rob, "though, between us, Merritt, I don't believe the tiny puff of smoke could be seen away down here, unless you had a strong glass. Of course, when moving as fast as they do, the chance of making a shot tell is next door to nix."

"Anyhow, they're chasing the German aëroplane off," Tubby declared. "That is the main object for the brave Belgians going up there."

The boys had made up their minds while on the way across that as Americans they must obey the President's appeal and be strictly neutral, if it were possible. They had many good friends who were of German descent, while others had English ancestors and near relatives.

The one country with which they sympathized deeply was Belgium. The stubborn and heroic way in which that seven millions of people had defied seventy millions, and the gallant manner in which their little army had tried to resist the invasion of their beloved country, had aroused the admiration of every one of the scouts.

As they stood there on that afternoon, and watched, they finally saw the German Taube vanish in the clouds, with the leading Belgian aëroplane following suit. Whether the pursuer ever overtook the foreign air-scout or not, the boys never learned.

"Well, that was a lively little tilt while it lasted," remarked Merritt as, the entertainment being over, the crowds again commenced sauntering back and forth, with everybody talking volubly about the spectacle in the heavens.

Soldiers gave them a curious look in passing. Every stranger in Antwerp was under more or less suspicion in those days, for it was becoming known that the German secret service had for years maintained the most wonderful system of spying in France, England and Belgium ever dreamed of. Antwerp had thousands of Teuton residents before the war, some of them leading merchants who owned splendid country places six or seven miles outside the city, where solid cement tennis courts afterward came in very handy as foundations for the immense German siege guns.

"We'll see plenty more things that will give us a thrill to beat that," Rob observed, pushing through the bustling, chattering crowds.

"Yes, and I'm afraid times may come when danger will hang over our heads," Merritt pursued, with a touch of regret in his voice. "Then you'll both be sorry you didn't let me go off on this wild goose chase, as it may turn out to be, by myself."

"What do you take us for, I want to know?" demanded Rob. "Haven't we been through all sorts of tough times together in the past; and why shouldn't we stand by our chum when he needs our help?"

What's a scout good for if he is ready to desert a comrade when the sky grows dark? That's just the time to show his true colors."

"You're taking the very words out of my mouth when you say that, Rob!" asserted Tubby valiantly. "No matter what happens, we're bound by the ties of old friendship. We'll sink or swim together, boys. And Merritt, please don't ever tell us again you're feeling sorry for letting us come along."

"If that man is to be found, we're going to corner him!" declared Rob, with his lips taking on the firm lines that marked them whenever he was making up his mind to hammer away persistently, like Grant did before Richmond; "and when we go back to the other side, we hope to be carrying that precious old paper your grandfather let get out of his possession in such a queer way."

"This seems like a pretty warm day to me, even for summer," observed Tubby irrelevantly.

"Now, we can give a pretty good guess, Rob," ventured Merritt smilingly, "that Tubby has a sly meaning back of that remark."

"Yes," added the patrol leader, "and the chances are three to one it has something to do with feeding."

"You are champion guessers, both of you," Tubby informed them, without seeming to be in the least ashamed of the confession. "I'm consumed by a violent thirst right now; and I bet you the milk in that shiny brass can that those two tired dogs have been dragging all over Antwerp this afternoon will have a lump of ice in it. Anyway, I'm going to test it; come along and let me stand treat."

Laughing at his earnestness, the others followed the fat scout across the street, where the old woman with her dog team was apparently resting, and observing the remarkably interesting sights around her.

Just then there were loud cheers that attracted the attention of the three boys.

"Something else coming along that's worth seeing," Merritt announced. "Better curb that fierce thirst of yours for a minute or two, Tubby, while we watch what's passing."

"Oh! well, I guess the milk won't sour while we're waiting," admitted the fat boy with a sigh of resignation, as he wheeled so as to face the street.

"What do you call that, I wonder?" remarked Merritt, as he looked. "It's got the wheels of an automobile; but say, notice how the body of the car has been built up with steel sides, will you? And as sure as you live there's a quick firing Maxim mounted behind that bullet shield."

"Now I know what it is," Rob hastened to say.

"Then tell us, please," urged Tubby helplessly.

"They call them armored cars," said the patrol leader. "I've read about how some of these reckless Belgians have fitted up cars in this way. Nearly every day they start out to raid through the country, where they expect to run across detachments of Uhlans, or bicycle squads of the German advance. Then they dart down on them and do some terrible work; before the enemy can recover to smash them, they are off like a flash, and return to town with all sorts of trophies."

"They must have just been coming in," ventured Merritt. "I saw one of the soldiers had a bandage around his head. Another was holding up two helmets which must have been worn by Uhlans. And listen how the crowds roar and cheer. They certainly do hate the Kaiser and his army in Antwerp."

"Well, do you wonder?" Rob asked. "After some of their lovely towns have been burnt down, and thousands of houses destroyed, simply because these Belgians dared to stand up for their rights as a neutral nation!"

"Well, how about that drink of milk, fellows?" Tubby wanted to know.

"Suit yourself, Tubby," Rob told him. "If it tastes good to you, we might join you in a glass."

"Huh! sort of 'trying it on the dog first,' eh?" Tubby retorted, and then turning toward the owner of the dog team and the milk cart, he made a gesture with his head, and held up three fingers.

Evidently the old woman must have understood what he meant, though she looked a bit "peeved," as Tubby afterward expressed it, at being asked to do a retail business. There were a number

of measures dangling from hooks around the top of the shining brass milk can, also several glass "schooners." Taking one of the latter the old Belgian milk vender was in the act of filling it from the contents of the can when something astonishing happened.

Four soldiers who had been passing became excited, and pointed at the group; then they laid violent hands on the owner of the milk cart!

CHAPTER III. LEAVING FOR THE FRONT

"What's this? What's this?" stammered Tubby, as the schooner of rich milk fell with a crash to the pavement when the soldiers began struggling with the woman vender, who was also the owner of the dog team.

Of course a crowd collected immediately, as it always will in a city when there is the first sign of something doing. Antwerp was fairly seething with half suppressed excitement at that time, and anything of this kind was like putting a match to the powder magazine.

"Well, I declare but she's a husky old woman, that's right!" Tubby was heard to say after his astonishment had in a measure abated, and he could catch his breath. "Why, it takes the whole four soldiers to subdue her. Shame! to hit a poor old woman like that; but my stars, don't she kick and try to land a blow on some of their noses."

"Whew! what do you think!" exclaimed Rob just then, for he had been listening to some of the chattering on the part of the excited crowd near by. "It isn't an old woman, after all, but a man. That explains how he comes to fight as he does, and why the Belgians keep on treating him so roughly."

"A man, and dressed up like a woman!" cried Tubby. "Well, if that isn't a queer stunt, I want to know. Is he trying to escape military duty, do you think, Rob? I remember they have conscription here in Belgium just like in Germany, Russia and France. Every young fellow has to serve the colors just so long."

But Rob shook his head. By now the soldiers had apparently conquered the spirit of the man in woman's garments. His white Belgian cap had been torn off in the struggle, showing that his hair was short underneath. He was also bleeding from having come in contact with some hard object, but he now stood there as straight as any grenadier, and looked his captors contemptuously in the face.

"They say he's a German spy!" Rob told his two chums. Tubby again held his breath, and stared as hard as he could at the prisoner.

The crowd became fairly wild to get at the captive, and made all manner of violent threats as they surged around the little group. The milk can was upset, and the dogs liberated by some friendly hand ran wildly away, as though knowing that their temporary master had gotten himself in a serious scrape.

The four determined Belgian soldiers guarding their prisoner against the fury of the mob began to work a way along the pavement, meaning, no doubt, to land their prize in the lock-up, where he would be safe until the firing squad was called on to complete the tragedy.

Presently their signals brought another detachment of the guard to the spot, a way was speedily cleared through the dense masses of people, and that was the last the three scouts saw of the spy. They could guess his fate, but at the same time felt positive that he must have met it as a man.

Somehow, the experience gave them a queer feeling. Here they had been rubbing up against some of the tragic happenings of the war, and after being in Antwerp only a few hours. No wonder they all felt convinced that the signs pointed to their having some lively times ahead.

"And say, I didn't get my drink of milk, either, did I?" lamented Tubby, after things settled back into the old rut again, with that never-ending procession of citizens, refugees, soldiers, and even a sprinkling of venturesome foreign tourists passing by in both directions.

"Oh! that doesn't cut much figure in the matter," Merritt told him, "because if you step off this main street into one of the side *gassens* you'll run across plenty of other milk-venders, who will not turn out to be something else."

"I see one right now," announced the persistent Tubby, who did not like to give up anything on which he had set his heart. "And look at the name of the same, will you: *The Street of the Steen*. Now what does that stand for, Rob? Is it the same as the German word *stein*?"

"Oh! no, you're away off there, Tubby," he was immediately told by the patrol leader, who had studied his guide book to some advantage. "This Steen used ages ago to be a terrible prison, where in the days of the Spanish Inquisition they tortured people in all sorts of ways. Just now it's a great museum; and if only we had time, which we don't expect, I'd like nothing better than to explore it."

"You see," Merritt told them, "if only you would let me go on by myself, and try to find Steven Meredith, you might stay around here and have a fairly decent time, unless the Germans do really start to try and capture Antwerp, after all."

"That'll do for you, Merritt," Rob informed him severely, "you forget that incident is closed."

"Yes," added Tubby, trying to frown, but as usual making a sorry mess of it, for the lines of his chubby face refused to take on such an air, seeing that they were only adapted for smiling, "don't let us hear another wheeze from you, Merritt. But please come with me, and let's see if all the old milk-venders of Antwerp are German spies. I hope the milk isn't poisoned."

"That isn't fair talk, Tubby, because you know the Germans would be away and above doing anything like that. They have their faults, but nobody calls them cowards. In fact, they seem to be too brave for their own good, because we hear how they are shot down like ripe grain, pushing along in masses straight into the jaws of death, and singing as they go."

This time they were allowed to quaff their mugs of cool, fresh milk without any unpleasant incident to interrupt the ceremony. Tubby did eye the woman who owned the outfit rather suspiciously, and must have aroused her curiosity by the way he turned his head several times after they had walked off.

For another hour the three American scouts tramped back and forth, seeing all they possibly could in so short a time. The quaint Flemish houses, with their many gables, and their red-tiled roofs, interested them greatly. In some of the streets the buildings even seemed to lean toward one another, and Tubby declared two men could almost shake hands by stretching from the upper windows.

"Now we ought to see the burgomaster," said Rob, as the afternoon waned. "You know you are carrying a letter to him, Merritt, from your grandfather, who happens to be acquainted with him. And we count on getting a guide through his influence who will take us along the roads between here and Brussels."

"Even if a guide is not to be found, because nearly all the men are enlisted in the army," Merritt replied, "we've made up our minds not to hold back. Fellows who have had as much experience in running the gauntlet as the scouts of the Eagle Patrol can point to, needn't worry about how they're going to get along."

"Leave that to us," said Tubby, rather pompously; "and we'll land on our feet all right, just as a cat does if you drop it out of the second-story window."

After considerable difficulty, the boys were admitted to an audience with the mayor or burgomaster of Antwerp in his official chambers. Fortunately, he spoke English, so they expected to meet with little difficulty in acquainting him with the nature of their mission to Belgium at a time when nearly all other Americans were only too well pleased to get away from the land of strife and warfare.

The burgomaster looked surprised and even anxious when he heard that they desired an official paper from him, requesting all Belgians to assist them in their search for one Steven Meredith, who was believed to be located in a town not many miles to the west of the capital.

"I would do much for my old friend, Monsieur Charles Crawford, for whom I have long entertained a sincere affection," he told Merritt, after he had read the letter presented to him, and questioned the boys at length, "but it is a most serious undertaking you have in view. I question the wisdom of my encouraging such a dangerous trip."

Rob, seeing that the good burgomaster appeared to be hesitating, and as Tubby expressed it, "on the fence," started in to talk. Rob had a very persuasive way about him, as his chums knew from past experiences. They guessed how it would all turn out as soon as they saw how impressed the Belgian city official seemed to be with the arguments the boy brought forward.

Of course, in the end, the burgomaster yielded, and wrote them out the passport they wanted so badly. This document would possibly permit them to go even beyond the lines where the Belgian army was intrenched, waiting to deal a blow at the enemy in case the Germans turned threateningly toward Antwerp.

"I do this much against my will," he told them, as he was shaking each one by the hand upon their leaving. "But my old friend has written me so much that is clever about the faculty you boys have shown in taking care of yourselves, that I am in hopes you may get through safely. But I shall be sad indeed if anything overtakes you through my giving way to sentiment. I wish I could influence you to remain here in safety, and send out some messenger in your stead to bring this man to Antwerp."

"We have made up our minds to accompany our friend, the grandson of the Charles Crawford you knew, sir," Rob told him, "and all we can promise is that we mean to be very careful. If the man you will send around to us as a guide does his duty faithfully, we hope to get along fairly well. And believe us, sir, we feel that you have advised and assisted us even more generously than Mr. Crawford expected of you. We thank you a thousand times. Good-bye."

That night passed without anything unusual happening to disturb the three boys. Their hotel chanced to be situated in a quiet part of the seething city, so that they were not at all annoyed by patriotic outbursts. And boys as a rule have a happy faculty of losing their troubles in sleep.

With the coming of that next morning all of them were early astir. After breakfast they went in search of mounts, having secured some hints from the proprietor of the hotel.

Horses were certainly at a high premium just then in Flanders. Nearly every animal of any worth at all had been taken by the Belgian field forces for army use. If a few were by accident hidden, and escaped this search, they were apt to be discovered by the advancing Germans.

"It would be of no use, anyway, getting hold of respectable nags," Rob explained, when he saw even Tubby gape at sight of the poor looking animals they had offered to them at exorbitant prices, "because we'd never have the least chance to get anywhere on their backs. No matter how many passes we had from burgomasters, or even King Albert himself, somebody would be sure to take them away from us."

"I suppose half a loaf *is* better than no bread at all," complained Merritt with vivid recollections of the fine mounts he and his chums had sported on several occasions, notably when on the cattle ranch, and following Mexican war trails.

"But *such* a loaf!" sighed Tubby, as he ran his hand over the bony back of the nearest quadruped, and wondered whether so weak looking a horse could long survive under his rather heavy weight.

"They may turn out a heap better than they look," Rob told them. "Sometimes it's the bony horses that can hold the pace in a grueling journey. But, after all, it's a case of Hobson's choice with us; either these nags, or walk."

"Whew! better close the bargain then, Merritt; that is, if you think you can afford the price," Tubby hastened to say, for as may be easily understood, he was not very much in love with protracted walks, not having been built for a sprinter.

So Merritt bought four horses, and paid cash down for them, receiving a regular bill of sale from the dealer, to show they were his property. With them went old saddles and bridles, good enough for the purpose of the three scouts, but not of a type calculated to incite anyone to steal the same.

All that remained to be looked after now was that promised guide. If the good burgomaster of Antwerp kept his promise, they expected to find a native waiting at the hotel when they got back after their foray into the limited horse market.

And sure enough they found a swarthy Belgian there who said he had been engaged by the mayor to serve them. Merritt quickly made terms, for the guide, besides being able to converse in French and Flemish, could speak some English, and readily comprehended all that was said in that tongue; especially when the subject of a money contract came under consideration.

"There's nothing to detain us any longer, boys," remarked Merritt. "We have made up a little pack apiece which we'd like to take along. We travel light on this trip, you know; all but Tubby, and that's something he always gets left on. The balance of our duffle the proprietor of the hotel has promised to keep safely until we show up to claim it again."

"Small loss if we never see any of it again," Rob admitted. "At the same time we hope to come back this way after we've run that person down, and either recover the paper your grandfather wants, or learn that it's lost for good."

"That is," corrected Tubby, "we expect to see Antwerp again if the Germans don't gobble us up."

"I'd like to see them try it," remarked Merritt, with a significant look at the ample proportions of the fat chum. "They'd have their work cut out, as sure as you live, Tubby."

"Now, don't get personal again, Merritt," cautioned the other, holding up a warning forefinger, "but as there are heaps and heaps of queer things I'd like to poke into around this town, I certainly hope to visit it again."

Half an hour afterward, mounted on scrubby looking horses, which would have excited the derision of any respectable cowboy in the West, Rob and his two chums, accompanied by Anthony Wallenhout, the Belgian guide, passed out of the city, heading toward the east.

Before they had gone a sixth of a mile they found themselves stopped by a patrol of soldiers, led by a young lieutenant, who, it happened, could speak English.

"It is no use, messieurs," he told them, with a pleasant smile, but a determined shake of the head, "you must face the other way and go back. The enemy is in force in many places between Brussels and Antwerp, and severe fighting is going on wherever our brave army has thrown up entrenchments. Antwerp is the only safe place for any who speak English, these days."

CHAPTER IV. THE DAY OF THE BOY SCOUT

"Now, wouldn't that jar you!" muttered Tubby, sprawled on the back of his horse very much after the manner of a great toad. "Here we hardly get started on our wonderful trip over the battlefields of Belgium before we're held up, and told to fade away. Huh! talk to me about luck, we seem to have lost our grip."

"Show him what you've got, Merritt," suggested Rob, who did not give up quite so easily, because of a sudden snag in the stream.

"Oh! why, yes, how about that passport the burgomaster wrote out for us himself? It ought to do the trick!" exclaimed Tubby, his sad look disappearing like a flash, and an expectant one appearing in its stead.

The officer scanned the paper which Merritt handed him.

"At a time like this the burgomaster himself is under military orders," he told the waiting boys, "and if it happened to be a matter of much importance I could not honor his request. It chances, however, that in this case there is nothing involved except your safety. And you seem to be willing to take the risk?"

"Yes, because we have a very important piece of business to carry out," Rob hastened to tell him, seeing which way the wind was blowing, and wishing to take advantage of the flood-tide. "It means a great deal to one of my friends if we can find a certain man. You will allow us to go on, then, I hope?"

The lieutenant shrugged his shoulders in real French style as he handed the burgomaster's passport back.

"Yes, if you are that rash, young messieurs," he said. "We, of the Belgian army, can admire pluck. You certainly have my best wishes."

"Oh! thank you, lieutenant!" gushed Tubby, who was relieved to know that the enterprise was not fated to be condemned at the start.

Perhaps the time might come ere long when the same Tubby would be secretly lamenting over the fact that it had been given a free swing. But coming events do not always cast their shadows before; and just at that moment none of the venturesome scouts could so much as guess what awaited them in the disturbed country beyond.

They gave the obliging lieutenant a regular scout salute, which he returned in kind. The paper had informed him that Rob and his chums were members of the Boy Scout organization in America, so that the fact of their wearing khaki uniforms was easily understood.

"I hope we have as good luck in skipping past every obstacle we run up against," Merritt was saying, as they moved along the road leading from Antwerp in the direction of the Belgian capital.

"Oh! we mustn't expect to be always as fortunate as that," said Rob. "I believe in hoping for the best, and preparing for the worst. It's good policy all around."

"Something like we read the Pilgrim Fathers used to do in the good old days when they used to ride to church with the wife back of them," Tubby explained, "and every man carrying his gun along. Their motto was 'trust in the Lord; but keep your powder dry!'"

"That's the idea," agreed Rob. "And so far, in all our tramps and wanderings, we've managed to do our part fairly well."

"Let's hope this venture turns out as good," Tubby added, with a side glance toward Merritt, for, of course, it concerned him more than either of the others whether success or failure resulted from their trip abroad.

That was only a beginning, for they were soon held up again. This time it came about that the soldier in charge of the detachment could not speak a word of English, so the guide had to exercise his ability in the line of a translator.

So well did he plead, and explain that they were all good friends of the burgomaster of Antwerp, that once again they were allowed to proceed.

Rob could easily see, however, that considerable doubt had arisen in the mind of the officer as to whether he should permit three boys to head into such a disturbed country as that lying beyond.

Like the lieutenant, he shrugged his shoulders, and dismissed the matter of responsibility from his mind. Indeed, there were too many other serious affairs to be considered just then to bother about a party of tourists fairly wild to say they had gazed upon actual battlefields; for, doubtless, he concluded this was the real reason why these venturesome boys elected to take chances in the war zone.

So long as they were not spies in the service of the enemy it was all right; only he wanted to warn them that they were apt to meet with some roving detachment of Germans at almost any time, since they were overrunning most of the country, appearing suddenly at villages, and demanding food and wine, or surprising isolated stations poorly guarded, so as to hold some important bridge for the coming of a column.

"Look what's coming whizzing along ahead there!" Tubby called out a short time after this encounter.

There was a little cloud of dust, and they could see that it was caused by someone mounted on a bicycle, who was bending down over the handlebars and working his feet very rapidly.

"Give him the road, fellows; he seems to be in a big hurry!" ordered Rob.

A minute later and the bicyclist shot by them. As he did so he straightened up in the saddle, and to their surprise gave them a regulation scout salute. Then he went tearing down the road in that cloud of dust.

"Did you see that?" cried Tubby. "Why, he was a Boy Scout as sure as anything! Now, what in the wide world was he in such a terrible hurry for? He acted like he might be late for his breakfast."

"Just now the Boy Scouts in Belgium have a good many other things to bother them besides missing an occasional meal," explained Rob. "They have been taken over by the military authorities and are doing splendid work in heaps of ways."

"Yes," added Merritt, as they rode on again, "I noticed a number of them while we were in Antwerp, and they seemed to be on the jump constantly. Every fellow had a badge on his left arm with the letters 'S. M.' on it. You remember, Rob, when you asked what they stood for, you were told the letters meant 'Service Militaire,' and showed that the boys were working for the Government."

"What d'ye reckon they find to do?" asked Tubby, deeply interested.

"They act as dispatch bearers," replied Rob, "ambulance orderlies, and aids to the police. They told me that in Brussels, now held by the Germans, some scouts daily herded the women who came for their regular ration issued by the Government, and kept order, too. Everybody takes them seriously. This is no time for play among the Boy Scouts of Belgium, when war has gripped their native land."

"When we were over in England," Merritt related, "I made it a point to find out how all the scouts there were being made use of. It gave me a mighty proud feeling to know that I was authorized to wear the uniform of the Eagle Patrol; for there never was a time in the history of the world when boys were of as much use as now."

"But there have been no battles on English soil, up to now, Merritt; tell me how the Boy Scouts of Great Britain could do things, then?" asked Tubby, who it seems could not have been bothering himself very much when his chums were making all these observations.

Merritt took a slip of paper from his pocket. They were riding slowly at the time, indeed at all times, for the horses did not seem desirous of making any particular speed.

"Here's an account I clipped from an English paper while we were in London," he told Tubby. "It tells a lot of things the scouts have taken to doing in order to assist; for, during the war, school duties have been mostly dropped."

"Oh! what joy!" cried Tubby; "but go and read it out to us, Merritt."

"Here's what the account says, then," Merritt told them, as he managed to read from the slip: "'Acting as guides to troops. Forwarding dispatches dropped from air craft. Coastguard work, such as watching estuaries, guiding vessels in unbuoyed channels, and showing lights to friendly vessels!'"

"Whew!" remarked Tubby; "that sounds fine to me, Merritt. For once I almost wish I happened to be a Johnny Bull boy instead of an Uncle Sam. Is that all?"

"It's only the beginning," he was told. "Listen to some more work a scout can do for his country over there. 'Collecting information as to available supplies and transports. Helping the families of men at the front. First aid; fitting up nursing stations, refuges, dispensaries, and kitchens in their own club rooms. Carrying on organized relief of the destitute. Guarding and patrolling bridges, culverts, telegraph lines, and water supplies. Serving as dispatch bearers, telegraph and mail delivery riders; and distributing millions of notices as to billeting, commandeering, safety precautions, and the like.' How's that strike you, Tubby?"

"It certainly gives me a thrill," the fat boy replied, "and I envy the lucky Boy Scouts of Great Britain. I reckon they're doing things like that down in France. Yes, and in Germany too. Now people will see what it means to wear the khaki uniform. I'm prouder than ever because I have that right."

"They say," remarked Rob, chiming in with what knowledge he had picked up, "that for once the boys are appreciated in these times. They have at last come into their own. A scout's uniform is regarded in England as a sign of competence and responsibility. It is treated with the same respect given to any other official garb."

"This account goes on to say that the boys have developed a wonderful topographical knowledge," Merritt continued, full of the subject as any Boy Scout might well be. "They pack ambulances systematically with instruments and medical supplies, checking off their lists like experienced quartermasters. Others take charge of the delivery of camp outfits from the stores to the troops about to embark for the seat of war. The bicycle corps and mounted squads can care for their machines and horses, make high speed, and meet emergencies with decision and intelligence. The signal corps can use the telegraph key, semaphore, and flags almost as well as veterans, thanks to their training. They can repair telegraph lines and instruments, and have considerable knowledge of wireless."

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Tubby. "This is sure the day of the Boy Scout. I never thought I'd ever live to see him climb to such a dazzling height. Of course, over in America, scouts have never been trained with any idea that they might be soldiers; for we don't have a chip on our shoulder all the time, and feel that we're spoiling for a fight."

"All the same," said Rob, "the time may come when what we've learned will be of great use to our country. Besides, every boy is ten times better off for joining the organization."

They had been riding in this fashion for an hour and more, often meeting parties of fugitives on the road, some of them bearing household treasures, leading a mooring cow, or driving a spavined old horse that was attached to a shaky wagon piled up with goods of value to the owners only.

These sights at first struck the boys as pitiful. They would in time become so accustomed to them that such spectacles must be taken as a part of the war game; still, all of them were sure that in this case "familiarity would not breed contempt."

Then at times it happened that houses were scarce, and a stretch of the road, from some reason or other, ahead appeared deserted. Often, in the distance, they heard strange sounds like far-away thunder. It thrilled them to imagine that possibly this was the roar of big guns; perhaps they were even drawing near to an actual battlefield!

About this time the boys noticed that their guide was acting as though excited.

"What's the matter, Anthony?" asked Rob, bent on knowing the worst.

In his broken English the Belgian guide tried to tell them his fears.

"Look you – over thisaways – you see men, horses – they run thisaway, they run thataway – some shake hands at us – I do not know, but it may be they will turn out to be Uhlan cavalrymen – bad men who ride far in advance of the army, to screen movements of troops. If they are Uhlans, we may not go ahead further!"

CHAPTER V. UNDER THE BRIDGE

Of course what Anthony told them caused the boys more or less concern. They had no desire to fall into the hands of the Germans. While it could not be said that they were against the invaders, the terrible stories they had heard in Antwerp, even if only a small part were true, gave them an unpleasant feeling toward the Kaiser's men.

That word Uhlans was dreaded by every Belgian or native of Northern France. While it really stands for the cavalry arm of the German forces, still, ever since the Franco-Prussian war of more than forty years ago, it has possessed a terrible significance all its own. Humble peasants shivered when they pronounced it, and no doubt many an unruly child was threatened with the coming of the terrible Uhlans unless it mended its ways.

"If that's the case, then," Merritt voiced the opinion of himself and chums by saying hurriedly, "we want to get out of this. It's a case of either run or hide with us."

"But where could we hide?" asked Tubby, looking all around him helplessly. "Just now there isn't a single cottage in sight; and the bare fields around don't offer much shelter, seems to me."

"There's a bridge just ahead of us," said Rob.

"And we might manage to get our mounts down underneath," added Merritt instantly, grasping the idea that was in the patrol leader's mind. "The bank slopes easy enough to allow of it."

"Eet could be done, Messieurs!" allowed the guide, who was even more alarmed, it seemed, than Tubby himself, since the prospect of falling into the hands of the dreaded Uhlans raiders began to assume greater proportions, now that the peril no longer lay in the dim distance, but was close at hand.

"Then let's hurry and see what it looks like under the bridge," advised Rob.

Just as they figured, it proved easy enough to lead their horses down the bank, which was covered with grass and growing weeds, for since the war began all really unnecessary work on roads and railways had been stopped. And those horses would have willingly gone anywhere if there only seemed a prospect that they might rest a spell, for they seemed tired all of the time.

"Listen to them shouting, will you?" Tubby complained as they were going down amidst the bushes that promised to screen them from the party on the other side of the little stream across which the massive bridge had been built.

"I'm afraid they must have seen us," Merritt said, "and that will mean they'll soon be across the bridge again to find out what we're doing, and who we are. What's the program, Rob?"

"We must act as though our only object in coming down here was to water our horses," replied the patrol leader; this idea having possibly come into his mind as he noticed the way his mount put its ears forward, and commenced to whinny – as horses invariably do when they scent water, and are thirsty.

"Come on, here, what's ailing you, Dobbin?" demanded Tubby, jerking at the reins when his animal displayed an inclination to hold back.

"He acts kind of queer, doesn't he?" Merritt said when, after considerable fussing, Tubby managed to coax his horse to once more advance, though the animal seemed to be snorting, and trembling. "If we were on the cattle range right now I'd be half inclined to think he smelled a rattler near by."

"My stars! I hope they don't have such pests over here in Belgium!" exclaimed Tubby, beginning to himself show immediate signs of nervousness.

"Not the least danger," declared Rob. "But, all the same, my horse seems trying to hold back, just as yours did, Tubby."

"They're sure a cantankerous lot all through!" grumbled the fat scout, looking carefully where he expected to plant his foot next; for, in spite of Rob's assurance, he was not quite so certain that the undergrowth beneath the bridge might not harbor some poisonous reptile which might strike unexpectedly.

"They're still keeping up that shouting!" announced Merritt, listening. "Which I take it is a queer thing for them to do. If they're German raiders why don't they come across and interview us, I wonder? I thought I saw uniforms among the bunch. How about that, Rob?"

"The sun was in my eyes, and I couldn't say for certain," acknowledged the one spoken to, jerking at the bridle of his horse.

"One thing is sure," said Tubby, "the horses are not at all thirsty; else there's some thing they don't like about this place down here."

All of them were really puzzled by the strange actions of their horses. It was no longer simply Tubby's mount that acted so contrary, but the other three also.

"Guess my nag got cold feet about something; and it's catching as the measles," Tubby announced, as he shook his head in the manner of one who finds himself with too hard a nut to crack.

"Well, that water looks cool and clear," said Merritt, "and I think I could enjoy a few swallows myself, if the horses won't."

"Sure it ain't poisoned, are you, Merritt?" queried Tubby dubiously.

"Oh! get that crazy notion out of your poor head, Tubby. Germans don't make war that way. They face the music, and stand up before the guns. What makes you look at me like that, Rob?" and Merritt as he asked this question stopped short, for he had been in the act of putting his threat into deeds, and getting down beside the stream to take a drink.

"I smell it too, Rob!" exclaimed Tubby just then. "And, oh! let me tell you it's a rank odor. Isn't it in this country they make all that Limburger cheese; or over the border in Holland? Well, if you asked me I'd say it was something like that."

"Smells more like burnt powder to me!" snapped Rob, showing visible signs of increasing excitement.

With that he commenced looking hurriedly around. Perhaps a sudden tremendous suspicion may have flashed into his mind, and he was seeking to justify it by making some sort of discovery.

The gully was of considerable width, as has been said before, though just at that time in the late summer the stream that flowed through it did not appear to be of any great depth, and could be easily forded.

There were bushes and grass and weeds growing all about, besides stray stones that may have fallen there when the solid masonry of the really fine bridge had been constructed years before.

Although he turned his eyes in this quarter and that, Rob failed to see anything that looked at all suspicious. Still that peculiar odor continued to strike his sense of smell, stronger than before, if anything.

"Must be something burning, fellows!" announced Tubby, as he held a hand up so that he could close his nose with thumb and finger against the offensive odor.

The guide had meanwhile thrown himself down at the brink of the stream and proceeded to drink his fill. Evidently he had no fear concerning the quality of the water. Typhoid germs were unknown to his lexicon; and so long as water looked fairly clear it suited him.

He was getting on his feet again as Tubby made that last remark. His horse had been pulling more violently than ever at the rein, and the Belgian started to say something uncomplimentary to the animal in Flemish.

Rob had stopped examining the shore upon which they were standing. He turned his gaze across the stream to the opposite bank, for his scout training told him that since the breeze came from that quarter he would be apt to learn the cause of the odor, so like burnt powder, if he followed it up.

The others heard Rob give a half suppressed shout, as though he had made a sudden and startling discovery.

"Oh! what is it?" cried Tubby, straining to keep his horse from trying to start up the ascent again.

"Across the river, over there under the arch of the bridge, don't you see that little curl of blue-white rising?" exclaimed Rob. "Watch it and you'll find that it is creeping along over the ground. Come, we've got to get up out of this in a hurry! Turn your horses, and let them help to drag you up! Quick, everybody; not a second to lose, I tell you!"

Tubby no longer tried to hold his horse back; on the contrary, he even urged the animal to climb the grade in frantic haste. He did not know what it all meant, but Rob acted as though there must be some terrible danger threatening them; and Tubby was no fool.

With cries and shouts they urged the animals to ascend. Several times a horse would slip, and come near falling headlong backward; then it was the one who held the reins found it necessary to encourage the struggling beast with word and act, so that the horse might regain his footing.

Tubby, chancing to glimpse Rob's face about the time they drew near the top was horrified to see how very white it seemed. Then more than ever did he realize that it must be something dreadful that had threatened them.

"Rob, tell us what it was all about?" Tubby managed to gasp, when, having reached the road again, they were hurrying back as rapidly as they could go, the horses helping to drag them along.

"Just this," Rob told him briefly. "They've fixed a mine there under the bridge, so as to blow it up; and we've had the narrowest escape of our lives!"

CHAPTER VI. GETTING NEAR THE WAR ZONE

"Hold on to your horses, everybody!" called out Merritt, as he looked back toward the bridge from which they had now managed to press quite a little distance.

Merritt somehow did not seem to be very much astonished at what Rob had said. It might be he himself had entertained suspicions along those same lines.

They had heard that the determined Belgians were engaged in throwing all the obstacles possible in the way of an advance in force on the part of the invaders. If only cavalry were to be dealt with, the defenders of the soil had faith in their ability to take care of all that could be sent against them; but it was known to be a fact that the artillery arm was what the Germans meant to depend on more than anything else in this war for conquest.

If bridges and culverts were destroyed in every direction before the enemy could take possession of the roads, it would be next to impossible to move the great siege guns until some sort of strong temporary structure had been built in place of the stone and steel fabrics that were blown up.

And so, for days, there had been reports drifting in to Antwerp that certain bridges had been marked for destruction. Those who sallied forth in armored cars to speed over the country, and play havoc with their Maxim guns, found it necessary to revise their map of the district every night so as to conform to the new changes that had been wrought.

It was hardly ten seconds after Merritt told them to keep a firm grip on the bridles of their horses that the boys on looking back saw the bridge suddenly rear itself in the air. Then came a terrifying boom that made the very ground under their feet quiver; and, in a moment later, in place of the fine bridge lay a horrible gap, from which smoke and dust was arising in sickening clouds.

Tubby was as white as a sheet. The others could hear the big sigh with which he drew in a gulp of air.

"I want to say right here," he started to remark solemnly, "that I'm thankful I've got such a cracking good nose for queer odors. Think what might have happened to us if I hadn't begun to sniff around, and made Rob take notice. All that pile of stuff would have buried us out of sight. And the horses knew, sure they did. That explains why they acted so funny all the while. But isn't it a shame to see how they had to smash that splendid bridge!"

"Don't forget that this is war, Tubby," Merritt told him, "and to hinder the enemy from coming up, anything is allowable."

"But that's going to block our going on, I take it," ventured Tubby, watching Anthony, who showed evidences of having been considerably excited by the explosion, though Tubby could not tell whether it was fear that influenced the man, or an overmastering desire to join the army, and engage in some of this obstructive work himself.

"Oh! that doesn't follow," Rob assured him. "I noticed that the river was shallow just now; and I imagined I could see the old ford that used to answer before this bridge was ever thought of. We can get across without swimming. You forded the Rio Grande once upon a time, Tubby, and such a little bug stream as this shouldn't phase you a bit."

"Oh! count on me going wherever the rest of you lead," retorted Tubby, with a blustering air, as though he did not want anyone to think him at all timid.

"We might as well go back now," remarked Rob, "and see about getting over. If the mine has been exploded, there shouldn't be any danger; I want to try that ford."

It was found that though the bridge was wrecked pretty badly, the greatest damage was to the span, and not so much to the anchorages or piers. In time another arch could be built – should peace

ever come to this distracted land – when men would be able to once more "beat their swords into ploughshares," and start to rebuilding what had been destroyed.

"Follow after me," Rob told them, as he started to urge his horse across where he could see the old ford had been.

Little of the material from the wrecked bridge had been thrown to any distance, so the ford was not blocked. The horses still displayed more or less restlessness, as though they could not understand that, with such a smell of choking gases in the air, the danger was all over. The three boys, however, had had considerable experience in handling balky animals, and knew just how to urge them on.

Once on the other side, they started up the bank. As they arrived at the road, having crossed the abyss, they saw a crowd of men hurrying toward the spot. They were partly Belgian soldiers, it turned out, along with some civilians, possibly men versed in explosives or strategy to be employed to delay the advance of the German artillery.

Of course, they were very much excited at meeting the boys. The khaki uniforms seemed to soften their anger to some extent, but one who appeared to be in authority started to scold them for walking so blindly into a trap.

Through the guide Rob hastened to explain how it came they had not suspected the truth. Then as questions began to follow, he also told who and what they were, even mentioning something concerning their self-imposed mission into the danger zone of the fighting.

When the precious passport, written out by the good burgomaster, was shown, it had an additional soothing effect. The man in charge of the squad of destruction smiled and nodded as he perused the document, written in French.

"He say burgomaster his uncle!" explained Antonio, after the other had handed the paper back, and made some remark.

"Well, now, that's what I call fine. Tell him we're glad we got out from under that bridge in time," said Rob, "and also that we think he made a clean sweep of the job."

This seemed to please the Belgian officer, for he insisted on shaking hands all around. Feeling that they were now free to proceed, the scouts resumed their journey along the road that led to Brussels; probably, wholly in the hands of the invaders further on toward the capital, since rumor had it that immense numbers of German troops were daily being moved toward Ghent.

"All of which only goes to show how necessary it is to be constantly on the watch while you're in a country that's fighting for its life," Merritt remarked to his companions as they lost sight of the ruined bridge.

"If only we had eyes in the back of our heads, we might get along a heap better, I think," grumbled Tubby, as his horse awkwardly stumbled over some small object, and gave him a shock.

"It was a close call, all right," acknowledged Merritt, "and has sobered our guide a whole lot, I notice. He listens to every far-off boom now, as though something might be drawing him. But the morning is wearing away, so I suggest that we stop at the very first village we come to, and see if we can beg, buy, or steal something to eat. I'm hungry as a bear."

"Oh! bless you, Merritt, for those kind words!" called out Tubby. "I've felt a vacuum down around my belt line for two hours back. Whoa! there!" he added, as his horse stumbled again. "Want to break my neck, you animated skeleton? He knocks his hoofs together every third step he takes. No wonder they didn't grab him for the cavalry; he'd have fallen all over himself in the first charge."

Coming to a little hamlet, the boys found a house where they could secure something in the way of a lunch. Even at this early stage in the war, however, prudent hotel keepers realized that times were going to be hard, and that it would be the part of wisdom to conceal all the stores possible against a rainy day, or the raids of such invaders who might be billeted upon the villagers.

Here the boys remained between one and two hours, since the day was unusually hot, and their mounts were not in the best of condition for standing hard service.

Some of the good people had left for safer quarters, which would mean Antwerp, of course, – deemed impossible of capture at that day on account of its wonderful defenses. A group gathered in front of the little hotel, and questioned Anthony as to who the three boys in the uniform of scouts might be, and of the nature of their mission that tempted them to invade a region being made desolate by war.

Anthony himself knew very little on that score; but since it would not look well for him to admit this fact, it is possible he "drew the long bow" to some extent. He may even have told all sorts of fairy stories about the boys being English agents sent over to learn facts in connection with the movements of the German army, so that a strong force of the allies from across the Channel could be hastily dispatched to the scene, and chase the haughty Germans back across the Rhine.

Some idea like this the boys found very prevalent all through their journey. The Belgians seemed to believe the English were getting a wonderful surprise ready with which to stagger the enemy. If they could have only known how an army had to be built up step by step in the great island country, they might have felt less confidence, and perhaps shown more discretion in attacking the invaders.

Rob suspected something of this sort when he saw the way the villagers observed him and two chums, staring at them as though they were curiosities.

"Makes you feel like some punkins, to have all these people watch every little thing you do, and get out of your way so quick when you go to make a move, don't it?" remarked Tubby, evidently tickled over the attention shown them.

"I don't just like it, to tell you the truth," admitted Merritt.

"Oh! you're too modest by half, Merritt!" jeered the fat scout.

"It isn't that, Tubby," explained the other. "Rob here says he believes our guide is spreading the report that we're English messengers, sent ahead to pick up news about the Germans, so they can be smashed when the British army gets here."

"Well, what of that?" demanded his friend. "It isn't so *very* dreadful that I can see, to be mistaken for a Johnny Bull."

"You'll change your tune, my boy," Rob told him, "if the Germans should come along and nab us. We'll soon see how you begin to roar out that you're a Yankee, as true-blue as they make them."

"Oh! but they wouldn't know anything about that!" declared Tubby, though showing signs of increasing dismay at the same time.

"You never can tell," he was told by Rob. "The ways of these smart Germans are past finding out. They've got spies everywhere. Right now there may be some secret sympathizer with the Fatherland in that bunch close by, taking in all that silly Anthony has been saying."

"Gingersnaps and popguns!" gasped Tubby, "if that's really so I guess we'd better muzzle our guide in a hurry. Where's he gone to, do you think, Rob? It was all of half an hour ago that I saw him last, talking to the crowd."

"I was wondering about that myself," said Merritt. "If we expect to be getting along about this time, we ought to look Anthony up."

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