

Emerson Alice B.

**Ruth Fielding Homeward
Bound; A Red
Cross Worker's Ocean...**



Alice Emerson

**Ruth Fielding Homeward Bound;
A Red Cross Worker's Ocean Perils**

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CHAPTER I – TEA AND A TOAST

“And you once said, Heavy Stone, that you did not believe a poilu *could* love a fat girl!”

Helen said it in something like awe. While Ruth’s tea-urn bubbled cozily three pair of very bright eyes were bent above a tiny, iridescent spark which adorned the “heart finger” of the plumper girl’s left hand.

There is something about an engagement diamond that makes it sparkle and twinkle more than any other diamond. You do not believe that? Wait until you wear one on the third finger of your left hand yourself!

These three girls, who owned all the rings and other jewelry that was good for them, continued to adore this newest of Jennie Stone’s possessions until the tea water boiled over. Ruth Fielding arose with an exclamation of vexation, and corrected the height of the alcohol blaze and dropped in the “pinch” of tea.

It was mid-afternoon, the hour when a cup of tea comforts the fagged nerves and inspires the waning spirit of womankind almost the world over. These three girls crowded into Ruth Fielding’s little cell, even gave up the worship of the ring, to sip the tea which the hostess soon poured into the cups.

“The cups are nicked; no wonder,” sighed Ruth. “They have traveled many hundreds of miles with me, girls. Think! I got them at Briarwood – ”

“Dear old Briarwood Hall,” murmured Jennie Stone.

“You’re in a dreadfully sentimental mood, Jennie,” declared Helen Cameron with some scorn. “Is that the way a diamond ring affects all engaged girls?”

“Oh, how fat I was in those days, girls! And how I did eat!” groaned the girl who had been known at boarding school as “Heavy Stone,” and seldom by any other name among her mates.

“And you still continue to eat!” ejaculated Helen, the slimmest of the three, and a very black-eyed girl with blue-black hair and a perfect complexion. She removed the tin wafer box from Jennie’s reach.

“Those are not real eats,” complained the girl with the diamond ring. “A million would not add a thousandth part of an ounce to my pounds.”

“Listen to her!” gasped Helen. “If Major Henri Marchand could hear her now!”

“He is a full colonel, I’d have you know,” declared Jennie Stone. “And in charge of his section. In *our* army it is the Intelligence Department – Secret Service.”

“That is what Tom calls the ‘Camouflage Bureau.’ *Colonel* Marchand has a nice, sitting-down job,” scoffed Helen.

“Colonel Marchand,” said Ruth Fielding, gravely, “has been through the enemy’s lines, and with his brother, the Count Allaire, has obtained more information for the French Army, I am sure, than most of the brave men belonging to the Intelligence Department. Nobody can question his courage with justice, Jennie.”

“*You* ought to know!” pouted the plumper girl. “You and my colonel have tramped all over the French front together.”

“Oh, no! There were some places we did not go to,” laughed Ruth.

“And just think,” cried Helen, “of her leaving us here in this hospital, Heavy, while she went off with your Frenchman to look for Tom, my own brother! And she would not tell me a word about it till she was back with him, safe and sound. This Ruthie Fielding of ours – ”

“Tut, tut!” said Ruth, shaking her chum a little, and then kissing her. “Don’t be jealous, Helen.”

“It’s not I that should be jealous. It is Heavy’s friend with whom you went over to the Germans,” declared Helen, tossing her head.

“And Jennie had not even met Major Marchand —*that was!* ‘Colonel,’ I should say,” said Ruth. “Oh, girls! so much has happened to us all during these past few months.”

“During the past few years,” said the plump girl sepulchrally. “Talking about your cracked and chipped china,” and she held up her empty cup to look through it. “*I* remember when you got this tea set, Ruthie. Remember the Fox, and all her chums at Briarwood, and how mean we treated you, Ruthie?”

“Oh, *don’t!*” exclaimed Helen. “I treated my Ruthie mean in those days, too – sometimes.”

“Goodness!” drawled their friend, who was in the uniform of the Red Cross worker and was a very practical looking, as well as pretty, girl. “Don’t bring up such sad and sorrowful remembrances. This tea is positively going to your heads and making you maudlin. Come! I will give you a toast. You must drink your cup to it – and to the very dregs!”

“‘Dregs’ is right, Ruth,” complained Jennie, peering into her cup. “You never will strain tea properly.”

“Pooh! If you do,” scoffed Helen, “you never have any leaves left with which to tell your fortune.”

“‘Fortune!’ Superstitious child!” Then Jennie added in a whisper: “Do you know, Madame Picolet knows how to tell fortunes splendidly with tea-grounds. She positively told me I was going to marry a tall, dark, military man, of noble blood, and who had recently been advanced in the service.”

“Goodness! And who could not have told you the same after having seen your Henri following you about the last time he had leave in Paris?” laughed Helen. Then she added: “The toast, Ruthie! Let us have it, now the cups are filled again.”

Ruth stood up, smiling down upon them. She was not a large girl, but in her uniform and cap she seemed very womanly and not a little impressive.

“Here’s to the sweetest words the exile ever hears,” said she softly, her eyes suddenly soft and her color rising: “Homeward bound! Oh, girls, when shall we see America and all our friends and the familiar scenes again? Cheslow, Helen! And the dear, dear old Red Mill!”

She drank her own toast to the last drop. Then she shrugged her pretty shoulders and put her serious air aside. Her eyes sparkled once more as she exclaimed:

“On my own part, I was only reminiscing upon the travels of this old tea set. Back and forth from the dear old Red Mill to Briarwood Hall, and all around the country on our vacations. To your Lighthouse Point place, Jennie. To your father’s winter camp, Helen. And out West to Jane’s uncle’s ranch, and down South and all! And then across the ocean and all about France! No wonder the teacups are nicked and the saucers cracked.”

“What busy times we’ve had, girls,” agreed Helen.

“What busy times Ruth has had,” grumbled Jennie. “You and I, Nell, come up here from Paris to visit her now and then. Otherwise we would never hear a Boche shell burst, unless there is an air raid over Paris, or the Germans work their super-gun and smash a church!”

“Ruth is so brave,” sighed Helen.

“Cat’s foot!” snapped Ruth. “I’m just as scared as you are every time I hear a gun. Oh!”

To prove her statement, that cry burst from her lips involuntarily. There was an explosion in the distance – whether of gun or bomb, it was impossible to say.

“Oh, Ruth!” cried Helen, clasping her hands. “I thought you wrote us that our boys had pushed the Germans back so far that the guns could scarcely be heard from here?”

“Must be some mistake about that,” muttered Jennie, with her mouth full of tea-wafers. “There goes another!”

Ruth Fielding had risen and went to the narrow window. After the second explosion a heavy siren began to blow a raucous alarm. Nearer aerial defense guns spoke.

“Oh, girls!” exclaimed Ruth, “it is an air raid. We have not had one before for weeks – and never before in broad day!”

“Oh, dear me! I wish we hadn’t come,” Helen said, trembling. “Let us find a *cave voûtée*. I saw signs along the main street of this village as we drove through.”

“There is a bomb proof just back of the hospital,” said Ruth, and then another heavy explosion drowned what else she might have said.

Her two visitors dropped their teacups and started for the door. But Ruth did not turn from the window. She was trying to see – to mark the direction of the Boche bombing machine that was deliberately seeking to hit the hospital of Clair.

“Come, Ruthie!” cried Helen, looking back.

“I don’t know that I should,” the other girl said slowly. “I am in charge of the supplies. I may be wanted at any moment. The nurses do not run away from the wards and leave their poor *blessés* at such a time – ”

Another thundering explosion fairly shook the walls of the hospital. Jennie and Helen shrieked aloud. They were not used to anything like this. Their months of war experience had been gained mostly in Paris, not so near the front trenches. A bombing raid was a tragedy to them. To Ruth Fielding it was an incident.

“Do come, Ruthie!” cried her chum. “I am frightened to death.”

“I will go downstairs with you – ”

The sentence was never finished. Out of the air, almost over their heads, fell a great, whining shell. The noise of it before it exploded was like a knife-thrust to the hearts of the frightened girls. Jennie and Helen clung to each other in the open doorway of Ruth’s cell. Their braver companion had not left the window.

Then came the shuddering crash which rocked the hospital and all the taller buildings about it!

Clair had been bombed many times since the Boche hordes had poured down into France. But never like this, and previous bombardments had been for the most part at night. The aerial defense guns were popping away at the enemy; the airplanes kept up a clatter of machine-gun fire; the alarm siren added to the din.

But that exploding shell drowned every other sound for the moment. The whole world seemed to rock. A crash of falling stones and shattered glass finally rose above the dying roar of the explosion.

And then the window at which Ruth Fielding stood sprang inward, glass and frame together, the latter in a grotesque twisted pattern of steel rods, the former in a million shivered pieces.

Smoke, or steam, or something, filled the cell for a minute and blinded Helen Cameron and Jennie Stone. This cloud cleared, and struggling up from the floor just outside the doorway, where the shock had flung them, the two terrified girls uttered a simultaneous cry.

Ruth Fielding lay on her face upon the floor of her cell. A great, jagged tear in her apron and dress revealed her bared shoulder, all blood-smeared. And half across her body lay a slab of gray stone that had been the sill of the window!

CHAPTER II – SUCH A DREAM!

The lights in the day coach had just been lit and she was looking out into the gathering darkness as the train rolled slowly into Cheslow, the New England town to which her fare had been paid when her friends back in the town where she was born had decided that little Ruth Fielding should be sent to her single living relative, Uncle Jabez Potter.

He was her mother's uncle, really, and a "great uncle" was a relative that Ruth could not quite visualize at that time. It was not until she had come to the old Red Mill on the bank of the Lumano River that the child found out that a great uncle was a tall, craggy kind of man, who wore clothing from which the mill dust rose in little clouds when he moved hurriedly, and with the same dust seemingly ground into every wrinkle and line of his harsh countenance.

Jabez Potter had accepted the duty of the child's support without one softening thought of love or kindness. She was a "charity child"; and she was made to feel this fact continually in a hundred ways.

Had it not been for Aunt Alvira Boggs, who had likewise been taken in by the miller to keep house for him – the little, crippled old woman would otherwise have completed her years in the poorhouse. Had it not been for Aunt Alvira Boggs, Ruth Fielding's first months at the Red Mill would have been a most somber experience, although the child was naturally of a cheerful and sanguine temperament.

The miserly miller considered Ruth Fielding a liability; she proved herself in time to be an asset. And as she grew older the warped nature and acid temper of the miller both changed toward his grand-niece. But to bring this about took several years – years filled with more adventure and wider experiences than most girls obtain.

Beginning with her acquaintance with Helen and Tom Cameron, the twins, who lived near the Red Mill, and were the children of a wealthy merchant, Ruth's life led upward in successive steps into education and fortune. As "Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill" – the title of the first book of this series – the little girl had never dreamed that she would arrive at any eminence. She was just a loving, sympathetic, cheerful soul, whose influence upon those about her was remarkable only because she was so much in earnest and was of honest purpose in all things.

Uncle Jabez could appreciate her honesty, for that was one virtue he himself possessed. He always paid his bills, and paid them when they came due. He considered that because Ruth discovered a sum of money that he lost he owed her a reward. That reward took the form of payment for tuition and board for her first year at Briarwood Hall, where she went with Helen Cameron. At the same time Helen's brother went to Seven Oaks, a military school for boys.

In this way began the series of adventures which had checkered Ruth Fielding's career, and as related in the fourteen successive volumes of the series, the girl of the Red Mill is to be met at Briarwood Hall, at Snow Camp, at Lighthouse Point, at Silver Ranch, on Cliff Island, at Sunrise Farm, with the Gypsies, in Moving Pictures, down in Dixie, at College, in the Saddle, in the Red Cross, at the War Front. In this present volume she is introduced, with her chum Helen Cameron and with their friend, Jennie Stone, at the French evacuation Hospital at Clair, not many miles behind a sector of the Western Front held by the brave fighting men of the United States.

Ruth had been there in charge of the supply department of the hospital for some months, and that after some considerable experience at other points in France. As everywhere else she had been, the girl of the Red Mill had made friends around her.

Back of the old-world village of Clair, the one modern touch in which was this hospital, lay upon a wooded height an old château belonging to the ancient family of the Marchands. With the Countess Marchand, a very simple and lovely lady, Ruth had maintained a friendship since soon after arriving at Clair to take up her Red Cross work.

When Tom Cameron, who was at work with his regiment on this very sector of the battle-front, got into trouble while on special duty beyond the German lines, it was by grace of Henri Marchand's influence, and in his company, that Ruth Fielding was able to get into the German lines and by posing as Tom's sister, "Fraulein Mina von Brenner," helped Tom to escape from the military governor of the district.

Aided by Count Allaire Marchand, the Countess' oldest son, and the then Major Henri Marchand, the girl of the Red Mill and Helen Cameron's twin brother had returned in safety through the German lines. The adventure had knitted a stronger cord of friendship between Ruth and Tom; although heretofore the young man had quite plainly showed that he considered Ruth much the nicest girl of any of his sister's acquaintances.

Other than a strong sisterly feeling for Tom Cameron, Ruth had not really revealed. Perhaps that was as deep as her interest in the young man lay. And, in any case, she was not the girl to wear her heart on her sleeve.

The girls who had gone through Briarwood Hall together, and later had entered Ardmore College and were near to finishing their sophomore year when America got into the World War, were not the kind who put "the boys" before every other thought.

Marriage was something very far ahead in the future, if Ruth or Helen thought of it at all. And it was quite a surprise to them that Jennie Stone should have so suddenly become engaged. Indeed, the plump girl was one of "the old crowd" that the girl of the Red Mill had not supposed would become early engaged. "Heavy" Stone was not openly of a sentimental character.

But when, through Ruth, the plump girl had become acquainted with the Countess Marchand's younger son, Jennie Stone had been carried quite off her feet by the young Frenchman's precipitous courtship.

"Talk about the American boys being 'sudden'! Theirs is nothing to the whirlwind work of Henri Marchand!" exclaimed Helen.

Jennie and Helen Cameron had been going back and forth to Clair as affairs permitted during the past few months; therefore Jennie had become acquainted with the Countess and was now more often a visitor at the old château than at the hospital.

The country about Clair had quieted down during the past two months; and for a long time previous to this fateful day when our story opens, the war had touched the town but slightly save as the ambulances rolled in now and then with wounded from the field hospitals.

Gradually the roar of the cannon had retreated. The Yankees were forcing the fighting on this front and had pressed the Germans back, slowly but surely. The last and greatest German offensive had broken down, and now Marshal Foch had started his great drive which was to shatter utterly the foe's western front.

By some foul chance the German bombing plane had escaped the watchful French and American airplanes at the front, had crossed the fighting lines, and had reached Clair with its single building of mark – the hospital. The Hun raider deliberately dropped his cargo of explosives on and around this building of mercy.

In broad daylight the red crosses painted upon the roofs of the several departments of the institution were too plainly seen from the air for the Hun to have made a mistake. It was a deliberate expression of German "frightfulness."

But the bomb, which in exploding had crushed inward the window of Ruth Fielding's little sleeping cell, was the final one dropped from the enemy plane. The machine droned away, pursued by the two or three airplanes that had spiraled up to attack it.

Enough damage had been done, however. As Helen Cameron and Jennie Stone scrambled up from the floor of the corridor outside Ruth's door their united screams brought the little *Madame la Directrice* of the hospital to their aid.

"She is killed!" gasped Jennie, gazing in horror at their fallen comrade and friend.

“Murdered!” shrieked Helen, and covered her face with her hands.

The Frenchwoman swept them both aside and entered the chamber. She was not more practical than the two American girls, but her experience of four years of war had made her used to such sights as this. She knelt beside the fallen girl, discovered that the wound upon her shoulder was not deep, and instantly heaved the heavy stone off the girl’s back.

“La, la, la!” she murmured. “It is sad! That so-heavy stone! Ah, the bone must be broken! Poor child!”

“Isn’t she dead?” gasped Helen. “No, no! She is very bad wounded-perhaps. See – let us turn her over – ”

She spoke in English. It was Jennie who came to her aid. Between them they turned Ruth Fielding over. Plainly she was not dead. She breathed lightly and she was unconscious.

“Oh, Ruthie! Ruthie!” begged Helen. “Speak to me!”

“No!” exclaimed the matron. “Do not attempt to rouse her, Mademoiselle. It is better that the shoulder should be set and properly bandaged before she comes to consciousness again. Push that button yonder for the orderly – twice! That is it. We will lay her on her cot – poor child!”

The woman was strong as well as tender. With Jennie’s aid she lifted the wounded girl and placed her on her narrow bed. A man came running along the corridor. The matron instructed him in such rapid French that neither of Ruth’s friends could understand all that she said. The orderly departed on the run.

“To the operating room!” commanded the matron, when the *brancardiers* appeared with the stretcher.

They lifted Ruth, who remained unconscious, from the bed to the stretcher. They descended with her to the ground floor, Jennie and Helen following in the wake. On both of the main floors of the hospital nurses came to the doors of the wards to learn what had happened. Although the whole hospital had been shaken by the bombs, there had been no casualty within its precincts save this.

“Why should it have to be Ruth?” groaned Helen. “To think of our Ruthie being wounded – the only one!”

They shut the two American girls out of the operating room, of course. *The Médecin Chef* himself came hurriedly to see what was needed for the injured girl. *Mademoiselle Americaine*, as Ruth was called about the hospital by the grateful French people, was very popular and much beloved.

Her two girl friends waited in great anxiety outside the operating room. At last *Madame la Directrice* came out. She smiled at the anxious girls. That was the most glorious smile – so Jennie Stone said afterward – that was ever beheld.

“A fracture of the shoulder bone; her sweet flesh cut and bruised, but not deeply, Mesdemoiselles. No scar will be left, the surgeon assures me. And when she recovers from the anesthetic – Oh, la, la! she will have nothing to do but get well. It means a long furlough, however, for *Mademoiselle Americaine*.”

It was two hours later that Helen and Jennie sat, one on either side of Ruth’s couch, in the private room that had been given to the wounded Red Cross worker. Ruth’s eyes opened heavily, she blinked at the light, and then her vision swept first Helen and then Jennie.

“Oh, such a dream!” she murmured. “I dreamed about coming to Cheslow and the Red Mill again, when I was a little girl. And I dreamed all about Briarwood, and our trips about the country, and our adventures in school and out. I dreamed even of coming here to France, and all that has happened. Such a dream!”

“Mercy’s sake, girls! What has happened to me? I’m all bandaged up like a *grand blessé*!”

CHAPTER III – IT'S ALL OVER!

The shoulder had to be put in a cast; but the healing of the cuts and bruises on Ruth Fielding's back was a small matter. Only —

"It's all over for me, girls," she groaned, as her two friends commiserated with her. "The war might just as well end to-morrow, as far as I am concerned. I can help no longer."

For Major Soutre, the head surgeon, had said:

"After the plaster comes off it will be then eight weeks, Mademoiselle, before it will be safe for you to use your arm and shoulder in any way whatsoever."

"So my work is finished," she repeated, wagging a doleful head upon her pillow.

"Poor dear!" sighed Jennie. "Don't you want me to make you something nice to eat?"

"Mercy on us, Heavy!" expostulated Helen, "just because you work in a diet kitchen, don't think that the only thing people want when they are sick is something to eat." "It's the principal thing," declared the plump girl stubbornly. "And Colonel Marchand says I make *heavenly* broth!"

Helen sniffed disdainfully.

Ruth laughed weakly; but she only said:

"Tom says the war will be over by Christmas. I don't know whether it is he or General Pershing that has planned out the finish of the Germans. However, if it is over by the holidays, I shall be unable to do anything more for the Red Cross. They will send me home. I have done my little, girls."

"Little!" exclaimed Helen. "You have done much more than Jennie and I, I am sure. We have done little or nothing compared with your services, Ruthie."

"Hold on! Hold on!" exclaimed Jennie Stone gruffly, pulling a paper out of her handbag. "Wait just a minute, young lady. I will not take a back seat for anybody when it comes to statistics of work. Just listen here. These are some of the things *I* have done since I joined up with that diet kitchen outfit. I have tasted soup and broth thirty-seven thousand eight hundred and three times. I have tasted ten thousand, one hundred and eleven separate custards. I have tasted twenty thousand ragouts — many of them of rabbit, and I am always suspicious that the rabbit may have had a long tail — ugh! Baked cabbage and cheese, nine thousand, seven hundred and six — "

"Jennie! Do stop! How *could* you eat so much?" demanded Helen in horror.

"Bless you! the poilus did the eating; I only did the seasoning and tasting. It's *that* keeps me so fat, I do believe. And then, I have served one million cups of cocoa."

"Why don't you say a billion? You might as well."

"Because I can't count up to a billion. I never could," declared the fleshy girl. "I never was top-hole at mathematics. You know that."

They tried to cheer Ruth in her affliction; but the girl of the Red Mill was really much depressed. She had always been physically, as well as mentally, active. And at first she must remain in bed and pose as a regular invalid.

She was thus posing when Tom Cameron got a four-days' leave and came back as far as Clair, as he always did when he was free. It was so much nearer than Paris; and Helen could always run up here and meet him, where Ruth had been at work. The chums spent Tom's vacations from the front together as much as possible.

When Mr. Cameron, who had been in Europe with a Government commission, had returned to the United States, he had laughingly left Helen and Tom in Ruth's care.

"But he never would have entrusted you children to my care," sighed the girl of the Red Mill, "if he had supposed I would be so foolish as to get a broken shoulder."

"Quite," said Tom, nodding a wise head. "One might have supposed that if an aerial shell hit your shoulder the shell would be damaged, not the shoulder."

"It was the stone window-sill, they say," murmured Ruth contritely.

“Sure. Dad never supposed you were such a weak little thing. Heigh-ho! We never know what’s going to happen in this world. Oh, I say!” he suddenly added. “I know what’s going to happen to me, girls.”

“What is it, Captain Tom?” his sister asked, gazing at him proudly. “They are not going to make you a colonel right away, are they, like Jennie’s beau?”

“Not yet,” admitted her brother, laughing. “I’m the youngest captain in our division right now. Some of ’em call me ‘the infant,’ as it is. But what is going to happen to me, I’m going up in the air!”

“Oh!” exclaimed Jennie Stone. “I should say that was a rise in the world.”

“You are never going into aviation, Tom?” screamed Helen.

“Not exactly. But an old Harvard chum of mine, Ralph Stillinger, is going to take me up. You know Stillinger. Why, he’s an ace!”

“And you are crazy!” exclaimed his sister, rather tartly. “Why do you want to risk your life so carelessly?”

Tom chuckled; and even Ruth laughed weakly. As though Tom had not risked his life a hundred times already on the battle front! If he were not exactly reckless, Tom Cameron possessed that brand of courage owned only by those who do not feel fear.

“I don’t blame Tommy,” said Jennie Stone. “I’d like to try ‘aviating’ myself; only I suppose nothing smaller than a Zeppelin could take me up.”

“Will you really fly, Tom?” Ruth asked.

“Ralph has promised me a regular circus – looping the loop, and spiraling, and all the tricks of flying.”

“But you won’t fly into battle?” questioned Helen anxiously. “Of course he won’t take you over the German lines?”

“Probably not. They don’t much fancy carrying amateurs into a fight. You see, only two men can ride in even those big fighting planes with the liberty motors; and both of them should be trained pilots, so that if anything happens to the man driving the machine, the other can jump in and take his place.”

“Ugh!” shuddered his sister. “Don’t talk about it any more. I don’t want to know when you go up, Tommy. I should be beside myself all the time you were in the air.”

So they talked about Ruth’s chances of going home instead. After all, as she could be of no more use in Red Cross work for so long a time, the girl of the Red Mill began to look forward with some confidence to the home going.

As she had told her girl friends that very day when the hospital had been bombed and she had been hurt, the sweetest words in the ears of the exile are “homeward bound!” And she expected to be bound for home – for Cheslow and the Red Mill – in a very few weeks.

Her case had been reported to Paris headquarters; and whether she wished it or not, a furlough had been ordered and she would be obliged to sail from Brest on or about a certain date. The sea voyage would help her to recuperate; and by that time her shoulder would be out of the plaster cast in which Dr. Soutre had fixed it. Whether she desired to be so treated or not, the Red Cross considered her an invalid – a “*grande blessée*.”

So, as the days passed, Ruth Fielding gradually found that she suffered the idea of return to America with a better mind. The more she thought of going home, the more the desire grew in her soul to be there.

It was about this time that the letter came from Uncle Jabez Potter. A letter from Uncle Jabez seemed almost as infrequent as the blooming of a century plant.

It was delayed in the post as usual (sometimes it did seem as though the post-office department had almost stopped functioning!) and the writing was just as crabbed-looking as the old miller’s speech usually was. Aunt Alvirah Boggs managed to communicate with “her pretty,” as she always

called Ruth, quite frequently; for although Aunt Alvira suffered much in “her back and her bones” – as she expressed herself dolefully – her hands were not too crippled to hold a pen.

But Uncle Jabez Potter! Well, the letter itself will show what kind of correspondent the old miller was:

“My Dear Niece Ruth:

“It does not seem as though you was near enough to the Red Mill to ever get this letter; and mebbe you won’t want to read it when you do get it. But I take my pen in hand just the same to tell you such news as there is and pertycly of the fact that we have shut down. This war is terrible and that is a fact. I wish often that I could have shouldered a gun – old Betsy is all right now, me having cleaned the cement out of her muzzle what your Aunt Alvira put in it – and marched off to fight them Germans myself. It would have been money in my pocket if I had done that instead of trying to grind wheat and corn in this dratted old water-mill. Wheat is so high and flour is so low that I can’t make no profit and so I have had to shut down the mill. First time since my great grandfather built it back in them prosperous times right after we licked the British that first time. This is an awful mean world we live in anyway. Folks are always making trouble. If it was not for them Germans you’d be home right now that your Aunt Alvira needs you. You see, she has took to her bed, and Ben, the hired man, and me, don’t know much what to do for her. Ain’t no use trying to get a woman to come in to help, for all the women and girls have gone to work in the munitions factory down the river. Whole families have gone to work there and earn so much money that they ride back and forth to work in their own automobiles. It’s a cussed shame.

“Your Aunt Alvira talks about you nearly all the time. She’s breaking up fast I shouldn’t wonder and by the time this war is done I reckon she’ll be laid away. Me not making any money now, we are likely to be pretty average poor in the future. When it is all outgo and no come-in the meal tub pretty soon gets empty. I reckon I would better sell the mules and I hope Ben will find him a job somewhere else pretty soon. He won’t be discharged. Says he promised you he would stick to the old Red Mill till you come back from the war. But he’s a eating me out of house and home and that’s a fact.

“If it is so you can get away from that war long enough, I wish you’d come home and take a look at your Aunt Alvira. It seems to me if she was perked up some she might get a new hold on life. As it is, even Doc Davidson says there ain’t much chance for her.

“Hoping this finds you the same, and wishing very much to see you back at the Red Mill, I remain,

“Yr. Obedient Servant,

“J. Potter.”

CHAPTER IV – TWO EXCITING THINGS

Uncle Jabez's letter and Tom Cameron arrived at the hospital at Clair on the very same day. This was the second visit the captain had made to see Ruth since her injury. At this time Helen and Jennie had returned to Paris and Ruth was almost ready to follow them.

"It reads just like the old fellow," Tom said, smiling, after having perused the letter. "Of course, as usual he has made a mountain of trouble out of a molehill of vexation. But I am sorry for Aunt Alvira."

"The dear old soul!" sighed Ruth. "I begin to feel that my being bombed by the Hun may not have been an unmixed evil. Perhaps Aunt Alvira – and Uncle Jabez, too – very much need me at home. And without the excuse of my broken shoulder I don't see how I could have got away from here."

"I wish I were going with you."

"What! To leave your regiment and all?"

"No, I do not want to leave until this war is finished. But I hate to think of your crossing the ocean alone."

"Pooh! I shall not be alone. Lots of other people will be on the boat with me, Tommy."

"But nobody who would have your safety at heart as I should," he told her earnestly. "You cannot help yourself very well if – if anything should happen."

"What will happen, do you suppose?" she demanded.

"There are still submarines in the sea," he said, grimly enough. "In fact, they are more prevalent just now than they were when you came over."

"You bother about my chances of meeting a submarine when you are planning to go up into the air with that Mr. Stillinger! You will be more likely to meet the Hun in the air than I shall in the water."

"Pooh! I am just going on a joy ride in an airplane. While you –"

"It is not just a joy ride I shall take, I admit, Tom," Ruth said, more seriously. "I do hate to give up my work here and go home. Yet this letter," and she tapped the missive from Uncle Jabez, "makes me feel that perhaps I have duties near the Red Mill."

"Uh-huh!" he grunted understandingly.

"You know I have been running around and having good times for a good many years. Aunt Alvira is getting old. And perhaps Uncle Jabez should be considered, too."

"He's an awful old grouch, Ruth," said Tom Cameron, shaking his head.

"I know. But he really has been kind to me – in his way. And if he has had to close down the mill, and is making no money, he will surely feel pretty bad. Somebody must be there to cheer him up."

"He don't need to run that mill," said Tom shortly. "He has plenty of money invested in one way or another."

"But he doesn't think he is earning anything unless the mill runs and he sees the dollars increasing in his strong box. You know, he counts his ready cash every night before he goes to bed. It is almost all the enjoyment he has."

"He's a blessed old miser!" exclaimed her friend, "I don't see how you have stood him all these years, Ruthie."

"I really believe he loves me – in his way," returned the girl thoughtfully. "Poor Uncle Jabez! Well, I am beginning to feel that it was meant that I should go home to him and to Aunt Alvira."

"Don't!" he exclaimed. "You'll make me wish to go home, too. And the way this war is now," said Tom, smiling grimly, "they really need all us fellows. The British and the French have fought Fritz so long and at such odds that I almost believe they are half scared of him. But you can't make our Buddies feel scared of a German. They have seen too many of them running delicatessen stores and saloons."

“Why, they have already sent some of their great shock troops against us in this sector. All the ‘shock’ they have given us you could put in your eye and still see from here to the Goddess of Liberty in New York Harbor!”

“That’s a bit of ‘swank,’ you know, Tom,” said Ruth slyly.

“Wait! You’ll see! Why, it’s got to be a habit for the French and the British to retreat a little when the Germans pour in on top of them. They think they lose fewer troops and get more of the Huns that way. But that isn’t the way we Yankees have been taught to fight. If we once get the Huns in the open we’ll start them on the run for the Rhine, and they won’t stop much short of there.”

“Oh, my dear boy, I hope so!” Ruth said. “But what will you be doing meanwhile? Getting into more and more danger?”

“Not a bit!”

“But you mean right now to take an air trip,” Ruth said hastily. “Oh, my dear! I don’t want to urge you not to; but do take care, if you go up with Ralph Stillinger. They say he is a most reckless flier.”

“That is why he’s never had a mishap. It’s the airmen who are unafraid who seem to pull through all the tight places. It is when they lose their dash that something is sure to happen to them.”

“We will hope,” said Ruth, smiling with trembling lips, “that Mr. Stillinger will lose none of his courage while you are up in the air with him.”

“Pshaw! I shall be all right,” Tom declared. “The only thing is, I am sorry that he has made the date for me so that I can’t go down to Paris with you, and later see you aboard the ship at Brest. But this has been arranged a long time; and I must be with my boys when they go back from the rest camp to the front again.”

Ruth recovered herself quickly. She gave him her good hand and squeezed his in a hearty fashion.

“Don’t mind, Tom,” she said. “If this war is pretty near over, as you believe, you will not be long behind me in taking ship for home.”

“Right you are, Ruthie Fielding,” he agreed cheerfully.

But neither of them – and both were imaginative enough, in all good conscience! – dreamed how soon nor in what manner Tom Cameron would follow Ruth to sea when she was homeward bound. Nor did the girl consider how much of a thrilling nature might happen to them both before they would see each other again.

Tom Cameron left the hospital at Clair that afternoon to make all haste to the aviation camp where he was to meet his friend and college-mate, Ralph Stillinger, the American ace. Ruth was helped by the hospital matron herself to prepare for an automobile trip to Lyse, from which town she could entrain for Paris.

It was at Lyse that Ruth had first been stationed in her Red Cross work; so she had friends there. And it was a very dear little friend of hers who came to drive the automobile for Ruth when she left Clair. Henriette Dupay, the daughter of a French farmer on the outskirts of the village, had begged the privilege of taking “Mademoiselle Americaine” to Lyse.

“*Ma foi!*” gasped plump little Henriette, or “Hetty” as almost everybody called her, “how pale you are, Mademoiselle Ruth. The bad, bad Boches, that they should have caused you this annoyance.”

“I am only glad that the Germans did no more harm around the hospital than to injure me,” Ruth said. “It was providential, I think.”

“But no, Mademoiselle!” cried the French girl, letting in her clutch carefully when the engine of the motor began to purr smoothly, “it cannot be called ‘providential.’ This is a serious loss for us all. Oh, we feel it! Your going away from Clair is a sorrow for all.”

And, indeed, it seemed true. As the car rolled slowly through the village, children ran beside the wheels, women waved their hands from the doorways of the little cottages, and wounded poilus saluted the passage of the Red Cross worker who was known and beloved by everybody.

The tears stung Ruth's eyelids. She remembered how, the night before, the patients in the convalescent wards – the boys and men she had written letters for before her injury, and whom she had tried to comfort in other ways during the hours she was off duty – had insisted upon coming to her cell, one by one, to bid her good-bye. They had kissed her hands, those brave, grateful fellows! Their gratitude had spilled over in tears, for the Frenchman is never ashamed of emotion.

As she had come down from her chamber every nurse and orderly in the hospital, as well as the surgical staff and even the porters and *brancardiers*, had gathered to bid her God-speed.

"The dear, dear people!" Ruth murmured, as the car reached the end of the village street. She turned to throw kisses with her one useful hand to the crowd gathered in the street.

"The dear, dear people!" she repeated, smiling through her happy tears at Hetty.

"Ah, they know you, Mademoiselle," said the girl with a practical nod. "And they know they will seldom see your like again."

"Oh, la, la!" responded Ruth, using an expression of Henriette's, and laughed. Then suddenly: "You are not taking the shortest road, Henriette Dupay!"

"What! do you expect to get away from Clair without seeing Madame the Countess?" laughed the younger girl. "I would not so dare – no, no! I have promised to take you past the château. And at the corner of the road beyond my whole family will await you. Papa Dupay has declared a holiday on the farm till we go past."

Ruth was really very happy, despite the fact that she was leaving these friends. It made for happiness, the thought that everybody about Clair wished her well.

The car mounted the gentle slope of the highway that passed the château gates. It was a beautiful road with great trees over-arching it – trees that had sprung from the soil at least two hundred years before. With all the air raids there had been about Clair, the Hun had not worked his wrath upon this old forest, nor upon the château almost hidden behind the high wall.

The graceful, slim figure of the lady of the château, holding a big greyhound in leash, appeared at the small postern when the car came purring up the hill. Henriette brought the machine to a stop where the Countess Marchand could give Ruth her hand.

"Good-bye, dear child!" she said, smiling cheerfully at Ruth. "We shall miss you; but we know that wherever you go you will find some way of helping others. Mademoiselle Jeannie," (it was thus she spoke of her son, Henri's, sweetheart) "has told us much of you, Ruth Fielding. And we know you well, *n'est-ce pas*, Hetty? We shall never forget her, shall we?"

"*Ma foi*, no!" rejoined the practical French girl. "She leaves her mark upon our neighborhood, does she not, Madame la Comtesse?"

On they rolled, past the end of the farm lane where stood the whole Dupay household, even to Aunt Abelard who had never quite forgiven the Americans for driving her back from her old home north of Clair when the Germans made their spring advance. But Aunt Abelard found she could forgive the military authorities now, because of Ruth Fielding.

They all waved aprons and caps until the motorcar was out of sight. It dipped into a swale, and the last picture of the people she had learned to love faded from Ruth Fielding's sight – but not to be forgotten!

CHAPTER V – THE SECRET

Ruth spent one night in Lyse, where she went to the pension patronized by a girl friend from Kansas City, Clare Biggars. She was obliged to have somebody assist her in dressing and disrobing, but she was in no pain. Merely she was warned to keep her shoulder in one position and she wore her arm in a black silk sling.

“It is quite the fashion to ‘sling’ an arm,” said Clare, laughing. “They should pin the *Croix de Guerre* on you, anyway, Ruth Fielding. After what you have been through!”

“Deliver us from our friends!” groaned Ruth. “Why should you wish to embarrass me? How could I explain a war cross?”

“I don’t know. One of the Kansas City boys was here on leave a few weeks ago and he wore a French war cross. I tried to find out why, but all he would tell me was that it was given him for a reward for killing his first ten thousand cooties!”

“That is all right,” laughed Ruth. “They make fun of them, but the boys are proud of being cited and allowed to wear such a mark of distinction, just the same. Only, you know how it is with American boys; they hate to be made conspicuous.”

“How about American girls?” returned Clare slyly.

That evening Ruth held a reception in the parlor of the pension. And among those who came to see her was a little, stiff-backed, white-haired and moustached old gentleman, with a row of orders across his chest. He was the prefect of police of the town, and he thought he had good reason for considering the “*Mademoiselle Americaine*” quite a wonderful young woman. It was by her aid that the police had captured three international crooks of notorious character.

Off again in the morning, this time by rail. In the best of times the ordinary train in France is not the most comfortable traveling equipage in the world. In war time Ruth found the journey most abominable. Troop trains going forward, many of them filled with khaki-uniformed fighters from the States, and supply trains as well, forced the ordinary passenger trains on to side tracks. But at length they rolled into the Gare du Nord, and there Helen and Jennie were waiting for the girl of the Red Mill.

“Oh! She looks completely done up!” gasped Helen, as greeting.

“Come over to the canteen and get some nice soup,” begged Jennie. “I have just tasted it. It is fine.”

“Tasted it!” repeated Helen scornfully. “Ruthie, she ate two plates of it. She is beginning to put on flesh again. What do you suppose Colonel Henri will say?”

“As though *he* would care!” smiled Jennie Stone. “If I weighed a ton he would continue to call me *petite poulet*.”

“Chicken Little! No less!” exclaimed Helen. “Honest, Ruthie, I don’t know how I bear this fat and sentimental girl. I – I wish I was engaged myself so I could be just as silly as she is!”

“How about you, Ruthie?” asked Jennie, suspiciously. “Let me see your left hand. What! Has he not put anything on that third finger yet?”

“Have a care! A broken shoulderbone is enough,” gasped Ruth. “I am looking for no other ornament at present, thank you.”

“We are going to take you to Madame Picolet’s,” Helen declared the next minute, as they left the great train shed and found a taxicab. “You would not disappoint her, would you? She so wants you with her while you remain in Paris.”

“Of course,” said Ruth, who had a warm feeling for the French teacher with whom she had been so friendly at Briarwood Hall. “And she has such a cosy and quiet little place.”

But after Ruth had rested from her train journey, Madame Picolet's apartment did not prove to be so quiet a place. Besides Helen Cameron and Jennie Stone, there were a lot of other young women whom Ruth knew in Paris, working for the Red Cross or for other war institutions.

Of all their clique, Ruth had been the only girl who had worked right up on the battleline and had really seen much of the war. The visitors wanted to know all about it. And that Ruth had been injured by a Hun bomb made her all the more interesting to these young American women who, if they were not all of the calibre of the girl of the Red Mill, were certainly in earnest and interested in their own part of the work.

The surgeons had been wise, perhaps, in advising Ruth to take boat as soon as possible for the American side of the Atlantic. The Red Cross authorities gave her but a few days in Paris before she had to go on to Brest – that great port which the United States had built over for its war needs.

Helen and Jennie insisted on going with her to Brest. Indeed, Ruth found herself so weak that she was glad to have friends with her. She knew, however, that there would be those aboard the *Admiral Pekhard*, the British transport ship to which she was assigned, who would give her any needed attention during the voyage.

Up to the hour of sailing, Ruth received messages and presents – especially flowers – from friends she was leaving behind in France. Down to the ship came a boy from a famous florist in Paris – having traveled all the way by mail train carrying a huge bunch of roses.

"It's from Tom," cried Helen excitedly, "I bet a penny!"

"What a spendthrift you are, Helen," drawled Jennie. But she watched Ruth narrowly as the latter opened the sealed letter accompanying the flowers.

"You lose," said Ruth cheerfully, the moment she saw the card. "But somebody at the front has remembered me just the same, even if Tom did not."

"Well!" exclaimed Tom's sister, "what do you know about *that*?"

"Who is the gallant, Ruthie?" demanded Jennie.

"Charlie Bragg. The dear boy! And a steamer letter, too!"

Helen Cameron was evidently amazed that Tom was not heard from at this time. Ruth had kept to herself the knowledge that Tom was going to the aviation camp and expected to make his first trip into the air in the company of his friend, the American ace. This was a secret she thought Helen would better not share with her.

After she had opened Charlie Bragg's letter on the ship she was very glad indeed she had said nothing to Helen about this. For along with other news the young ambulance driver wrote the following:

"Hard luck for one of our best flying men. Ralph Stillinger. You've heard of him? The French call him an ace, for he has brought down more than five Hun machines.

"I hear that he took up a passenger the other day. An army captain, I understand, but I did not catch the name. There was a sudden raid from the German side, and Stillinger's machine was seen to fly off toward the sea in an endeavor to get around the flank of the Hun squadron.

"Forced so far away from the French and American planes, it was thought Stillinger must have got into serious trouble. At least, it is reported here that an American airplane was seen fighting one of those sea-going-Zeppelins – the kind the Hun uses to bomb London and the English coast, you know.

"Hard luck for Stillinger and his passenger, sure enough. The American airplane was seen to fall, and, although a searching party discovered the wrecked machine, neither its pilot nor the passenger was found."

Charlie Bragg had no idea when he wrote this that he was causing Ruth Fielding, homeward bound, heartache and anxiety. She dared tell Helen nothing about this, although she read the letter before the *Admiral Pekhard* drew away from the pier and Helen and Jennie went ashore.

Of course, Stillinger's passenger might not have been Tom Cameron. Yet Tom had been going to the aviation field expecting to fly with the American ace. And the fact that Tom had allowed her,

Ruth, to sail without a word of remembrance almost convinced the girl of the Red Mill that something untoward had happened to him.

It was a secret which she felt she could share with nobody. She set sail upon the venturesome voyage to America with this added weight of sorrow on her heart.

CHAPTER VI – A NEW EXPERIENCE

Tom landed from a slowly crawling military train at a place some miles behind the actual battleline and far west of the sector in which his division had been fighting for a month. This division was in a great rest camp; but Tom did not want rest. He craved excitement – something new.

In a few hours an automobile which he shared with a free-lance newspaper man brought him to a town which had been already bombarded half a dozen times since Von Kluck's forced retreat after the first advance on Paris.

As Tom walked out to the aviation field, where Ralph Stillinger's letter had advised his friend he was to be found, all along the streets the American captain saw posters announcing *Cave Voûteé* with the number of persons to be accommodated in these places of refuge, such number ranging from fifteen to sixty.

The bomb-proof cellars were protected by sandbags and were conveniently located so that people might easily find shelter whenever the German Fokkers or *Tauben* appeared. Naturally, as the town was so near the aviation field, it was bound to be a mark for the Hun bombing planes.

Sentinels were posted at every street corner. There were three of the anti-aircraft .75's set up in the town. Just outside the place were the camps of three flying escadrilles, side by side. One of these was the American squadron to which Ralph Stillinger, Tom's friend, was attached.

Each camp of the airmen looked to Tom, when he drew near, like the "pitch" of a road show. With each camp were ten or twelve covered motor-trucks with their tentlike trailers, and three automobiles for the use of the officers and pilots.

Tom had not realized before what the personnel of each *équipé* was like. There were a dozen artillery observers; seven pilots; two mechanics to take care of each airplane, besides others for general repair work; and chauffeurs, orderlies, servants, wireless operators, photographers and other attachés – one hundred and twenty-five men in all.

Tom Cameron's appearance was hailed with delight by several men who had known him at college. Not all of his class had gone to the Plattsburg officer's training camp. Several were here with Ralph Stillinger, the one ace in this squadron.

"You may see some real stuff if you can stay a day or two," they told the young captain of infantry.

"I suppose if there is a fight I'll see it from the ground," returned Tom. "Thanks! I've seen plenty of air-fights from the trenches. I want something better than that. Ralph said he'd take me up."

"Don't grouch too soon, young fellow," said Stillinger, laughing. "We're thirty miles or so from the present front. But in this new, swift machine of mine (it's one of the first from home, with a liberty motor) we can jump into any ruction Fritzie starts over the lines in something like fifteen minutes. I'll joyride you, Tommy, if nothing happens, to-morrow."

It was not altogether as easily arranged as that. Permission had to be obtained for Ralph to take his friend up. The commander of the squadron had no special orders for the next day. He agreed that Ralph might go up with his passenger early in the morning, unless something interfered.

The young men were rather late turning in, for "the crowd" got together to swap experiences; it seemed to Tom as though he had scarcely closed his eyes when an orderly shook him and told him that Lieutenant Stillinger was waiting for him out by Number Four hangar – wherever that might be.

Tom crept out, yawning. He dressed, and as he passed the kitchen a bare-armed cook thrust a huge mug of coffee and a sandwich into his hands.

"If you're going up in the air, Captain, you'll be peckish," the man said. "Get around that, sir."

Tom did so, gratefully. Then he stumbled out into the dark field, for there were no lights allowed because of the possibility of lurking Huns in the sky. He ran into the orderly, the man who had

awakened him, who was coming back to see where he was. The orderly led Tom to the spot where Stillinger and the mechanic were tuning up the machine.

“Didn’t know but you’d backed out,” chuckled the flying man.

“Your grandmother!” retorted Tom cheerfully. “I stopped for a bite and a mug of coffee.”

“You haven’t been eating enough to overload the machine, have you?” asked Stillinger. “I don’t want to zoom the old girl. The motor shakes her bad enough, as it is.”

“Come again!” exclaimed Tom. “What’s the meaning of ‘zoom’?”

“Overstrain. Putting too much on her. Oh, there is a new language to learn if you are going to be a flying man.”

“I’m not sure I want to be a flying man,” said Tom. “This is merely a try-out. Just tell me what to look out for and when to jump.”

“Don’t jump,” warned Stillinger. “Nothing doing that way. Loss of speed —*perte de vitesse* the French call it – is the most common accident that can happen when one is up in the air in one of these planes. But even if that occurs, old man, take my advice and *stick*. You’ll be altogether too high up for a safe jump, believe me!”

They got under way with scarcely any jar, and with tail properly elevated the airplane was aimed by Ralph Stillinger for the upper reaches of the air. They went up rather steeply; but the ace was not “zooming”; he knew his machine.

There is too much noise in an airship to favor conversation. Gestures between the pilot and the observation man, or the photographer, usually have to do duty for speech. Nor is there much happening to breed discussion. The pilot’s mind must be strictly on the business of guiding his machine.

With a wave of his hand Stillinger called Tom’s attention to the far-flung horizon. Trees at their feet were like weeds and the roads and waterways like streamers of crinkled tape. The earth was just a blur of colors – browns and grays, with misty blues in the distance. The human eye unaided could not distinguish many objects as far as the prospect spread before their vision. But of a sudden Tom Cameron realized that that mass of blurred blue so far to the westward, and toward which they were darting, must be the sea.

The airplane mounted, and mounted higher. The recording barometer which Tom could easily read from where he sat, reached the two-thousand mark. His eyes were shining now through the mask which he wore. His first perturbation had passed and he began actually to enjoy himself.

This time of dawn was as safe as any hour for a flight. It is near mid-day when the heat of the sun causes those disturbances in the upper atmosphere strata that the French pilots call *remous*, meaning actually “whirlpools.” Yet these phenomena can be met at almost any hour.

The machine had gathered speed now. She shook terrifically under the throbbing of the heavy motor – a motor which was later found to be too powerful for the two-seated airplanes.

At fifty miles an hour they rushed westward. Tom was cool now. He was enjoying the new experience. This would be something to tell the girls about. He would wire Ruth that he had made the trip in safety, and she would get the message before she went aboard the *Admiral Pekhard*, at Brest.

Why, Brest was right over there – somewhere! Vaguely he could mark the curve of miles upon miles of the French coast. What a height this was!

And then suddenly the airplane struck a whirlpool and dropped about fifty feet with all the unexpectedness of a similar fall in an express elevator. She halted abruptly and with an awful shock that set her to shivering and rolling like a ship in a heavy sea.

Tom was all but jolted out of his seat; but the belt held him. He turned, open-mouthed, upon his friend the pilot. But before he could yell a question the airplane shot up again till it struck the solid air.

“My heavens!” shouted Tom at last. “What do you call *that*

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