



IT WAS a day of peace and quiet, of beautiful sunshine and intense heat, wherefore the crew of Number One Piece shot craps in the shade of the gun shield for matches, cigarets and their next month's pay. They were not allowed to leave their gun, "per order," and they had been fighting the war in the same manner for a week. That is to say, they rolled bones all day and slept until one o'clock each morning, when they would all awake, answer, "Here," and go back to sleep again. Number Four Piece, which was off in the woods somewhere, did all the shooting for the battery, about ten rounds a night.

The gunner, having made three passes, lighted one of his winnings and allowed that it was a great war.

"I will bet you," said he, "my second mess kit of slum, that there are no Jerries on the other side of the Marne, nor anywhere else in this sector. Here have we sat and worn out our uniforms at the seat for some seven or eight days, and there is a pile of tin cans back of the kitchen that you can see in Berlin, and not a — shot have we heard, and not so much as seen a balloon. No wonder this war has gone on for four years."

Now there was one within hearing who was shining the eyepieces of his gasmask and cleaning a pistol and burning the end of a

piece of cork, and he looked up at this.

"Look you, now, Sheehan, for the Connemara bog trotter that you are. I will bet you a bottle of vin rooge, which I gave a Frog my slicker for this very morning, against your syrup ration for the week, that there are Huns across that river, and that I will bring one back for you to send home to your girl, more by token that the old man has detailed me to go patrol this very night with a wild crazy looey from the doughboys, a curse on him and all his, and I must go and prowl about in the wheat with no hat on. Moreover and beyond, I must blacken my face with this cork, so that when I am dead no man will know me, and I shall fill an unknown grave to the glory of some mail-order officer."

With that he applied himself to the cork once more.

"You observers," said Sheehan, "lead a hard life, what with your meals brought to you and every two nights in bed all night and no rocket guard to stand, and I will bet you my allowance of Karo for the week, and if we have none then I will get a bottle of white mule for my extra pair of shoes and bet that. But I am not very like to lose."

NOW when it began to grow dark the observer gathered his pistol and a short

and husky knife to him and walked out through the wheat field and along a path to the road. There was a sign here that said GAS ALERT, and the observer knew that it was just four hundred yards from that sign to the machine-guns that guarded the batteries' flank, which was the reason for the sign's being. So then he went on up the road and passed a crossroads where the signs said Brownsville and Dragon Fly and Home Run, they being the names of regimental or battalion headquarters that were in that direction.

The observer looked off at the German lines that were across the river and wondered whether any one was watching him and thought that the sunset was gorgeous and that the valley of the Marne was quite the most beautiful place that he had ever seen. He went on down a road bordered by elms, ancient and immemorial, down into a little town where every house had blanketed windows, and after following a line of arrows went down into a cellar and reported to the officer that he found there.

This one turned him over to a sergeant, who led him by a nice trench back of some houses and through some gardens to a place just under the railroad track, where he found some seven men, hatless, and each with his face blackened and a look of disquiet upon it, like a child seeing the castor oil appear, or a man on horseback who is not quite sure of his seat.

"I suppose," said the observer, seeing no sign of any shoulder bars, "that the officer is still eating his supper. Perhaps the steak was done a trifle too much, or the potatoes cold. So shall we sit here and wait, and the American Army suspend operations until Sears Roebuck has smoked his cigar."

"We are waiting until it is dark," said a voice that seemed to come across miles of snowy fields and glittering ice, and the observer looked and saw that he who spoke

had on a heavy gold ring of peculiar design, and then he knew that there was the officer, and that he was a real one, and that it was like to be a wild night.

"Now that the artillery is here, give ear to our plan," said the icy voice. "We are directed to cross this river and to bring back a prisoner if we have to go to Germany to get him. Now we will cross in a boat which has been provided and go straightway up the bank in single file. I will be in the lead, and each man shall hold the ankle of the man in front of him. As we crawl along, should I kick twice, the signal will be passed along the line, and we will all execute right into line, each man with his bombs in his hand, and when I say, 'Now!' then let each rush forward. For the rest, let every man do as the man in front of him does. Any questions?"

"I have no bombs," said the observer.

"It will be your duty," said the officer, "to locate machine-gun nests, strong points and trenches, by the system of Cartesian coordinates, and not to be throwing high explosives around with an unpracticed hand. This is once when the artillery will not shoot up its own troops."

When it was dark the patrol crept over the railroad track and down through the wheat to the river's edge. It was damp and cold, and the observer was stricken with chills, and his teeth chattered, and his body shook like a leaf. When they were getting into the boat, he nearly capsized it, and had he done so, they were all dead, for the other bank was German and was but ten feet away.

They lay under the shelter of the bank for some time, and then up and across a narrow path into the wheat, the artillery man clinging for his life to a thick ankle. Now this ankle belonged to a large, rough man, by name "Gopher," a Tar Heel, and he was a good man to cling to.

So they went on, and ever and anon stopped to listen, and loud was the pounding

of their hearts. The wind whistled through the wheat, and the observer wondered how they would ever get back across the river, and the tears ran down the bridge of his nose and tickled it so that he was hard put to keep from sneezing.

Now some one with few brains and much curiosity found a rocket on the American side and touched it off, to see what would happen. At once every man with a Very pistol discharged it so that the bank on both sides of the river was as bright as day.

The patrol lay without breathing but cursing inwardly, for they knew that they must have worked either east or west and were in front of troops that had not been warned that there was a patrol out, and by the fact that the lights were almost over them they knew they were not far from the bank for all their crawling.

Moreover, the Americans were having a merry time with their machine-guns, and although the bullets were all going high, still it was not pleasant to hear the pounding and see the wheat falling and dropping around one's ears.

It came like a thunderbolt. Gopher kicked the observer suddenly in the face, and he rushed forward without further parley, falling headlong into a shell hole. There was a startled grunt, and he saw some one running off trailing a blanket. Out pistol and a bullet away to the moon, the lieutenant kicking him vigorously and cursing him to a fare-you-well, and a free fight going on under his nose. The light went out, and darkness came that you could taste. Much straining and cursing, then a thud, and silence. Two husky whispers proclaimed—

"I've got one of the illegitimates."

Startled mutterings, and—

"Why, I thought you was one of them," from two throats at once.

"Hot dog!" said a voice. "You got teeth on you like a shark."

"Oh, blessed day," said the lieutenant, "that ever I joined the Army! What an aggregation of wooden heads and tippy soldiers! You naughty, naughty boys, not to know enough to be able to tell one another apart from the enemy, for the double-cross, compound, triple expansion, nameless, brainless descendants of horrible ancestry that you are. Blight me and strike me all colors of the rimrocked rainbow if I ever saw anything like it before. And 'Wild West Artillery' here, shooting off his pistol right in front of the whole German Army. By this and by that, you ought to write the Kaiser a letter that you are going to call. Now look at that—" as a rocket curved up behind them, green and blue—"Fritz will reap and sow and harrow this field with artillery and machine-gun until the prince of all evil himself wouldn't have it. And after all this commotion, which was as much as would be made by a division with trains, Y. M. C. A. and all, we have got no prisoner and are like to be made some ourselves."

"Not so," said Gopher, "for we have one, on whose head I now sit, and I know that he is a German, for I can smell him."

Now this prisoner was for the moment quite still, as Gopher had felt him wiggle and had wound the barrel of his pistol about the German's head just over the ears. In his limp state, then, he was confided to the care of Gopher and another man, called the "Squarehead," because no one knew his real name, the patrol coming from all over the regiment.

"If I find, upon returning home, that you have lost my prisoner, then shall you come softly back and get another one, and no mistake. Now, let us begone from this shell hole."

SO THEN they started the return, crawling single file as before, with Gopher and the Squarehead in the middle with the prisoner and the rest with their hearts in their throats.

There was no artillery fire and few lights, which meant that the enemy had out patrols looking for them, and their hearts sank in consequence.

It was growing colder as the night advanced, and the way back to the river seemed overlong. They had been crawling since the world began, thought the artilleryman, and then he tried to think how long it had taken them to come from the river, and it seemed to him that they were, somewhat overlong on the homeward way.

The wheat stopped. They were on the edge of a road. Two cautious kicks, and the patrol rushed to the front. At once they were all among flower pots and crashing glass, lights going up everywhere, machine-guns pounding, men rising up under foot, a dark shape jabbing at the artilleryman with a bayonet, a house with windows that leered in the ghastly light from the flares, the lightning thought that the patrol was lost and that it had crawled into Chartreves or Jaulgonne.

The observer fled headlong into the wheat. For the infantry the task of fighting hand to hand with angry Huns. Two jumps, and he swan dived in gorgeous style into a shell hole, among a number of soft things.

“You ——!” said a soft whisper, and the artilleryman’s wind was at once shut off with a hand of steel, the while something hard was slammed against his ribs.

“Let him up,” quoth another voice, “it is one of our guys.”

The three men dismounted from the fourth one’s head, leaving him to gasp and choke as best he might.

“Now,” said one, resuming a conversation that had been interrupted, “get gone, and see that you lose not my prisoner. Give me a gun and a couple of eggs, and I will see if I can not hold Jerry in play a while.”

Now all this time there was great thrashing about in the wheat and much muttering in an unknown tongue, so that it

appeared that the patrol would have scant chance to get back to the river. Howbeit, they eased out by inches, the observer, the Squarehead and Gopher going first with the precious prisoner, who was still in the land of Nod, and the lieutenant bringing up the rear.

A long hiss, and a faint plop. The patrol hugged the ground until the light would die out. Six inches from the observer’s face was a German, looking at him with slack jaw and goggling eyes. Both recoiled with speed, a cry, a tearing grunt.

“Run like ——!” and the artilleryman sped toward the river, toward the American lines, and toward Spain and the African coast.

Had his wind lasted, he would have been on the edge of the Sahara by daybreak. The flare still burned. The officer was standing up and was taking them as they came, until both guns were empty. So died a very gallant gentleman.

So long as one has his face toward the enemy, terror keeps at a distance. Let him once turn, let him feel that safety lies before and that a bloodthirsty foe presses on his heels, that all is lost save his own neck, and a man’s own fright will drive him on when all danger of the enemy has long since ceased.

The artilleryman ran at the top of his speed. He fell into shell holes and scrambled out of them. His breath came in sobs. He threw away his pistol, belt and gasmask. He wept. He cared not the slightest whether he was seen or not. He took no heed to the fact that all this banging and yelling would arouse the whole sector, and that the Americans would gaily shoot up that wheat field until a mouse was not safe in it. So the Providence that watches over fools brought him safely to the river again.

There was a little path along the river, where aforetime youths and maidens were wont to walk of an evening. The observer lay on his stomach on the far side of the path, trying to regain some of his wind and to quiet

the roaring in his ears. The pounding of his heart shook him like a leaf. If he tried to cross the path and swim the river, most likely the Americans would lay down a rain of steel and throw bombs and have a most delightful time killing him.

If he called out that he was a friend, Jerry would make a colander out of him from the near side of the bank. While he debated with himself he heard a stealthy creeping along the path, and when he was like to die from fear and horror he heard words and at once knew that the creepers were Americans, for they were both cursing a third to their heart's content. There is no more heartbreaking thing than to have to swear at some one in whispers.

Gopher it was, and the Squarehead, and the prisoner, who still slept.

"He began to take on and squeak a while back," said Gopher, "but I hung one on his chin, and he has held his peace the while we dragged him around in the weeds by the slack of his neck."

It seemed that Gopher knew where there was a machine-gun whose crew knew him, and it was his mind to crawl along until they were opposite and then hurl his gasmask, which had his name on it, across the river, leaving the little book on which one was supposed to write each time he used the mask, hanging outside. On the book he would write—

"Throw us a rope, and shoot like —— when you want us to come over."

This then was done. The note was written as best it could be in the dark and the three started downriver, dragging the Jerry with them. They stayed in the wheat, but not so far in as to get themselves lost, and well it was that they did, for they passed several dark, humpy things that they knew were machine-guns, with their crews lying alongside in a hole.

Anon they paused, and Gopher crept down to the edge of the bank and gave a mighty heave to his gasmask. They heard it land.

Shortly thereafter a length of rope whistled through the air.

A flare went up at this, and much banging ensued. It died down, only to have the whole American line leap into a long, continuous pounding.

"Let's go!" and they were in the water and scrambling through the reeds on the other side.

Eager hands dragged them under a little foot bridge. Others pulled right lustily on the rope which Gopher had tied around the prisoner and brought him over, a little damp but not spoiled. A group of officers arrived, bringing a doctor. Excitement, hurried whispering, cigarets, handshaking, clapping on the back, feeling of great pride by the patrol, visions of the D. S. C.

"When," said the doctor, who was kneeling over the prisoner, "was this man shot?"

"He was not shot," said Gopher. "I smote him as to the jaw."

"Not so," said the medico, and he pointed to the blouse which he had taken off, all soaked with blood, and then to a small hole just over the prisoner's collarbone.

"It is in my mind that this Hun was shot earlier in the evening and laid aside to cool, for his wound has been dressed by unskillful hands. Now whether that long ridge running Tar Heel really heard him squeak or thought he did is not material, for it is very certain that he has been plugged through the lungs, and has been dead some time, for he is quite cold."

Whereat the survivors of the patrol, being but children of a larger growth after all, wept bitterly.