CHAMBERS ROBERT WILLIAM

BARBARIANS

Robert Chambers
Barbarians

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Barbarians:

Содержание

Robert W. Chambers
Barbarians

Stent lost the fight, fell outward, wider, dropping back into mid-air. [Page 62]

TO

LYLE and MADELEINE MAHAN

I

"Daughter of Light, the bestial wrath
Of Barbary besets thy path!
The Hun is beating his painted drum;
His war horns blare! The Hun is come!"

"Father, I feel his fœtid breath:
The thick air reeks with the stench of death;
My will is Thine. Thy will be done
On Turk and Bulgar, Czech and Hun!"

II

She understands.
Where the dead headland flare
Mocks sea and sand;
Where death-lights shed their glare
On No-Man's-Land.
France takes her stand.
Magnificently fair,
The Flaming Brand
Within her slender hand;
Christ's lilies in her hair.

III

"Daughter of Grief, thy House is sand!
Thy towers are falling athwart the land.
They've flayed the earth to its ribs of chalk
And over its bones the spectres stalk!"

"Father, I see my high spires reel;
My breast is scarred by the Hun's hoofed heel.
What was, shall be! I read Thy sign:
Thy ocean yawns for the smitten swine!"

IV

Then, from Verdun
Pealed westward to the Somme
From every gun
God's summons: "Daughter! Come!"
Then the red sun
Stood still. Grew dumb
The universal hum
Of life, and numb
The lips of Life, undone
By Death.... And so—France won!

V

"Daughter of God, the End is here!
The swine rush on: the sea is near!
My wild flowers bloom on the trenches' edge;
My little birds sing by shore and sedge."

"Father, raise up my martyred land!
Clothe her bones with Thy magic hand;
Receive the Brand Thy angel lent,

And stanch my blood with Thy sacrament."

CHAPTER I
FED UP

So this is what happened to the dozen-odd malcontents who could no longer stand the dirty business in Europe and the dirtier politicians at home.

There was treachery in the Senate, treason in the House. A plague of liars infested the Republic; the land was rotting with plots.

But if the authorities at Washington remained incredulous, stunned into impotency, while the din of murder filled the world, a few mere men, fed up on the mess, sickened while awaiting executive galvanization, and started east to purge their souls.

They came from the four quarters of the continent, drawn to the decks of the mule transport by a common sickness and a common necessity. Only two among them had ever before met. They represented all sorts, classes, degrees of education and of ignorance, drawn to a common rendezvous by coincidental nausea incident to the temporary stupidity and poltroonery of those supposed to represent them in the Congress of the Great Republic.

The rendezvous was a mule transport reeking with its cargo, still tied up to the sun-scorched wharf where scores of loungers loafed and gazed up at the rail and exchanged badinage with the

supercargo.

The supercargo consisted of this dozen-odd fed-up ones—eight Americans, three Frenchmen and one Belgian.

There was a young soldier of fortune named Carfax, recently discharged from the Pennsylvania State Constabulary, who seemed to feel rather sure of a commission in the British service.

Beside him, leaning on the blistering rail, stood a self-possessed young man named Harry Stent. He had been educated abroad; his means were ample; his time his own. He had shot all kinds of big game except a Hun, he told another young fellow—a civil engineer—who stood at his left and whose name was Jim Brown.

A youth on crutches, passing along the deck behind them, lingered, listening to the conversation, slightly amused at Stent's game list and his further ambition to bag a Boche.

The young man's lameness resulted from a trench acquaintance with the game which Stent desired to hunt. His regiment had been, and still was, the 2nd Foreign Legion. He was on his way back, now, to finish his convalescence in his old home in Finistère. He had been a writer of stories for children. His name was Jacques Wayland.

As he turned away from the group at the rail, still amused, a man advancing aft spoke to him by name, and he recognized an American painter whom he had met in Brittany.

"You, Neeland?"

"Oh, yes. I'm fed up with watchful waiting."

"Where are you bound, ultimately?"

"I've a hint that an Overseas unit can use me. And you, Wayland?"

"Going to my old home in Finistère where I'll get well, I hope."

"And then?"

"Second Foreign."

"Oh. Get that leg in the trenches?" inquired Neeland.

"Yes. Came over to recuperate. But Finistère calls me. I've *got* to smell the sea off Eryx before I can get well."

A pleasant-faced, middle-aged man, who stood near, turned his head and cast a professionally appraising glance at the young fellow on crutches.

His name was Vail; he was a physician. It did not seem to him that there was much chance for the lame man's very rapid recovery.

Three muleteers came on deck from below—all young men, all talking in loud, careless voices. They wore uniforms of khaki resembling the regular service uniform. They had no right to these uniforms.

One of these young men had invented the costume. His name was Jack Burley. His two comrades were, respectively, "Sticky" Smith and "Kid" Glenn. Both had figured in the squared circle. All three were fed up. They desired to wallop something, even if it were only a leather-rumped mule.

Four other men completed the supercargo—three French youths who were returning for military duty and one Belgian.

They had been waiters in New York. They also were fed up with the administration. They kept by themselves during the voyage. Nobody ever learned their names. They left the transport at Calais, reported, and were lost to sight in the flood of young men flowing toward the trenches.

They completed the odd dozen of fed-up ones who sailed that day on the suffocating mule transport in quest of something they needed but could not find in America—something that lay somewhere amid flaming obscurity in that hell of murder beyond the Somme—their souls' salvation perhaps.

Twelve fed-up men went. And what happened to all except the four French youths is known. Fate laid a guiding hand on the shoulder of Carfax and gave him a gentle shove toward the Vosges. Destiny linked arms with Stent and Brown and led them toward Italy. Wayland's rendezvous with Old Man Death was in Finistère. Neeland sailed with an army corps, but Chance met him at Lorient and led him into the strangest paths a young man ever travelled.

As for Sticky Smith, Kid Glenn and Jack Burley, they were muleteers. Or thought they were. A muleteer has to do with mules. Nothing else is supposed to concern him.

But into the lives of these three muleteers came things never dreamed of in their philosophy—never imagined by them even in their cups.

As for the others, Carfax, Brown, Stent, Wayland, Neeland, this is what happened to each one of them. But the episode of

Carfax comes first. It happened somewhere north of the neutral Alpine region where the Vosges shoulder their way between France and Germany.

After he had exchanged a dozen words with a staff officer, he began to realize, vaguely, that he was done in.

CHAPTER II
MAROONED

"Will they do anything for us?" repeated Carfax.

The staff officer thought it very doubtful. He stood in the snow switching his wet puttees and looking out across a world of tumbled mountains. Over on his right lay Germany; on his left, France; Switzerland towered in ice behind him against an arctic blue sky.

It grew warm on the Falcon Peak, almost hot in the sun. Snow was melting on black heaps of rocks; a black salamander, swollen, horrible, stirred from its stiff lethargy and crawled away blindly across the snow.

"Our case is this," continued Carfax; "somebody's made a mistake. We've been forgotten. And if they don't relieve us rather soon some of us will go off our bally nuts. Do you get me, Major?"

"I beg your pardon–"

"Do you understand what I've been saying?"

"Oh, yes; quite so."

"Then ask yourself, Major, how long can four men stand it, cooped up here on this peak? A month, two months, three, five? But it's going on ten months—ten months of solitude—silence—not a sound, except when the snowslides go bellowing off into

Alsace down there below our feet." His bronzed lip quivered. "I'll get aboard one if this keeps on."

He kicked a lump of ice off into space; the staff officer glanced at him and looked away hurriedly.

"Listen," said Carfax with an effort; "we're not regulars—not like the others. The Canadian division is different. Its discipline is different—in spite of Salisbury Plain and K. of K. In my regiment there are half-breeds, pelt-hunters, Nome miners, Yankees of all degrees, British, Canadians, gentlemen adventurers from Cosmopolis. They're good soldiers, but do you think they'd stay here? It is so in the Athabasca Battalion; it is the same in every battalion. They wouldn't stay here ten months. They couldn't. We are free people; we can't stand indefinite caging; we've got to have walking room once every few months."

The staff officer murmured something.

"I know; but good God, man! Four of us have been on this peak for nearly ten months. We've never seen a Boche, never heard a shot. Seasons come and go, rain falls, snow falls, the winds blow from the Alps, but nothing else comes to us except a half-frozen bird or two."

The staff officer looked about him with an involuntary shiver. There was nothing to see except the sun on the wet, black rocks and the whitewashed observation station of solid stone from which wires sagged into the valley on the French side.

"Well—good luck," he said hastily, looking as embarrassed as he felt. "I'll be toddling along."

"Will you say a word to the General, like a good chap? Tell him how it is with us—four of us all alone up here since the beginning. There's Gary, Captain in the Athabasca Battalion, a Yankee if the truth were known; there's Flint, a cockney lieutenant in a Calgary battery; there's young Gray, a lieutenant and a Prince Edward Islander; and here's me, a major in the Yukon Battalion—four of us on the top of a cursed French mountain—ten months of each other, of solitude, silence—and the whole world rocking with battles—and not a sound up here—not a whisper! I tell you we're four sick men! We've got a grip on ourselves yet, but it's slipping. We're still fairly civil to each other, but the strain is killing. Sullen silences smother irritability, but—" he added in a peculiarly pleasant voice, "I expect we are likely to start killing each other if somebody doesn't get us out of here very damn quick."

The staff captain's lips formed the words, "Awfully sorry! Good luck!" but his articulation was indistinct, and he went off hurriedly, still murmuring.

Carfax stood in the snow, watching him clamber down among the rocks, where an alpinist orderly joined them.

Gary presently appeared at the door of the observation station. "Has he gone?" he inquired, without interest.

"Yes," said Carfax.

"Is he going to do anything for us?"

"I don't know.... *No!*"

Gary lingered, kicked at a salamander, then turned and went

indoors. Carfax sat down on a rock and sucked at his empty pipe.

Later the three officers in the observation station came out to the door again and looked at him, but turned back into the doorway without saying anything. And after a while Carfax, feeling slightly feverish, went indoors, too.

In the square, whitewashed room Gray and Flint were playing cut-throat poker; Gary was at the telephone, but the messages received or transmitted appeared to be of no importance. There had never been any message of importance from the Falcon Peak or to it. There was likely to be none.

Ennui, inertia, dry rot—and four men, sometimes silently, sometimes violently cursing their isolation, but always cursing it—afraid in their souls lest they fall to cursing one another aloud as they had begun to curse in their hearts.

Months ago rain had fallen; now snow fell, and vast winds roared around them from the Alps. But nothing else ever came to the Falcon Peak, except a fierce, red-eyed *Lämmergeyer* sheering above the peak on enormous pinions, or a few little migrating birds fluttering down, half frozen, from the high air lanes. Now and then, also, came to them a staff officer from below, British sometimes, sometimes French, who lingered no longer than necessary and then went back again, down into friendly deeps where were trees and fields and familiar things and human companionship, leaving them to their hell of silence, of solitude, and of each other.

The tide of war had never washed the base of their granite

cliffs; the highest battle wave had thundered against the Vosges beyond earshot; not even a deadened echo of war penetrated those silent heights; not a Taube floated in the zenith.

In the squatty, whitewashed ruin which once had been the eyrie of some petty predatory despot, and which now served as an observatory for two idle divisions below in the valley, stood three telescopes. Otherwise the furniture consisted of valises, trunks, a table and chairs, a few books, several newspapers, and some tennis balls lying on the floor.

Carfax seated himself at one of the telescopes, not looking through it, his heavy eyes partly closed, his burnt-out pipe between his teeth.

Gary rose from the telephone and joined the card players. They shuffled and dealt listlessly, seldom speaking save in monosyllables.

After a while Carfax went over to the card table and the young lieutenant cashed in and took his place at the telescope.

Below in the Alsatian valley spring had already started the fruit buds, and a delicate green edged the lower snow line.

The lieutenant spoke of it wistfully; nobody paid any attention; he rose presently and went outdoors to the edge of the precipice —not too near, for fear he might be tempted to jump out through the sunshine, down into that inviting world of promise below.

Far underneath him—very far down in the valley—a cuckoo called. Out of the depths floated the elfin halloo, the gaily malicious challenge of spring herself, shouted up melodiously

from the plains of Alsace—*Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!*—You poor, sullen, frozen foreigner up there on the snowy rocks! —*Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!*

The lieutenant of Yukon infantry, whose name was Gray, came back into the room.

"There's a bird of sorts yelling like hell below," he said to the card players.

Carfax ran over his cards, rejected three, and nodded. "Well, let him yell," he said.

"What is it, a Boche dicky-bird insulting you?" asked Gary, in his Yankee drawl.

Flint, declining to draw cards, got up and went out into the sunshine. When he returned to the table, he said: "It's a cuckoo.... I wish to God I were out of this," he added.

They continued to play for a while without apparent interest. Each man had won his comrades' money too many times to care when Carfax added up debit and credit and wrote down each man's score. In nine months, alternately beggaring one another, they had now, it appeared, broken about even.

Gary, an American in British uniform, twitched a newspaper toward himself, slouched in his chair, and continued to read for a while. The paper was French and two weeks old; he jerked it about irritably.

Gray, resting his elbows on his knees, sat gazing vacantly out of the narrow window. For a smart officer he had grown slovenly.

"If there was any trout fishing to be had," he began; but Flint

laughed scornfully.

"What are you laughing at? There must be trout in the valley down there where that bird is," insisted Gray, reddening.

"Yes, and there are cows and chickens and houses and women. What of it?"

Gary, in his faded service uniform of a captain, scowled over his newspaper. "It's bad enough to be here," he said heavily; "so don't let's talk about it. Quit disputing."

Flint ignored the order.

"If there was anything sportin' to do–"

"Oh, shut up," muttered Carfax. "Do you expect sport on a hog-back?"

Gray picked up a tennis ball and began to play it against the whitewashed stone wall, using the palm of his hand. Flint joined him presently; Gary went over to the telephone, set the receiver to his ear and spoke to some officer in the distant valley on the French side, continuing a spiritless conversation while watching the handball play. After a while he rose, shambled out and down among the rocks to the spring where snow lay, trodden and filthy, and the big, black salamanders crawled half stupefied in the sun. All his loathing and fear of them kindled again as it always did at sight of them. "Dirty beasts," he muttered, stumping and stumbling among the stunted fir trees; "some day they'll bite some of these damn fools who say they can't bite. And that'll end 'em."

Flint and Gray continued to play handball in a perfunctory

way while Carfax looked on from the telephone without interest. Gary came back, his shoes and puttees all over wet snow.

"Unless," he said in a monotonous voice, "something happens within the next few days I'll begin to feel queer in my head; and if I feel it coming on, I'll blow my bally nut off. Or somebody's." And he touched his service automatic in its holster and yawned.

After a dead silence:

"Buck up," remarked Carfax; "think how our men must feel in Belfort, never letting off their guns. Ross rifles, too—not a shot at a Boche since the damn war began!"

"God!" said Flint, smiting the ball with the palm of his hand, "to think of those Ross rifles rusting down there and to think of the pink-skinned pigs they could paunch so cleanly. Did you ever paunch a deer? What a mess of intestines all over the shop!"

Gary, still standing, began to kick the snow from his shoes. Gray said to him: "For a dollar of your Yankee money I'd give you a shot at me with your automatic—you're that slack at practice."

"If it goes on much longer like this I'll not have to pay for a shot at anybody," returned Gary, with a short laugh.

Gray laughed too, disagreeably, stretching his facial muscles, but no sound issued.

"We're all going crazy together up here; that's my idea," he said. "I don't know which I can stand most comfortably, your voices or your silence. Both make me sick."

"Some day a salamander will nip you; then you'll go loco,"

observed Gary, balancing another tennis ball in his right hand. "Give me a shot at you?" he added. "I feel as though I could throw it clean through you. You look soft as a pudding to me."

Far, clear, from infinite depths, the elf-like hail of the cuckoo came floating up to the window.

To Flint, English born, the call meant more than it did to Canadian or Yankee.

"In Devon," he said in an altered voice, "they'll be calling just now. There's a world of primroses in Devon.... And the thorn is as white as the damned snow is up here."

Gary growled his impatience and his profile of a Greek fighter showed in clean silhouette against the window.

"Aw, hell," he said, "did I come out here for this?—nine months of it?" He hurled the tennis ball at the wall. "Can the home talk, if you don't mind."

The cuckoo was still calling.

"Did you ever play cuckoo," asked Carfax, "at ten shillings a throw? It's not a bad game—if you're put to it for amusement."

Nobody replied; Gray's sunken, boyish face betrayed no interest; he continued to toss a tennis ball against the wall and catch it on the rebound.

Toward sundown the usual Alpine chill set in; a mist hung over the snow-edged cliffs; the rocks breathed steam under a foggy and battered moon.

CHAPTER III
CUCKOO!

Carfax, on duty, sat hunched up over the telephone, reporting to the fortress.

Gray came in, closed the wooden shutters, hung blankets over them, lighted an oil stove and then a candle. Flint took up the cards, looked at Gary, then flung them aside, muttering.

Nobody attempted to read; nobody touched the cards again. An orderly came in with soup. The meal was brief and perfectly silent.

Flint said casually, after the table had been cleared: "I haven't slept for a month. If I don't get some sleep I'll go queer. I warn you; that's all. I'm sorry to say it, but it's so."

"They're dirty beasts to keep us here like this," muttered Gary —"nine months of it, and not a shot."

"There'll be a few shots if things don't change," remarked Flint in a colourless voice. "I'm getting wrong in my head. I can feel it."

Carfax turned from the switchboard with a forced laugh: "Thinking of shooting up the camp?"

"That or myself," replied Flint in a quiet voice; "ever since that cuckoo called I've felt queer."

Gary, brooding in his soiled tunic collar, began to mutter presently: "I once knew a man in a lighthouse down in Florida

who couldn't stand it after a bit and jumped off."

"Oh, we've heard that twenty times," interrupted Carfax wearily.

Gray said: "*What* a jump!—I mean down into Alsace below–"

"You're all going dotty!" snapped Carfax. "Shut up or you'll be doing it—some of you."

"I can't sleep. That's where I'm getting queer," insisted Flint. "If I could get a few hours' sleep now–"

"I wish to God the Boches could reach you with a big gun. That would put you to sleep, all right!" said Gray.

"This war is likely to end before any of us see a Fritz," said Carfax. "I could stand it, too, except being up here with such"—his voice dwindled to a mutter, but it sounded to Gary as though he had used the word "rotters."

Flint's face had a white, strained expression; he began to walk about, saying aloud to himself: "If I could only sleep. That's the idea—sleep it off, and wake up somewhere else. It's the silence, or the voices—I don't know which. You dollar-crazy Yankees and ignorant Provincials don't realize what a cuckoo is. You've no traditions, anyway—no past, nothing to care for–"

"Listen to 'Arry!" retorted Gary—"'Arry and his cuckoo!"

Carfax stirred heavily. "Shut up!" he said, with an effort. "The thing is to keep doing something—something—anything —except quarrelling."

He picked up a tennis ball. "Come on, you funking brutes! I'll teach you how to play cuckoo. Every man takes three tennis

balls and stands in a corner of the room. I stand in the middle. Then you blow out the candle. Then I call 'cuckoo!' in the dark and you try to hit me, aiming by the sound of my voice. Every time I'm hit I pay ten shillings to the pool, take my place in a corner, and have a shot at the next man, chosen by lot. And if you throw three balls apiece and nobody hits me, then you each pay ten shillings to me and I'm cuckoo for another round."

"We aim at random?" inquired Gray, mildly interested.

"Certainly. It must be played in pitch darkness. When I call out cuckoo, you take a shot at where you think I am. If you all miss, you all pay. If I'm hit, I pay."

Gary chose three tennis balls and retired to a corner of the room; Gray and Flint, urged into action, took three each, unwillingly.

"Blow out the candle," said Carfax, who had walked into the middle of the room. Gary blew it out and the place was in darkness.

They thought they heard Carfax moving cautiously, and presently he called, "Cuckoo!" A storm of tennis balls rebounded from the walls; "Cuckoo!" shouted Carfax, and the tennis balls rained all around him.

Once more he called; not a ball hit him; and he struck a match where he was seated upon the floor.

There was some perfunctory laughter of a feverish sort; the candle was relighted, tennis balls redistributed, and Carfax wrote down his winnings.

The next time, however, Gray, throwing low, caught him. Again the candle was lighted, scores jotted down, a coin tossed, and Flint went in as cuckoo.

It seemed almost impossible to miss a man so near, even in total darkness, but Flint lasted three rounds and was hit, finally, a stinging smack on the ear. And then Gary went in.

It was hot work, but they kept at it feverishly, grimly, as though their very sanity depended upon the violence of their diversion. They threw the balls hard, viciously hard. A sort of silent ferocity seemed to seize them. A chance hit cut the skin over Flint's cheekbone, and when the candle was lighted, one side of his face was bright with blood.

Early in the proceedings somebody had disinterred brandy and Schnapps from under a bunk. The room had become close; they all were sweating.

Carfax emptied his iced glass, still breathing hard, tossed a shilling and sent in Gary as cuckoo.

Flint, who never could stand spirits, started unsteadily for the candle, but could not seem to blow it out. He stood swaying and balancing on his heels, puffing out his smooth, boyish cheeks and blowing at hazard.

"You're drunk," said Gray, thickly; but he was as flushed as the boy he addressed, only steadier of leg.

"What's that?" retorted Flint, jerking his shoulders around and gazing at Gray out of glassy eyes.

"Blow out that candle," said Gary heavily, "or I'll shoot it out!

Do you get that?"

"Shoot!" repeated Flint, staring vaguely into Gary's bloodshot eyes; "*you* shoot, you old slacker–"

"Shut up and play the game!" cut in Carfax, a menacing roar rising in his voice. "You're all slackers—and rotters, too. Play the game! Keep playing—hard!—or you'll go clean off your fool nuts!"

Gary walked heavily over and knocked the tennis balls out of Flint's hands.

"There's a better game than that," he said, his articulation very thick; "but it takes nerve—if you've got it, you spindle-legged little cockney!"

Flint struck at him aimlessly. "I've got nerve," he muttered, "plenty of nerve, old top! What d'you want? I'm your man; I'll go you—eh, what?"

"Go on with the game, I tell you!" bawled Carfax.

Gary swung around: "Wait till I explain–"

"No, don't wait! Keep going! Keep playing! Keep doing something, for God's sake!"

"Will you wait!" shouted Gary. "I want to tell you–"

Carfax made a hopeless gesture: "It's talk that will do the trick for us all–"

"I want to tell you–"

Carfax shrugged, emptied his full glass with a gesture of finality.

"Then talk, damn you! And we'll all be at each other's throats

before morning."

Gary got Gray by the elbow: "Reggie, it's this way. We flip up for cuckoo. Whoever gets stuck takes a shot apiece from our automatics in the legs—eh, what?"

"It's perfectly agreeable to me," assented Gray, in the mincing, elaborate voice characteristic of him when drunk.

Flint wagged his head. "It's a sportin' game. I'm in," he said.

Gary looked at Carfax. "A shot in the dark at a man's legs. And if he gets his—it will be Blighty in exchange for hell."

Carfax, sullen with liquor, shoved his big hand into his pocket, produced a shilling, and tossed it.

A brighter flush stained the faces which ringed him; the risky hazard of the affair cleared their sick minds to comprehension.

Tails turned uppermost; Flint and Gary were eliminated. It lay between Carfax and Gray, and the older man won.

"Mind you fire low," said the young fellow, with an excited laugh, and walked into the middle of the room.

Gary blew out the candle. Presently from somewhere in the intense darkness Gray called "Cuckoo!" and instantly a slanting red flash lashed out through the gloom. And, when the deafening echo had nearly ceased: "Cuckoo!"

Another pistol crashed. And after a swimming interval they heard him moving. "Cuckoo!" he called; a level flame stabbed the dark; something fell, thudding through the staccato uproar of the explosion. At the same moment the outer door opened on the crack and Carfax's orderly peeped in.

Carfax struck a match with shaky fingers; the candle guttered, sank, flared on Flint, who was laughing without a sound. "Got the beggar, by God!" he whispered—"through the head! Look at him. Look at Reggie Gray! Tried for his head and got him–"

He reeled back, chuckling foolishly, and levelled at Carfax. "Now I'll get you!" he simpered, and shot him through the face.

As Carfax pitched forward, Gary fired.

"Missed me, by God!" laughed Flint. "Shoot? Hell, yes. I'll show you how to shoot–"

He struck the lighted candle with his left hand and laughed again in the thick darkness.

"Shoot? I'll show you how to shoot, you old slacker–"

Gary fired.

After a silence Flint giggled in the choking darkness as the door opened cautiously again, and shot at the terrified orderly.

"I'm a cockney, am I? And you don't think much of the Devon cuckoos, do you? Now I'll show you that I understand all kinds of cuckoos–"

Both flashes split the obscurity at the same moment. Flint fell back against the wall and slid down to the floor. The outer door began to open again cautiously.

But the orderly, half dressed, remained knee-deep in the snow by the doorway.

After a long interval Gary struck a match, then went over and lit the candle. And, as he turned, Flint fired from where he lay on the floor and Gary swung heavily on one heel, took two uncertain

steps. Then his pistol fell clattering; he sank to his knees and collapsed face downward on the stones.

Flint, still lying where he had fallen, partly upright, against the wall, began to laugh, and died a few moments later, the wind from the slowly opening door stirring his fair hair and extinguishing the candle.

And at last, through the opened door crept Carfax's orderly; peered into the darkness within, shivering in his unbuttoned tunic, his boots wet with snow.

Dawn already whitened the east; and up out of the ghastly fog edging the German Empire, silhouetted, monstrous, against the daybreak, soared a *Lämmergeyer*, beating the livid void with enormous, unclean wings.

The orderly heard its scream, shrank, cowering, against the door frame as the huge bird's ferocious red and yellow eyes blazed level with his.

Suddenly, above the clamor of the *Lämmergeyer*, the shrill bell of the telephone began to ring.

The terrible racket of the *Lämmergeyer* filled the sky; the orderly stumbled into the room, slipped in a puddle of something wet, sent an empty bottle rolling and clinking away into the darkness; stumbled twice over prostrate bodies; reached the telephone, half fainting; whispered for help.

After a long, long while, the horror still thickly clogging vein and brain, he scratched a match, hesitated, then holding it high, reeled toward the door with face averted.

Outside the sun was already above the horizon, flashing over Haut Alsace at his feet.

The *Lämmergeyer* was a speck in the sky, poised over France.

Up out of the infinite and sunlit chasm came a mocking, joyous hail—up through the sheer, misty gulf out of vernal depths: *Cuck*-oo! *Cuck*-oo! *Cuck*-oo!

CHAPTER IV
RECONNAISSANCE

And that was the way Carfax ended—a tiny tragedy of incompetence compared to the mountainous official fiasco at Gallipoli. Here, a few perished among the filthy salamanders in the snow; there, thousands died in the burning Turkish gorse–

But that's history; and its makers are already officially damned.

But now concerning two others of the fed-up dozen on board the mule transport—Harry Stent and Jim Brown. Destiny linked arms with them; Fate jerked a mysterious thumb over her shoulder toward Italy. Chance detailed them for special duty as soon as they landed.

It was a magnificent sight, the disembarking of the British overseas military force sent secretly into Italy.

They continued to disembark and entrain at night. Nobody knew that British troops were in Italy.

The infernal uproar along the Isonzo never ceased; the din of the guns resounded through the Trentino, but British and Canadian noses were sniffing at something beyond the Carnic Alps, along the slopes of which they continued to concentrate, Rifles, Kilties, and Gunners.

There seemed to be no particular hurry. Details from the

Canadian contingent were constantly sent out to familiarize themselves with the vast waste of tunneled mountains denting the Austrian sky-line to the northward; and all day long Dominion reconnoitering parties wandered among valleys, alms, forest, and peaks in company sometimes with Italian alpinists, sometimes by themselves, prying, poking, snooping about with all the emotionless pertinacity of Teuton tourists preoccupied with *wanderlust*, *kultur*, and *ewigkeit*.

And one lovely September morning the British Military Observer with the Italian army, and his very British aid, sat on a sunny rock on the Col de la Reine and watched a Canadian northward reconnaissance—nothing much to see, except a solitary moving figure here and there on the mountains, crawling like a deerstalker across ledges and stretches of bracken—a few dots on the higher slopes, visible for a moment, then again invisible, then glimpsed against some lower snow patch, and gone again beyond the range of powerful glasses.

"The Athabasca regiment, 13th Battalion," remarked the British Military Observer; "lively and rather noisy."

"Really," observed his A. D. C.

"Sturdy, half-disciplined beggars," continued the B. M. O., watching the mountain plank through his glasses; "every variety of adventurer in their ranks—cattlemen, ranchmen, Hudson Bay trappers, North West police, lumbermen, mail carriers, bear hunters, Indians, renegade frontiersmen, soldiers of fortune—a sweet lot, Algy."

"Ow."

"—And half of 'em unruly Yankees—the most objectionable half, you know."

"A bad lot," remarked the Honorable Algy.

"Not at all," said the B. M. O. complacently; "I've a relative of sorts with 'em—leftenant, I believe—a Yankee brother-in-law, in point of fact."

"Ow."

"Married a step-sister in the States. Must look him up some day," concluded the B. M. O., adjusting his field glasses and focussing them on two dark dots moving across a distant waste of alpine roses along the edge of a chasm.

One of the dots happened to be the "relative of sorts" just mentioned; but the B. M. O. could not know that. And a moment afterward the dots became invisible against the vast mass of the mountain, and did not again reappear within the field of the English officer's limited vision. So he never knew he had seen his relative of sorts.

Up there on the alp, one of the dots, which at near view appeared to be a good-looking, bronzed young man in khaki, puttees, and mountain shoes, said to the other officer who was scrambling over the rocks beside him:

"Did you ever see a better country for sheep?"

"Bear, elk, goats—it's sure a great layout," returned the younger officer, a Canadian whose name was Stent.

"Goats," nodded Brown—"sheep and goats. This country was

made for them. I fancy they *have* chamois here. Did you ever see one, Harry?"

"Yes. They have a thing out here, too, called an ibex. You never saw an ibex, did you, Jim?"

Brown, who had halted, shook his head. Stent stepped forward and stood silently beside him, looking out across the vast cleft in the mountains, but not using his field glasses.

At their feet the cliffs fell away sheer into tremendous and dizzying depths; fir forests far below carpeted the abyss like wastes of velvet moss, amid which glistened a twisted silvery thread—a river. A world of mountains bounded the horizon.

"Better make a note or two," said Stent briefly.

They unslung their rifles, seated themselves in the warm sun amid a deep thicket of alpine roses, and remained silent and busy with pencil and paper for a while—two inconspicuous, brownish-grey figures, cuddled close among the greyish rocks, with nothing of military insignia about their dress or their round grey wool caps to differentiate them from sportsmen—wary stalkers of chamois or red deer—except that under their unbelted tunics automatics and cartridge belts made perceptible bunches.

Just above them a line of stunted firs edged limits of perpetual snow, and rocks and glistening fields of crag-broken white carried the eye on upward to the dazzling pinnacle of the Col de la Reine, splitting the vast, calm blue above.

Nothing except peaks disturbed the tranquil sky to the northward; not a cloud hung there. But westward mist clung to

a few mountain flanks, and to the east it was snowing on distant crests.

Brown, sketching rapidly but accurately, laughed a little under his breath.

"To think," he said, "not a Boche dreams we are in the Carnic Alps. It's very funny, isn't it? Our surveyors are likely to be here in a day or two, I fancy."

Stent, working more slowly and methodically on his squared map paper, the smoke drifting fragrantly from his brier pipe, nodded in silence, glancing down now and then at the barometer and compass between them.

"Mentioning big game," he remarked presently, "I started to tell you about the ibex, Jim. I've hunted a little in the Eastern Alps."

"I didn't know it," said Brown, interested.

"Yes. A classmate of mine at the Munich Polytechnic invited me—Siurd von Glahn—a splendid fellow—educated at Oxford —just like one of us—nothing of the Boche about him at all–"

Brown laughed: "A Boche is always a Boche, Harry. The black Prussian blood–"

"No; Siurd was all white. Really. A charming, lovable fellow. Anyway, his dad had a shooting where there were chamois, reh, hirsch, and the king of all Alpine big game—ibex. And Siurd asked me."

"Did you get an ibex?" inquired Brown, sharpening his pencil and glancing out across the valley at a cloud which had suddenly

formed there.

"I did."

"What manner of beast is it?"

"It has mountain sheep and goats stung to death. Take it from me, Jim, it's the last word in mountain sport. The chamois isn't in it. Pooh, I've seen chamois within a hundred yards of a mountain macadam highway. But the ibex? Not much! The man who stalks and kills an ibex has nothing more to learn about stalking. Chamois, red deer, Scotch stag make you laugh after you've done your bit in the ibex line."

"How about our sheep and goat?" inquired Brown, staring at his comrade.

"It's harder to get ibex."

"Nonsense!"

"It really is, Jim."

"What does your ibex resemble?"

"It's a handsome beast, ashy grey in summer, furred a brownish yellow in winter, and with little chin whiskers and a pair of big, curved, heavily ridged horns, thick and flat and looking as though they ought to belong to something African, and twice as big."

"Some trophy, what?" commented Brown, working away at his sketches.

"Rather. The devilish thing lives along the perpetual snow line; and, for incredible stunts in jumping and climbing, it can give points to any Rocky Mountain goat. You try to get above it, spend

the night there, and stalk it when it returns from nocturnal grazing in the stunted growth below. That's how."

"And you got one?"

"Yes. It took six days. We followed it for that length of time across the icy mountains, Siurd and I. I thought I'd die."

"Cold work, eh?"

Stent nodded, pocketed his sketch, fished out a packet of bread and chocolate from his pocket and, rolling over luxuriously in the sun among the alpine roses, lunched leisurely, flat on his back.

Brown presently stretched out and reclined on his elbow; and while he ate he lazily watched a kestrel circling deep in the gulf below him.

"I think," he said, half to himself, "that this is the most beautiful region on earth."

Stent lifted himself on both elbows and gazed across the chasm at the lower slopes of the alm opposite, all ablaze with dewy wild flowers. Down it, between fern and crag and bracken, flashed a brook, broken into in silvery sections amid depths of velvet green below, where evidently it tumbled headlong into that thin, shining thread which was a broad river.

"Yes," mused Stent, "Siurd von Glahn and I were comrades on many a foot tour through such mountains as these. He was a delightful fellow, my classmate Siurd–"

Brown's swift rigid grip on his arm checked him to silence; there came the clink of an iron-shod foot on the ledge; they

snatched their rifles from the fern patch; two figures stepped around the shelf of rock, looming up dark against the dazzling sky.

CHAPTER V
PARNASSUS

Brown, squatting cross-legged among the alpine roses, squinted along his level rifle.

"Halt!" he said with a pleasant, rising inflection in his quiet voice. "Stand very still, gentlemen," he added in German.

"Drop your rifles. Drop 'em quick!" he repeated more sharply. "Up with your hands—hold them up high! Higher, if you please! —quickly. Now, then, what are you doing on this alp?"

What they were doing seemed apparent enough—two gentlemen of Teutonic persuasion, out stalking game—deer, rehbok or chamois—one a tall, dark, nice-looking young fellow wearing the usual rough gray jacket with stag-horn buttons, green felt hat with feather, and leather breeches of the alpine hunter. His knees and aristocratic ankles were bare and bronzed. He laughed a little as he held up his arms.

The other man was stout and stocky rather than fat. He had the square red face and bushy beard of a beer-nourished Teuton and the spectacles of a Herr Professor. He held up his blunt hands with all ten stubby fingers spread out wide. They seemed rather soiled.

From his *rücksack* stuck out a butterfly net in two sections and the deeply scalloped, silver-trimmed butt of a sporting rifle.

Edelweiss adorned his green felt hat; a green tin box punched full of holes was slung from his broad shoulders.

Brown, lowering his rifle cautiously, was already getting to his feet from the trampled bracken, when, behind him, he heard Stent's astonished voice break forth in pedantic German:

"Siurd! Is it *thou* then?"

"Harry Stent!" returned the dark, nice-looking young fellow amiably. And, in a delightful voice and charming English:

"Pray, am I to offer you a shake hands," he inquired smilingly; "or shall I continue to invoke the Olympian gods with classically uplifted and imploring arms?"

Brown let Stent pass forward. Then, stepping back, he watched the greeting between these two old classmates. His rifle, grasped between stock and barrel, hung loosely between both hands. His expression became vacantly good humoured; but his brain was working like lightning.

Stent's firm hand encountered Von Glahn's and held it in questioning astonishment. Looking him in the eyes he said slowly: "Siurd, it is good to see you again. It is amazing to meet you this way. I am glad. I have never forgotten you.... Only a moment ago I was speaking to Brown about you—of our wonderful ibex hunt! I was telling Brown—my comrade—" he turned his head slightly and presented the two young men—"Mr. Brown, an American–"

"American?" repeated Von Glahn in his gentle, well-bred voice, offering his hand. And, in turn, becoming sponsor, he

presented his stocky companion as Dr. von Dresslin; and the ceremony instantly stiffened to a more rigid etiquette.

Then, in his always gentle, graceful way, Von Glahn rested his hand lightly on Stent's shoulder:

"You made us jump—you two Americans—as though you had been British. Of what could two Americans be afraid in the Carnic Alps to challenge a pair of wandering ibex stalkers?"

"You forget that I am Canadian," replied Stent, forcing a laugh.

"At that, you are practically American and civilian—" He glanced smilingly over their equipment, carelessly it seemed to Stent, as though verifying all absence of military insignia. "Besides," he added with his gentle humour, "there are no British in Italy. And no Italians in these mountains, I fancy; they have their own affairs to occupy them on the Isonzo I understand. Also, there is no war between Italy and Germany."

Stent smiled, perfectly conscious of Brown's telepathic support in whatever was now to pass between them and these two Germans. He knew, and Brown knew, that these Germans must be taken back as prisoners; that, suspicious or not, they could not be permitted to depart again with a story of having met an American and a Canadian after ibex among the Carnic Alps.

These two Germans were already their prisoners; but there was no hurry about telling them so.

"How do you happen to be here, Siurd?" asked Stent, frankly curious.

Von Glahn lifted his delicately formed eyebrows, then, amused:

"Count von Plessis invites me; and"—he laughed outright—"he must have invited you, Harry, unless you are poaching!"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Stent, for a brief second believing in the part he was playing; "I supposed this to be a free alp."

He and Von Glahn laughed; and the latter said, still frankly amused: "*Soyez tranquille*, Messieurs; Count von Plessis permits my friends—in my company—to shoot the Queen's alm."

With a lithe movement, wholly graceful, he slipped the *rücksack* from his shoulders, let it fall among the *alpenrosen* beside his sporting rifle.

"We have a long day and a longer night ahead of us," he said pleasantly, looking from Stent to Brown. "The snow limit lies just above us; the ibex should pass here at dawn on their way back to the peak. Shall we consolidate our front, gentlemen—and make it a Quadruple Entente?"

Stent replied instantly: "We join you with thanks, Siurd. My one ibex hunt is no experience at all compared to your record of a veteran—" He looked full and significantly at Brown; continuing: "As you say, we have all day and—a long night before us. Let us make ourselves comfortable here in the sun before we take—our final stations."

And they seated themselves in the lee of the crag, foregathering fraternally in the warm alpine sunshine.

The Herr Professor von Dresslin grunted as he sat down. After

he had lighted his pipe he grunted again, screwed together his butterfly net and gazed hard through thick-lensed spectacles at Brown.

"Does it interest you, sir, the pursuit of the diurnal Lepidoptera?" he inquired, still staring intently at the American.

"I don't know anything about them," explained Brown. "What are Lepidoptera?"

"The *schmetterling*—the butterfly. In Amerika, sir, you have many fine species, notably Parnassus clodius and the Parnassus smintheus of the four varietal forms." His prominent eyes shifted from one detail of Brown's costume to another—not apparently an intelligent examination, but a sort of protruding and indifferent stare.

His gaze, however, was arrested for a moment where the lump under Brown's tunic indicated something concealed—a hunting knife, for example. Brown's automatic was strapped there. But the bulging eyes, expressionless still, remained fixed for a second only, then travelled on toward the Ross rifle—the Athabasca Regiment having been permitted to exchange this beloved weapon for the British regulation piece recently issued to the Canadians. From behind the thick lenses of his spectacles the Herr Professor examined the rifle while his monotonously dreary voice continued an entomological monologue for Brown's edification. And all the while Von Glahn and Stent, reclining nearby among the ferns, were exchanging what appeared to be the frankest of confidences and the happiest of youthful

reminiscences.

"Of the Parnassians," rumbled on Professor von Dresslin, "here in the Alps we possess one notable example—namely, the Parnassus Apollo. It is for the capture of this never-to-be-sufficiently studied butterfly that I have, upon this ibex-hunting expedition, myself equipped with net and suitable paraphernalia."

"I see," nodded Brown, eyeing the green tin box and the net. The Herr Professor's pop-eyed attention was now occupied with the service puttees worn by Brown. A sportsman also might have worn them, of course.

"The Apollo butterfly," droned on Professor Dresslin, "iss a butterfly of the larger magnitude among European Lepidoptera, yet not of the largest. The Parnassians, allied to the Papilionidæ, all live only in high altitudes, and are, by the thinly scaled and always-to-be-remembered red and plack ge-spotted wings, to be readily recognized. I haf already two specimens captured this morning. I haff the honour, sir, to exhibit them for your inspection–"

He fished out a flat green box from his pocket, opened it under Brown's nose, leaning close enough to touch Brown with an exploring and furtive elbow—and felt the contour of the automatic.

Amid a smell of carbolic and camphor cones Brown beheld, pinned side by side upon the cork-lined interior of the box, two curiously pretty butterflies.

Their drooping and still pliable wings seemed as thin as white tissue paper; their bodies were covered with furry hairs. Brick-red and black spots decorated the frail membrane of the wings in a curiously pleasing harmony of pattern and of colour.

"Very unusual," he said, with a vague idea he was saying the wrong thing.

Monotonously, paying no attention, Professor von Dresslin continued: "I, the life history of the Parnassus Apollo, haff from my early youth investigated with minuteness, diligence, and patience."—His protuberant eyes were now fixed on Brown's rifle again.—"For many years I haff bred this Apollo butterfly from the egg, from the caterpillar, from the chrysalis. I have the negroid forms, the albino forms, the dwarf forms, the hybrid forms investigated under effery climatic condition. Notes sufficient for three volumes of quarto already exist as a residuum of my investigations–"

He looked up suddenly into the American's face—which was the first sudden movement the Herr Professor had made–

"Ach wass! Three volumes! It is nothing. Here iss material for thirty!—A lifetime iss too short to know all the secrets of a single species.... If I may inquire, sir, of what pattern is your most interesting and admirable rifle?"

"A—Ross," said Brown, startled into a second's hesitation.

"So? And, if I may inquire, of what nationality iss it, a R-r-ross?"

"It's a Canadian weapon. We Americans use it a great deal for

big game."

"So?… And it iss also by the Canadian military employed perhaps, sir?"

"I believe," said Brown, carelessly, "that the British Government has taken away the Ross rifle from the Canadians and given them the regulation weapon."

"So? Permit—that I examine, sir?"

Brown did not seem to hear him or notice the extended hand—blunt-fingered, hairy, persistent.

The Professor, not discouraged, repeated: "Sir, *bitte darf ich*, may I be permitted?" And Brown's eyes flashed back a lightning shaft of inquiry. Then, carelessly smiling, he passed the Ross rifle over to the Herr Professor; and, at the same time, drew toward him that gentleman's silver-mounted weapon, and carelessly cocked it.

"Permit me," he murmured, balancing it innocently in the hollow of his left arm, apparently preoccupied with admiration at the florid workmanship of stock and guard. No movement that the Herr Professor made escaped him; but presently he thought to himself—"The old dodo is absolutely unsuspicious. My nerves are out of order.... What odd eyes that Fritz has!"

When Herr Professor von Dresslin passed back the weapon Brown laid the German sporting piece beside it with murmured complimentary comment.

"Yess," said the German, "such rifles kill when properly handled. We Germans may cordially recommend them for

our American—friends—" Here was the slightest hesitation —"Pardon! I mean that we may safely guarantee this rifle *to* our friends."

Brown looked thoughtfully at the thick lenses of the spectacles. The popeyes remained expressionless, utterly, Teutonically inscrutable. A big heather bee came buzzing among the *alpenrosen*. Its droning hum resembled the monotone of the Herr Professor.

Behind them Brown heard Stent saying: "Do you remember our ambition to wear the laurels of Parnassus, Siurd? Do you remember our notes at the lectures on the poets? And our ambition to write at least one deathless poem apiece before we died?"

Von Glahn's dark eyes narrowed with merriment and his gentle laugh and attractive voice sounded pleasantly in Brown's ears.

"You wrote at least *one* famous poem to Rosa," he said, still laughing.

"To Rosa? Oh! Rosa of the Café Luitpold! By Jove I did, didn't I, Siurd? How on earth did you ever remember that?"

"I thought it very pretty." He began to repeat aloud:

"Rosa with the winsome eyes,
When my beer you bring to me;
I can see through your disguise!
I my goddess recognize—
Hebe, young immortally,

Sweet nepenthe pouring me!"

Stent laughed outright:

"How funny to think of it now—and to think of Rosa!… And you, Siurd, do you forget that you also composed a most wonderful war-poem—to the metre of 'Fly, Eagle, Fly!' Do you remember how it began?

"Slay, Eagle, Slay!
They die who dare decry us!
Red dawns 'The Day.'
The western cliffs defy us!
Turn their grey flood
To seas of blood!
And, as they flee, Slay, Eagle! Slay!
For God has willed this German 'Day'!"

"Enough," said Siurd Von Glahn, still laughing, but turning very red. "What a terrible memory you have, Harry! For heaven's sake spare my modesty such accurate reminiscences."

"I thought it fine poetry—then," insisted Stent with a forced smile. But his voice had subtly altered.

They looked at each other in silence, the reminiscent smile still stamped upon their stiffening lips.

For a brief moment the years had seemed to fade—time was not—the sunshine of that careless golden age had seemed to warm them once again there where they sat amid the *alpenrosen*

below the snow line on the Col de la Reine.

But it did not endure; everything concerning earth and heaven and life and death had so far remained unsaid between these two. And never would be said. Both understood that, perhaps.

Then Von Glahn's sidelong and preoccupied glance fell on Stent's field glasses slung short around his neck. His rigid smile died out. Soldiers wore field glasses that way; hunters, when they carried them instead of spyglasses, wore them *en bandoulière*.

He spoke, however, of other matters in his gentle, thoughtful voice—avoiding always any mention of politics and war—chatted on pleasantly with the familiarity and insouciance of old acquaintance. Once he turned slowly and looked at Brown—addressed him politely—while his dark eyes wandered over the American, noting every detail of dress and equipment, and the slight bulge at his belt line beneath the tunic.

Twice he found pretext to pick up his rifle, but discarded it carelessly, apparently not noticing that Stent and Brown always resumed their own weapons when he touched his.

Brown said to Von Glahn:

"Ibex stalking is a new game to me. My friend Stent tells me that you are old at it."

"I have followed some few ibex, Mr. Brown," replied the young man modestly. "And—other game," he added with a shrug.

"I know how it's done in theory," continued the American; "and I am wondering whether we are to lie in this spot until dawn

tomorrow or whether we climb higher and lie in the snow up there."

"In the snow, perhaps. God knows exactly where we shall lie tonight—Mr. Brown."

There was an odd look in Siurd's soft brown eyes; he turned and spoke to Herr Professor von Dresslin, using dialect—and instantly appearing to recollect himself he asked pardon of Stent and Brown in his very perfect English.

"I said to the Herr Professor in the Traun dialect: 'Ibex may be stirring, as it is already late afternoon. We ought now to use our glasses.' My family," he added apologetically, "come from the Traunwald; I forget and employ the vernacular at times."

The Herr Professor unslung his telescope, set his rifle upright on the moss, and, kneeling, balanced the long spyglass alongside of the blued-steel barrel, resting it on his hand as an archer fits the arrow he is drawing on the bowstring.

Instantly both Brown and Stent thought of the same thing: the chance that these Germans might spy others of the Athabasca regiment prowling among the ferns and rocks of neighbouring slopes. The game was nearly at an end, anyway.

They exchanged a glance; both picked up their rifles; Brown nodded almost imperceptibly. The tragic comedy was approaching its close.

"*Hirsch*" grunted the Herr Professor—"*und stück*—on the north alm"—staring through his telescope intently.

"Accorded," said Siurd Von Glahn, balancing his spyglass and

sweeping the distant crags. "*Stück* on the western shoulder," he added—"and a stag royal among them."

"Of ten?"

"Of twelve."

After a silence: "Why are they galloping—I wonder—the herd-stag and *stück*?"

Brown very quietly laid one hand on Stent's arm.

"A *geier*, perhaps," suggested Siurd, his eye glued to his spyglass.

"No ibex?" asked Stent in a voice a little forced.

"*Noch nicht, mon ami. Tiens! A gemsbok*—high on the third peak—feeding."

"Accorded," grunted the Herr Professor after an interval of search; and he closed his spyglass and placed his rifle on the moss.

His staring, protuberant eyes fell casually upon Brown, who was laying aside his own rifle again—and the German's expression did not alter.

"Ibex!" exclaimed Von Glahn softly.

Stent, rising impulsively to his feet, bracketted his field glasses on the third peak, and stood there, poised, slim and upright against the sky on the chasm's mossy edge.

"I don't see your ibex, Siurd," he said, still searching.

"On the third peak, *mon ami*"—drawing Stent familiarly to his side—the lightest caressing contact—merely enough to verify the existence of the automatic under his old classmate's tunic.

If Stent did not notice the impalpable touch, neither did Brown notice it, watching them. Perhaps the Herr Professor did, but it is not at all certain, because at that moment there came flopping along over the bracken and *alpenrosen* a loppy winged butterfly —a large, whitish creature, seeming uncertain in its irresolute flight whether to alight at Brown's feet or go flapping aimlessly on over Brown's head.

The Herr Professor snatched up his net—struck heavily toward the winged thing—a silent, terrible, sweeping blow with net and rifle clutched together. Brown went down with a crash.

At the shocking sound of the impact Stent wheeled from the abyss, then staggered back under the powerful shove from Von Glahn's nervous arm. Swaying, fighting frantically for foothold, there on the chasm's awful edge, he balanced for an instant; fought for equilibrium. Von Glahn, rigid, watched him. Then, deathly white, his young eyes looking straight into the eyes of his old classmate—Stent lost the fight, fell outward, wider, dropping back into mid-air, down through sheer, tremendous depths—down there where the broad river seemed only a silver thread and the forests looked like beds of tender, velvet moss.

After him, fluttering irresolutely, flitted Parnassus Apollo, still winging its erratic way where God willed it—a frail, dainty, translucent, wind-blown fleck of white above the gulf—symbol, perhaps of the soul already soaring up out of the terrific deeps below.

The Herr Professor sweated and panted as he tugged at the

silk handkerchief with which he was busily knotting the arms of the unconscious American behind his back.

"Pouf! Ugh! Pig-dog!" he grunted—"mit his pockets full of automatic clips. A Yankee, eh? What I tell you, Siurd?—English and Yankee they are one in blood and one at heart—pig-dogs effery one. Hey, Siurd, what I told you already *gesternabend*? The British *schwein* are in Italy already. Hola! Siurd! Take his feet and we turn him over *mal*!"

But Von Glahn remained motionless, leaning heavily against the crag, his back to the abyss, his blond head buried in both arms.

So the Herr Professor, who was a major, too, began, with his powerful, stubby hands, to pull the unconscious man over on his back. And, as he worked, he hummed monotonously but contentedly in his bushy beard something about *something* being "*über alles*"—God, perhaps, perhaps the blue sky overhead which covered him and his sickened friend alike, and the hurt enemy whose closed lids shut out the sky above—and the dead man lying very, very far below them—where river and forest and moss and Parnassus were now alike to him.

CHAPTER VI
IN FINISTÈRE

It was a dirty trick that they played Stent and Brown—the three Mysterious Sisters, Fate, Chance, and Destiny. But they're always billed for any performance, be it vaudeville or tragedy; and there's no use hissing them off: they'll dog you from the stage entrance if they take a fancy to you.

They dogged Wayland from the dock at Calais, where the mule transport landed, all the way to Paris, then on a slow train to Quimperlé, and then, by stagecoach, to that little lost house on the moors, where ties held him most closely—where all he cared for in this world was gathered under a humble roof.

In spite of his lameness he went duck-shooting the week after his arrival. It was rather forcing his convalescence, but he believed it would accelerate it to go about in the open air, as though there were nothing the matter with his shattered leg.

So he hobbled down to the point he knew so well. He had longed for the sea off Eryx. It thundered at his feet.

And, now, all around him through clamorous obscurity a watery light glimmered; it edged the low-driven clouds hurrying in from the sea; it outlined the long point of rocks thrust southward into the smoking smother.

The din of the surf filled his ears; through flying patches

of mist he caught glimpses of rollers bursting white against the reef; heard duller detonations along unseen sands, and shattering reports where heavy waves exploded among basalt rocks.

His lean face of an invalid glistened with spray; salt water dripped from cap and coat, spangled the brown barrels of his fowling-piece, and ran down the varnished supports of both crutches where he leaned on them, braced forward against an ever-rising wind.

At moments he seemed to catch glimpses of darker specks dotting the heaving flank of some huge wave. But it was not until the wild ducks rose through the phantom light and came whirring in from the sea that his gun, poked stiffly skyward, flashed in the pallid void. And then, sometimes, he hobbled back after the dead quarry while it still drove headlong inland, slanting earthward before the gale.

Once, amid the endless thundering, in the turbulent desolation around him, through the roar of wind in his ears, he seemed to catch deadened sounds resembling distant seaward cannonading —*real* cannonading—as though individual shots, dully distinct, dominated for a few moments the unbroken uproar of surf and gale.

He listened, straining his ears, alert, intent upon the sounds he ought to recognize—the sounds he knew so well.

Only the ceaseless pounding of the sea assailed his ears.

Three wild duck, widgeon, came speeding through the fog; he breasted the wind, balanced heavily on both crutches and one

leg, and shoved his gun upward.

At the same instant the mist in front and overhead became noisy with wild fowl, rising in one great, panic-stricken, clamoring cloud. He hesitated; a muffled, thudding sound came to him over the unseen sea, growing louder, nearer, dominating the gale, increasing to a rattling clatter.

Suddenly a great cloudy shape loomed up through the whirling mist ahead—an enormous shadow in the fog—a gigantic spectre rushing inland on vast and ghostly pinions.

As the man shrank on his crutches, looking up, the aëroplane swept past overhead—a wounded, wavering, unsteady, unbalanced thing, its right aileron dangling, half stripped, and almost mangled to a skeleton.

Already it was slanting lower toward the forest like a hard-hit duck, wing-crippled, fighting desperately for flight-power to the very end. Then the inland mist engulfed it.

And after it hobbled Wayland, painfully, two brace of dead ducks and his slung fowling piece bobbing on his back, his rubber-shod crutches groping and probing among drenched rocks and gullies full of kelp, his left leg in splints hanging heavily.

He could not go fast; he could not go very far. Further inland, foggy gorse gave place to broom and blighted bracken, all wet, sagging with rain. Then he crossed a swale of brown reeds and tussock set with little pools of water, opaque and grey in the rain.

Where the outer moors narrowed he turned westward; then a

strip of low, thorn-clad cliff confronted him, up which he toiled along a V-shaped cleft choked with ferns.

The spectral forest of Läis lay just beyond, its wind-tortured branches tossing under a leaden sky.

East and west lonely moors stretched away into the depths of the mist; southward spread the sea; to the north lay the wide woods of Läis, equally deserted now in this sad and empty land.

He hobbled to the edge of the forest and stood knee deep in discoloured ferns, listening. The sombre beech-woods spread thick on either hand, a wilderness of crossed limbs and meshed branches to which still clung great clots of dull brown leaves.

He listened, peering into sinister, grey depths. In the uncertain light nothing stirred except the clashing branches overhead; there was no sound except the wind's flowing roar and the ghostly noise of his own voice, hallooing through the solitude—a voice in the misty void that seemed to carry less sound than the straining cry of a sleeper in his dreams.

If the aëroplane had landed, there was no sign here. How far had it struggled on, sheering the tree-tops, before it fell?—if indeed it had fallen somewhere in the wood's grey depths?

As long as he had sufficient strength he prowled along the forest, entering it here and there, calling, listening, searching the foggy corridors of trees. The rotting brake crackled underfoot; the tree tops clashed and creaked above him.

At last, having only enough strength left to take him home, he turned away, limping through the blotched and broken ferns, his

crippled leg hanging stiffly in its splints, his gun and the dead ducks bobbing on his back.

The trodden way was soggy with little pools full of drenched grasses and dead leaves; but at length came rising ground, and the blue-green, glimmering wastes of gorse stretching away before him through the curtained fog.

A sheep path ran through; and after a little while a few trees loomed shadowy in the mist, and a low stone house took shape, whitewashed, flanked by barn, pigpen, and a stack of rotting seaweed.

A few wet hens wandered aimlessly by the doorstep; a tiny bed of white clove-pinks and tall white phlox exhaled a homely welcome as the lame man hobbled up the steps, pulled the leather latchstring, and entered.

In the kitchen an old Breton woman, chopping herbs, looked up at him out of aged eyes, shaking her head under its white coiffe.

"It is nearly noon," she said. "You have been out since dawn. Was it wise, for a convalescent, Monsieur Jacques?"

"Very wise, Marie-Josephine. Because the more exercise I take the sooner I shall be able to go back."

"It is too soon to go out in such weather."

"Ducks fly inland only in such weather," he retorted, smiling. "And we like roast widgeon, you and I, Marie-Josephine."

And all the while her aged blue eyes were fixed on him, and over her withered cheeks the soft bloom came and faded—that

pretty colour which Breton women usually retain until the end.

"Thou knowest, Monsieur Jacques," she said, with a curiously quaint mingling of familiarity and respect, "that I do not counsel caution because I love thee and dread for thee again the trenches. But with thy leg hanging there like the broken wing of a *vanneau*——"

He replied good humouredly:

"Thou dost not know the Legion, Marie-Josephine. Every day in our trenches we break a comrade into pieces and glue him together again, just to make him tougher. Broken bones, once mended, are stronger than before."

He was looking down at her where she sat by the hearth, slicing vegetables and herbs, but watching him all the while out of her lovely, faded eyes.

"I understand, Monsieur Jacques, that you are like your father—God knows he was hardy and without fear—to the last"—she dropped her head—"Mary, glorious—intercede—" she muttered over her bowl of herbs.

Wayland, resting on his crutches, unslung his ducks, laid them on the table, smoothed their beautiful heads and breasts, then slipped the soaking *bandoulière* of his gun from his shoulder and placed the dripping piece against the chimney corner.

"After I have scrubbed myself," he said, "and have put on dry clothes, I shall come to luncheon; and I shall have something very strange to tell you, Marie-Josephine."

He limped away into one of the two remaining rooms—the

other was hers—and closed his door.

Marie-Josephine continued to prepare the soup. There was an egg for him, too; and a slice of cold pork and a *brioche* and a jug of cider.

In his room Wayland was whistling "Tipperary."

Now and again, pausing in her work, she turned her eyes to his closed door—wonderful eyes that became miracles of tenderness as she listened.

He came out, presently, dressed in his odd, ill-fitting uniform of the Legion, tunic unbuttoned, collarless of shirt, his bright, thick hair, now of decent length, in boyish disorder.

Delicious odours of soup and of Breton cider greeted him; he seated himself; Marie-Josephine waited on him, hovered over him, tucked a sack of feathers under his maimed leg, placed his crutches in the corner beside the gun.

Still eating, leisurely, he began:

"Marie-Josephine—a strange thing has happened on Quesnel Moors which troubles me.... Listen attentively. It was while waiting for ducks on the Eryx Rocks, that once I thought I heard through the roar of wind and sea the sound of a far cannonading. But I said to myself that it was only the imagination of a haunted mind; that in my ears still thundered the cannonade of Lens."

"Was it nevertheless true?" She had turned around from the fire where her own soup simmered in the kettle. As she spoke again she rose and came to the table.

He said: "It must have been cannon that I heard. Because, not

long afterward, out of the fog came a great aëroplane rushing inland from the sea—flying swiftly above me—right over me!—and staggering like a wounded duck—it had one aileron broken—and sheered away into the fog, northward, Marie-Josephine."

Her work-worn hands, tightly clenched, rested now on the table and she leaned there, looking down at him.

"Was it an enemy—this airship, Jacques?"

"In the mist flying and the ragged clouds I could not tell. It might have been English. It must have been, I think—coming as it came from the sea. But I am troubled, Marie-Josephine. Were the guns at sea an enemy's guns? Did the aëroplane come to earth in safety? Where? In the Forest of Laïs? I found no trace of it."

She said, tremulous perhaps from standing too long motionless and intent:

"Is it possible that the Boches would come into these solitary moors, where there are no people any more, only the creatures of the Laïs woods, and the curlew and the lapwings which pass at evening?"

He ate thoughtfully and in silence for a while; then:

"They go, usually—the Boches—where there is plunder—murder to be done.... Spying to be done.... God knows what purpose animates the Huns.... After all, Lorient is not so far away.... Yet it surely must have been an English aëroplane, beaten off by some enemy ship—a submarine perhaps. God send that the rocks of the Isle des Chouans take care of her—with their teeth!"

He drank his cider—a sip or two only—then, setting aside the glass:

"I went from the Rocks of Eryx to Laïs Woods. I called as loudly as I could; the wind whirled my voice back into my throat.... I am not yet very strong....

"Then I went into the wood as far as my strength permitted. I heard and saw nothing, Marie-Josephine."

"Would they be dead?" she asked.

"They were planing to earth. I don't know how much control they had, whether they could steer—choose a landing place. There are plenty of safe places on these moors."

"If their airship is crippled, what can they do, these English flying men, out there on the moors in the rain and wind? When the coast guard passes we must tell him."

"After lunch I shall go out again as far as my strength allows.... If the rain would cease and the mist lift, one might see something—be of some use, perhaps–"

"Ought you to go, Monsieur Jacques?"

"Could I fail to try to find them—Englishmen—and perhaps injured? Surely I should go, Marie-Josephine."

"The coast guard–"

"He passed the Eryx Rocks at daylight. He is at Sainte-Ylva now. Tonight, when I see his comrade's lantern, I shall stop him and report. But in the meanwhile I must go out and search."

"Spare thyself—for the trenches, Jacques. Remain indoors today." She began to unpin the coiffe which she always wore

ceremoniously at meals when he was present.

He smiled: "Thou knowest I must go, Marie-Josephine."

"And if thou come upon them in the forest and they are Huns?"

He laughed: "They are English, I tell thee, Marie-Josephine!"

She nodded; under her breath, staring at the rain-lashed window: "Like thy father, thou must go forth," she muttered; "go always where thy spirit calls. And once *he* went. And came no more. And God help us all in Finistère, where all are born to grief."

CHAPTER VII
THE AIRMAN

She had seated herself on a stool by the hearth. Presently she spread her apron with trembling fingers, took the glazed bowl of soup upon her lap and began to eat, slowly, casting long, unquiet glances at him from time to time where he still at table leaned heavily, looking out into the rain.

When he caught her eye he smiled, summoning her with a nod of his boyish head. She set aside her bowl obediently, and, rising, brought him his crutches. And at the same moment somebody knocked lightly on the outer door.

Marie-Josephine had unpinned her coiffe. Now she pinned it on over her *bonnet* before going to the door, glancing uneasily around at him while she tied her tresses and settled the delicate starched wings of her bonnet.

"That's odd," he said, "that knocking," staring at the door. "Perhaps it is the lost Englishman."

"God send them," she whispered, going to the door and opening it.

It certainly seemed to be one of the lost Englishmen—a big, square-shouldered, blond young fellow, tall and powerful, in the leather dress of an aëronaut. His glass mask was lifted like the visor of a tilting helmet, disclosing a red, weather-beaten face,

wet with rain. Strength, youth, rugged health was their first impression of this leather-clad man from the clouds.

He stepped inside the house immediately, halted when he caught sight of Wayland in his undress uniform, glanced involuntarily at his crutches and bandaged leg, cast a quick, penetrating glance right and left; then he spoke pleasantly in his hesitating, imperfect French—so oddly imperfect that Wayland could not understand him at all.

"Who are you?" he demanded in English.

The airman seemed astonished for an instant, then a quick smile broke out on his ruddy features:

"I say, this *is* lucky! Fancy finding an Englishman here!—wherever this place may be." He laughed. "Of course I know I'm 'somewhere in France,' as the censor has it, but I'm hanged if I know where!"

"Come in and shut the door," said Wayland, reassured. Marie-Josephine closed the door. The aëronaut came forward, stood dripping a moment, then took the chair to which Wayland pointed, seating himself as though a trifle tired.

"Shot down," he explained, gaily. "An enemy submarine winged us out yonder somewhere. I tramped over these bally moors for hours before I found a sign of any path. A sheepwalk brought me here."

"You are lucky. There is only one house on these moors—this! Who are you?" asked Wayland.

"West—flight-lieutenant, 10th division, Cinque-Ports

patrolling squadron."

"Good heavens, man! What are you doing in Finistère?"

"*What!*"

"You are in Brittany, province of Finistère. Didn't you know it?"

The air-officer seemed astounded. Presently he said: "The dirty weather foxed us. Then that fellow out yonder winged us. I was glad enough to see a coast line."

"Did you fall?"

"No; we controlled our landing pretty well."

"Where did you land?"

There was a second's hesitation; the airman looked at Wayland, glanced at his crippled leg.

"Out there near some woods," he said. "My pilot's there now trying to patch up.... You are not French, are you?"

"American."

"Oh! A—volunteer, I presume."

"Foreign Legion—2d."

"I see. Back from the trenches with a leg."

"It's nearly well. I'll be back soon."

"Can you walk?" asked the airman so abruptly that Wayland, looking at him, hesitated, he did not quite know why.

"Not very far," he replied, cautiously. "I can get to the window with my crutches pretty well."

And the next moment he felt ashamed of his caution when the airman laughed frankly.

"I need a guide to some petrol," he said. "Evidently you can't go with me."

"Haven't you enough petrol to take you to Lorient?"

"How far is Lorient?"

Wayland told him.

"I don't know," said the flight-lieutenant; "I'll have to try to get somewhere. I suppose it is useless for me to ask," he added, "but have you, by any chance, a bit of canvas—an old sail or hammock?—I don't need much. That's what I came for—and some shellac and wire, and a screwdriver of sorts? We need patching as well as petrol; and we're a little short of supplies."

Wayland's steady gaze never left him, but his smile was friendly.

"We're in a tearing hurry, too," added the flight-lieutenant, looking out of the window.

Wayland smiled. "Of course there's no petrol here. There's nothing here. I don't suppose you could have landed in a more deserted region if you had tried. There's a château in the Laïs woods, but it's closed; owner and servants are at the war and the family in Paris."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Everybody has cleared out; the war has stripped the country; and there never were any people on these moors, excepting shooting parties and, in the summer, a stray artist or two from Quimperlé."

The lieutenant looked at him. "You say there is nobody here—between here and Lorient? No—troops?"

"There's nothing to guard. The coast is one vast shoal. Ships pass hull down. Once a day a coast guard patrols along the cliffs–"

"When?"

"He has passed, unfortunately. Otherwise he might signal by relay to Lorient and have them send you out some petrol. By the way—are you hungry?"

The flight-lieutenant showed all his firm, white teeth under a yellow mustache, which curled somewhat upward. He laughed in a carefree way, as though something had suddenly eased his mind of perplexity—perhaps the certainty that there was no possible chance for petrol. Certainty is said to be more endurable than suspense.

"I'll stop for a bite—if you don't mind—while my pilot tinkers out yonder," he said. "We're not in such a bad way. It might easily have been worse. Do you think you could find us a bit of sail, or something, to use for patching?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.