LILAC TIME

GUY FOWLER

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A First National Picture. *Lilac Time.*

LOVE CAME WITH PERFECT UNDERSTANDING.

LILAC TIME

BY
GUY FOWLER

NOVELIZED FROM THE SCREEN PLAY ADAPTED BY WILLIS GOLDBECK FROM THE STAGE PRODUCTION

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE COLLEEN MOORE-GEORGE FITZMAURICE PHOTOPLAY—A FIRST NATIONAL PICTURE

GROSSET & DUNLAP
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To

COLLEEN MOORE

Who, as Jeannine in ‘Lilac Time,’
revives so poignantly the indomitable
spirit of France in the dark
days of War.

G.F.

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LILAC TIME

CHAPTER I

AN EAGLE FALLS

TIME had been gentle with the village of Berle Le Bois. The cobblestones were smooth and rounded, worn by the feet of generations. Old wine filled ancient casks in the cool deep cellars of the cottages and the village was a place of laughter and song and simple living.

The sunlight of France had tinted the cottages honey-colored. With the same divine artistry it had touched the faces of the people until their skins were brown and polished as the leaves in autumn. And always, of course, the sun brought royal purple to the grapes.

But swiftly, in the passage of a single day in 1914, Time ceased to caress the village with a kindly hand. Song and laughter suddenly were silenced, or, if they sounded at all, it was with the plaintive note of futility. The Berle Le Bois of other days passed into oblivion. Something grim and brooding descended upon the village and the passing of Time came to be an ordeal to every living thing.

It was so with Jeannine. Like all the others, she, too, waited for the next hour, dimly wondering what new suffering it would bring. She paused now, in her arranging of the long table in the low ceiled dining room, to gaze at her mother, bent over the stove in the kitchen beyond. Mme. Berthelot was thinking of the simmering food with one side of her mind. But with the other, that part which lay deep and set the stern lines in her face, she was concerned with other things.

"The sun is good today," Jeannine ventured. "Perhaps they will all return."

"Perhaps," her mother said moodily. "They may be saved for another day."

A swift shadow passed over the dark eyes of the girl like a fleeting cloud before the sun. It had been like that when her father, Pierre, the peaceful one, responded to the call in 1914.

“It will be nothing,” Jeannine had cried gayly. “In a week it will be over.”

Then had her mother looked at her strangely, with a slow half smile.

“Do not be too sure.”

How well now she remembered the meager hysteric news of Verdun. Then the brief unemotional message from the War Office that Mme. Berthelot anticipated before she read.

“They shall not pass,” was the inscription over the great picture of Clemenceau, that now looked down from the wall of the dining room over the fireplace. But Pierre, the peaceful, had passed.

Jeannine turned to Grandpère Julien, whose face was like leather drawn taut across his bones. He sat deep in his chair, his knees covered beneath a rusty army coat, relic of the Franco-Prussian war. Grandpère knew of battle. To be sure, did he not return, paralyzed though he was? From a great distance came the growling rumble that forever sounded, until one ceased to hear it altogether.

“Do you hear the guns Grandpère?” she asked.

The ancient man peered at her without moving his head.

“Eh, it is not war,” he spoke scornfully. “There are too many miles between the men. Gas!” A brief flame lighted his eyes. “They are mathematicians, not soldiers!”

Jeannine set down the plates and cups and walked to the door. Her movements were lithe and sure. Life pulsed in her slim strong body as it glowed in her slumberous eyes. She leaned against the door frame, gazing into the distant western sky. A single plane hung in space, so high that the song of its motor was lost. For a moment she watched it, a speck against the edge of a lofty cloud, and saw that it was moving swiftly as it passed across the expanse of fluffy white.

As she lowered her gaze, Jeannine looked down to the stone doorstep, worn like a saucer by the tread of the Berthelots. Yet, surviving Time and the generations of passing feet, there remained the legend that had been carved there—the legend of the clan, perhaps before the Berthelots were peasants. It might, possibly, have been copied from an escutcheon. It was a brief sentence in French; “Love cannot die.”

Never, since she could remember, had Jeannine understood the inscription, nor had any one taken the trouble to explain it. On the contrary,

all things die. Or so she had been taught. A movement across the road caught her attention and she looked up to see a man emerge from the pine barracks. He grinned broadly and waved a careless hand. His red face was smirched with grease and he wore the baggy cover-alls of a mechanic in the British army.

Jeannine smiled and the man accepted it as a signal. He strode across the road towards her.

" 'Tis loike th' sunshine t' see ye smile, it is," he said, pausing before her, his legs spread wide, his big hands thrust into the pockets of his jumpers.

Jeannine, like all the remaining Berthelots, had learned enough of soldier jargon to comprehend the language from across the English channel. She knew, too, that when O'Rourke paid compliments it was for a purpose.

"You have much dirt." She continued to smile as she gazed at his greasy uniform, then at the marks on his face.

"Sure, an' it's ashamed Oi am," O'Rourke told her quickly. "It was me intintion t' wash up, but whin Oi seen yez standin' here it was an inspiration, it was. So Oi come roight over."

"You beg for something now," she answered wisely.

The Irishman grinned, revealing tobacco stained teeth.

" 'Tis not beggin', Miss Jeannine, Oi am, but askin' a favor."

Mme. Berthelot appeared suddenly behind Jeannine's shoulder. O'Rourke bowed and sobered instantly, as he gazed innocently into her steady gray eyes.

"Good mornin', Madam. Oi was sayin' to your daughter as how yez could do me th' bit av a favor."

Mme. Berthelot was silent. O'Rourke shifted and continued.

"As yez know, av course, we've drawn no pay since—well, ma'am, 'twas so long ago Oi've forgotten. An' Oi was wonderin' if a bit av fresh bread an' a bottle av wine could be put on tick, Oi was. Just this once, ma'am, an' no more. Oi could smell th' bread a-bakin' clean over in the hangar, ma'am."

How many loaves of bread and how many bottles of wine Mme. Berthelot had "put on tick" for O'Rourke was a thing beyond her recollection. Her gray eyes grew warm for an instant and she turned silently

back into the cottage. In a moment she was again at the door with a loaf of golden brown bread in one hand, the slim green bottle in the other.

O'Rourke met her on the sill with hands out-stretched.

"Oi'll remimber yez till th' crack o' doom, Oi will," he said gladly. "An' whin the pay comes——"

Mme. Berthelot waved him off and she came as near to a smile as she ever did.

Jeannine was smiling openly. Her face grew suddenly sober and she spoke to the mechanic with a little catch in her voice.

"Mike, when will they come home?"

O'Rourke looked at her swiftly, then gazed into the sky. Over his shoulder, Jeannine could see the lettering on the barracks—Thirteenth Flight, 22nd Wing, R.A.F.—and the insignia, two machine guns crossed, with an eagle roosting between them.

"Well now, Miss, ye niver can tell about thim lads. As long as there's a Heinie aloft they'll shtay, av course. But Oi'm expectin' thim any minute now, Miss. Th' whole bunch av thim took off just after dawn, they did."

Jeannine nodded and turned back into the house. O'Rourke wheeled to start across the road. At that moment the adjutant stepped from the barracks door. With frantic haste, O'Rourke gripped both the bread and the bottle in one hand, held it behind him and whipped the other into a smart salute. The adjutant gazed at him for a lingering second and returned the salute. As he strode away his lips twitched beneath his gray military moustache.

The noonday sun cast its soft radiance into the dining room where Jeannine resumed her preparations. As she arranged the plates and the silver, she counted half aloud.

"Seven," she said softly to herself, in French. "Today, with the sunshine, there must be seven. There were seven last night."

Her eyes wandered up to the walls and traveled among the curious objects that were tacked there. Bits of torn canvas, showing the black insignia of the Iron Cross, were everywhere, with holes through which she could see the walls.

There were, too, broken propeller blades, bits of bullet scarred fuselage and squares of canvas which bore the insignia of Richthofen's flying circus. But strangest of all, was the display on the aged sideboard and it was to this

which Jeannine looked now with tragic eyes. Half a dozen bottles of wine stood first and on a shelf which extended the width of the sideboard, were a number of broken champagne glasses. For the most part, their slender bases were intact. In nearly every instance the glass itself was broken to ragged sawtooth edges.

It seemed to Jeannine, as she gazed at this display, that Time itself dragged by on pinions that were wounded and might, at any moment, crash into eternity. Dimly, she wondered if tonight the flight commander would silently raise a brimming glass, pour its contents on the floor and smash the slim goblet as a signal that he, to whom the toast was drunk, would drink no more to his fellows. Each broken glass was for a shattered boy shot down in flight.

Once again she turned to the table and counted the plates. Either there would be a gay, reckless youth at each place in a little while, or on the sideboard yonder there would be another shattered goblet, perhaps more. Jeannine moved swiftly toward the door and her anxious eyes again sought the cloud-flecked sky. In the kitchen Mme. Berthelot continued about her duties with monotonous, unhalting certainty. Mme. Berthelot had seen so much of war.

Jeannine strained her ears for the staccato song of the pursuit planes. She was accustomed to this trick, as one becomes in a roaring mill, quite capable of distinguishing a certain sound above all others.

Faintly at first, she heard it. Her eyes narrowed as she faced the brilliant sky. A plane aloft over Berle Le Bois was no indication that the Thirteenth was returning. Jeannine watched the heavens, sweeping them with her gaze from one end of the horizon to the other. The sound increased in volume until she knew there would be more than a single ship.

Presently, out of the west they appeared in formation. They were flying high, probably at the altitude at which they had crossed the lines, dodging Archies, too far aloft for the machine guns. Jeannine waited until she could count the formation. In the lead, at the junction of the flying V, was the flight commander. That would be Major Russell. Then in their proper order, came the others, three on either side.

Jeannine turned and signalled to her mother.

“They are coming,” she called, and there was laughter in her voice. “Seven of them.”

Grandpère Julien nodded in his chair and at the sound of her glad cry, he started.

"Seven today," he cackled. "Tomorrow—who knows?"

Jeannine ran out into the garden to watch the sky. Beside the cottage lilacs bloomed and the air was sweet with them. She stood in the winding path that skirted the bushes and counted again as the seven planes swung into a wide circle, dropping in easy spirals. As they swung into the wind for a landing, the girl darted between two lilac bushes to halt before a niche built in the masonry. A statue of Joan of Arc looked back at her with granite tranquillity.

Jeannine crossed herself and her lips moved, although she spoke scarcely above a whisper. Her prayer was in her native tongue.

"Saint Joan," she breathed, and a faint smile curved her lips, "thank you for bringing them all home safely this day."

The hum of the motors had, by now, increased to a drone. The flight commander already had turned the nose of his ship to earth and she could see the round form of his head as he leaned out to peer below. Suddenly, he straightened out above the field and came to a three point landing, then taxied gently to the hangars. In swift succession then, the others plunged and flattened out on quivering wings.

As Major Russell climbed down and removed his helmet, Jeannine approached the field from the road. Anxiously, she studied his young face, smeared with the oil that spurts back in a plunge. Russell ran bronzed fingers through his shaggy hair and gazed upward towards his flight, now spread out fanwise for landing. Youth was in his face and his carriage, but too, there was the drawn expression of nerve strain, the weariness in his narrowed eyes of constant searching for the enemy.

The second plane landed neatly and rolled up beside the Major. A cheerful youngster climbed stiffly from the cockpit and reached for a cigaret.

"Heinie was hot this morning, eh, Major?" he remarked casually.

Russell smiled and nodded.

"Everything all right with you?" he asked in turn.

The youth shrugged and jerked his cigaret toward the wings of his ship.

"I'll need a patch or two," he replied.

The third plane came to earth and a boy stepped out, a boy unbelievably young.

"The Infant seems to have been stung." The man beside Russell sent a swift, comprehensive gaze along the fuselage of the boy's plane. The Major strode over to greet his protégé.

"All O.K., Rogers?"

The Infant, as he was known in the squadron, raised eyes that yet bore the horror of the morning. His face twitched and the slim hand that clutched his helmet and goggles quivered.

"All fit, sir. Except—" he turned expressively to gaze at the row of holes drilled in the side of his plane like the even line of ports in a ship. He steadied himself against the fuselage.

"Lucky," said the Major, turning to watch the fourth chaser bound across the field. Jeannine had approached them until she stood within earshot, watching each landing, her eyes glowing happily at their nearness. Two more came down and the pilots sought the feel of ground beneath their feet without delay.

The seventh ship straightened off into the wind and as it sped past them flying low, Jeannine and the men saw its pilot slouched in his seat, apparently at nonchalant ease. Suddenly, the left wing dipped and the plane seemed to quiver before it turned. Then, with awful slowness, it pancaked down, whirled grotesquely and crashed.

Even as the nose of the ship bit into the earth, sending up a spray of dirt, men ran out to the field. Jeannine, oblivious of regulations, followed them, stifling a scream as she ran.

Before the first of them ranged beside the wreck, a slim figure was crawling slowly from the shattered cockpit. He was clear of the plane when they reached him, sitting up on the ground, with his arms braced behind him for support. A ghastly smile greeted them and the boy shook his head to fling the blood from his eyes. A field mechanic kneeled beside him, offering his shoulder. In another moment, Major Russell was peering into the boy's eyes.

"We didn't even know they nicked you, Harley." In the Major's voice was a note of bewildered amazement, as though he had been the victim of some ghastly practical joke. His eyes went to the walls of the plane and new wonder came into them as he saw the holes studded in the fabric.

Harley coughed and spat blood. As the paroxysm ceased, he smiled again.

“He—he got over me—somehow,” said the boy. “I’m—awfully sorry, Major. Feel—rotten about it——”

Stretcher bearers came on at the double quick. Jeannine leaned back against the body of the wrecked plane, forcing the tears from her eyes, fighting to choke down the sobs. She saw them lift young Harley to the stretcher and watched them strangely as they came toward her bearing their burden.

Harley’s eyes were wide open. He recognized her and raised his hand. The stretcher bearers paused.

“I remembered how you counted us off every day,” he smiled wanly. “So—I—I came home.”

CHAPTER II

JEANNINE BERTHELOT

SHE took his hand in her own and leaned over him, smiling to distract his attention from the tears that would not down. It was not a new thing for her, this merciful deception, the hopeful words that sprang from a hopeless heart. Jeannine had comforted them before.

Looking into Harley's eyes that were glazed in pain, she recognized the shadow that hovered there. She had come to know now, that when they writhed and groaned, the chances were they would live. But when, as now, they lay quietly and smiled, they had made their final flight.

"You mus' not talk, petit," she told him softly. "Jus' rest. You go now to —what you call him—blighty. For long rest. An' you come back all well again."

Even as she voiced the words Jeannine knew that Harley, in his coma, understood. These fliers sensed death instinctively and scorned it, played hide-and-go-seek with it among the clouds, laughing in harmony with the wild singing of the wind in their rigging. Time was whipped into faster rhythm by the staccato beating of their mighty engines and if that were not fast enough there were the machine guns and the swift hammerings of their brave hearts.

The drums of ancient wars were slow and paced. A clock ticking the seconds seemed to loiter behind in the race of time. Life, to such as Harley, was lived more furiously and death must speed its hand to tag them.

The stretcher-bearers hurried on and Jeannine's last glimpse of Harley's face was to photograph his dying smile on the retina of her memory. The men moved off alone, or in little groups. Death might not slacken the momentum of their days and nights. There were holes in the wings to be patched, engines to be attuned for the next dawn. Between these victories of death such times as this were merely interludes.

Young as she was, the girl had come into a strange understanding with the men of the Thirteenth and through them, perhaps, with all of mankind.

She had been a child when they first came, bare legged, brown from the sun that gave the purple to the grapes and the tint of honey to the stones of the cottages there.

She recalled those early days now, as she stood alone.

Pierre, the peaceful one, her father, had gone out even before the fliers came. But somehow, then, life had not been terrible and the war was a glorious thing. They laughed and there was singing among them at night. That was before Mme. Berthelot had become what now she was, a woman of ice who thawed only on rare occasions.

Then, the news of Pierre's death! That had been the first shadow. It was then that the fliers had suddenly become more friendly. Instead of laughing at her forever, they talked to her kindly and seemed to accept her. For Jeannine, strict military discipline went by the boards. They had smiled and turned away when she defied the orders of a sergeant mechanic. They had done the same when she ignored the edict of a pompous officer of the general staff.

"The little devil will have her own way anyhow."

They had said that and shrugged.

So it was that Jeannine became the mascot of the Thirteenth Flight. Major Russell called her the guardian angel. That, of course, was foolish, she thought, because she was nothing like an angel. Strange, too, that in the same breath, he would say she was a little devil. At first she had pondered over that a great deal.

If she were to be their guardian angel, she decided at length, it would be necessary to comfort them always and forever to obey their least command. It would also require a measure of dignity and certainly a vast amount of self control. As an angel, Jeannine argued with herself in those first days, it would be out of character for her to steal into the hangars when the men were working on the planes. It was against orders.

Likewise, it would be improper for her to play humorous pranks on the fliers as she did often. It was so droll to watch them, for instance, when she donned a suit of greasy overalls and insisted on examining odd parts of the engines. Or, when she found a can of brown paint and searched carefully for a stone of the proper size and shape, painting it to exactly resemble a cruller which she heated in Mother Berthelot's oven.

"Phwat th' divil!" Sergeant O'Rourke, the mechanic, had dropped it and the expression on his face could still send her into a rapture of laughter when

she recalled it.

No, Jeannine had decided. It would not do to be the guardian angel. As the little devil of the Thirteenth she was free to do as she pleased. Devils disregarded rules. Of course, they were punished sometimes, but she had already come to know that the fliers were marvelously tolerant.

There were times, though, when she took the other rôle. They became more frequent as the war continued. She learned to wrap neat, clean white bandages over minor wounds. And there was none who could sew more swiftly, or more willingly. From her mother, even before the fliers came, Jeannine had learned the art of cookery, so that her services were as much in demand in the kitchen as elsewhere.

In her rôle as the little devil, however, she found the greatest satisfaction. It was far more amusing. For instance, by slipping quietly around the cottage, unseen by Mme. Berthelot, she could disappear into the dank, cold cellar. Far in the rear, stored in bins underneath the ground, was wine. Row upon row of bottles and casks.

In return for a bottle of wine she could play in the hangars for a whole morning. The mechanics told her so frequently. So often, in fact, that Mme. Berthelot put a huge padlock on the cellar door with her own strong hands.

"Mon Dieu," she exclaimed, "you'd think we had an enemy flight on our hands, the way they make free with the wine."

After that, Jeannine had to be more careful. She entered the cellar by the stairs from the kitchen, only when her mother was elsewhere. Once she had to remain in the cellar half an afternoon before it was possible to escape with a bottle of wine.

These were the happy, carefree memories. There were others of another sort, many of them. As with Harley this morning. From the first day Jeannine had counted the planes as they took off in the early sunlight, and recounted them when they returned.

She had watched seven of them glinting in the dawn and waited, wide-eyed and trembling, when only three came home. She had seen them speeding up to meet double their number on occasion, of the fleet black planes of the Germans. They had fought below the clouds and above, and yet deep in the rolling mist of them where they were lost to sight completely.

There was the morning of the bombing raid when only Major Russell and two others were on the field with ships available. The great, heavily laden planes of the Germans came over at ten thousand feet. They were two-

seaters, each with a pilot and an observer. Before they came over Berle Le Bois the first of the planes loosed his bombs and they fell in a curve.

They struck on the field, but too far out to cause great damage. And before the air was clear of smoke and particles of dirt, Russell and his companions were off the ground, pushing up in a steep climb. Five bombers there were then and they swung in a wide circle behind their leader as he roared back toward the German lines with his engine wide open.

Jeannine had watched the chaser planes climb up, a thousand feet in fifty seconds. Ten minutes later, Russell and his aides were over the bombers, diving with their engines on. She recoiled as a black bombing plane burst into flame, turned over slowly and plunged down like a meteor, leaving behind it a thin tail of smoke. Before the three returned, one other German fell.

The people of Berle Le Bois, gathered in the cobbled street and at the public square, cheered till their throats ached, half maddened in their excitement. Jeannine, more privileged than the rest, ran out upon the field before the hangars as the three ships of the Thirteenth circled once and glided to their landing.

Curiously, still shivering from the strain of watching, she saw the Major and his men climb down stiffly from their cockpits and walk around their ships, slowly, examining the bullet holes.

"Jeannine, I thought you were told to keep off the field."

Russell had turned on her and his face yet was grim and hard, with something of the expression that held over from the fighting aloft.

"Oh, I am ver' sorr-e-e. It was that I forgot, Monsieur."

"Well, don't forget again. Now leg it out of this."

Crestfallen, she went back to the cottage.

"The little devil," Russell remarked to his companions. "Some day she'll get in the way of a propeller and there'll be the hell to pay."

But later, when they came into the cottage, this same gruff, war-bitten young officer had spoken over his shoulder.

"Some more of that pudding, Jeannine. I'll take you out to see the ships after we eat. What do you say?"

Always it had been like that, so that in the course of time she had come to reign over the flight like an impetuous young queen. The war, so Mme.

Berthelot proclaimed frequently, had spoiled her. Certainly in the days before the soldiers came, Jeannine had usurped no authority in her own household.

"It is these English aviators," said Mme. Berthelot, with conviction. "They let you have your way too much. They are hard enough in other respects. I alone know how to handle you, Jeannine. It is not for nothing that I have known the Berthelots all my life."

"Were not the Berthelots good people?" the child had asked.

Then, slow amusement lighted on her mother's face.

"Yes, they were good people, child. And your father was the best of them all. Remember that."

That puzzled her. Now, with her more mature mind, the same problem often caused her to ponder deeply in the quiet of her garden. Pierre, her father, had been the best of all the Berthelots. Yet it was he who had been chosen to die in the flower of his manhood. To be sure, he had gone to his reward, but was there not something to be gained here on earth? Must one always die to come into his own?

The fliers joked about death and went up to face it laughing. Yet, she had seen the expressions on their faces when they were unaware of her. Men could not look like that and welcome this thing they seemed to fear so little. She had, too, watched the faces of some of them when death already lay chill upon them, and it was not a pleasant sight.

Her reflections were interrupted by the approach of Major Russell. From his face she knew that Harley had gone. His first words confirmed her thought.

"Another one, Jeannine."

"You have seen him?"

Russell nodded. "He went out easily, thank God. He seemed to be in no great pain."

"Tell me, Monsieur, what did he say?"

"Nothing. Toward the last. When he was still fully conscious, he just cursed."

"The Germans?"

"No. It wasn't that. Just his damnable luck—the war."

She had heard so many of them do that. Even the French soldiers, though they were so much more bitter toward the enemy.

"Always they blame the war when they are dying," she said now, with a hint of resentment. "Why is it not the Germans? Are they not the cause of it all? Bah, they have always wanted to tramp their heels on France."

Russell returned her gaze curiously. He was finding a new side of this joyous child and it rather surprised him. Yet, he disagreed with her.

"The Germans say that about France and England," he told her. "But just the same, Jeannine, when they die, they curse at war. You see, it isn't the German people we're fighting at all, petite. It's their government. And we're fighting that because it is the sort of government which makes war."

He paused to watch her somber eyes as she strove to analyze.

"Do you remember when Hutchinson died last week?" His abrupt inquiry shattered her train of thought.

"Oui, oui, Major. Did I not stand beside him in the sun?"

"Well then, you ought to understand, Jeannine. Don't you recall how he praised the German who shot him down? Said he was a first rate gentleman."

She remembered the strained voice of Hutchinson, the look of admiring awe on his face.

"Hutchinson was helpless," Russell continued. "The fellow could have sent him down in flames. Instead, he put a bullet in him."

She looked up at him wonderingly.

"You—you mean that it was a good thing to do? That Hutchinson was glad?"

"Certainly. The German couldn't have done him a greater favor at that moment."

Jeannine seemed to shrink within herself. Her eyes sought the ground and dull pain burned in her heart as she recalled Hutchinson's dying words.

"Gad, it was sporting of him, y' know. He smiled at me when he turned his Vickers loose. He—he—could have—plugged the—engine so easily."

She spread her hands in an expressive gesture at her sides.

“I cannot understand, Monsieur Major. War—he is something I cannot understand. You—all of them—you do not understand either.”

“That is the real answer, I suppose.” He nodded solemnly and watched her as she turned away. “Don’t think too much about it, Jeannine. You’ll live to see it over with.”

CHAPTER III

THE TOAST

JEANNINE returned slowly to the cottage. She walked unnoticed in advance of the flyers and the mechanics who were talking in subdued tones. In her sloe eyes grief gave way before a sullen anger and her heart beat rapidly, whipping her rage into flame. They were so young, these boys. Younger even, than she, some of them, and they came here only to die.

Entering the dining room, Jeannine removed a plate and the utensils from one of the seven places, then pushed the chair against the wall. She reached out for the wine glass, but drew back and a little shudder passed through her body as she remembered. She moved into the kitchen where her mother glanced up from expressionless eyes.

"How many?" asked the older woman, listlessly.

Jeannine did not reply. Instead, she set the plate and the silverware on a tray. Mme. Berthelot nodded and went back to her oven. There would be larger portions now, for the six who remained.

From his chair in the corner by the window, Grandpère Julien eyed the girl as she re-entered the room. In silence he had seen her take away the plate and in silence now he waited for her to speak. Jeannine said nothing.

"It is not war," the old man shrilled, in his voice a note of violence. "Little boys shot down from kites in the sky."

His gleaming eyes beneath their shaggy brows raised to a rusted musket hanging on a peg in the wall. The sunlight glinted dully on the time-stained bayonet. Jeannine followed his gaze and for an instant there was in the youth of her face, and the age of his, a bitter resemblance.

She turned away at the sound of tramping feet and from the kitchen watched the men who came in through the open door. Major Russell was first, looking older than when he had landed. The others followed him silently. The Major seated himself immediately and the others took their places. In turn they glanced at the vacant expanse of checkered table cloth where Harley had been accustomed to eat, then looked quickly away.

"Anyone see Von Richthofen today?"

Walker, a veteran of twenty-two, with fifteen enemy planes to his credit, spoke carelessly, hoping by so doing to break the strain.

There was a moment's silence while they eyed him inquiringly.

"You're jolly well right we didn't," said Rogers, the Infant, with obviously false cheerfulness. "You don't see that devil and live to tell about it."

"It was a red Fokker that got over Harley," said Major Russell quietly. "I thought the kid got away from him."

Several of the men nodded in corroboration and again six pairs of eyes subconsciously sought the vacant place at the table. In all the enemy flying force there was but one red ship, brilliant as a scarlet tanager, so that all who flew might read the challenge of its pilot, the chivalrous and deadly Von Richthofen.

Jeannine, in the kitchen, listened to the tense silence that followed the Major's words. Hot tears burned in her eyes and a sob wracked in her throat. Mme. Berthelot looked at her daughter curiously, and her grim, chiseled features softened.

Suddenly Jeannine seized a brown paper sack that lay on the table. With skillful hands she folded it to resemble the fatigue cap of the flying corps. With a slender finger she touched the soot on the oven door and drew a quick smear above her lips, a travesty on the moustache affected by some of the younger pilots. Then, taking up a long handled warming pan, she placed it across her shoulder as though it were a gun and began a queer little dance on the sanded floor of the kitchen.

Mme. Berthelot reached out strong hands and clutched the girl's arm.

"Have you gone mad?" she demanded. "Come to yourself."

Tears fell down across Jeannine's cheeks and she choked back a sob.

"Can't you see?" she cried, in a voice tinged with hysteria. "Can't you see?" she repeated. "I must play the fool. I must make them laugh—and forget."

She laughed wildly and spun away on dancing feet, whirling into the room to the amazement of the men at the table. They stared at her uncomprehendingly and there was no laughter on their lips or in their eyes. As she danced Jeannine sang gay little songs of France, a verse of one, the

chorus of another, searching all the while the cynical faces of the pilots. Major Russell alone permitted a shadowy smile to cross his face.

Jeannine realized that she had failed. She pirouetted in a last attempt and, as she whirled, her eyes fell upon the champagne bottles on the sideboard. She paused in her weird dance and began to pile them on her arm.

"Give them wine. Let them drown their memories." The thought registered and repeated itself and, as she turned, one bottle slipped and fell. She stooped to retrieve it and another went down. She bent again and now, when she least expected it, the strain was broken and the men burst into laughter at her serious efforts.

Major Russell was the first to her aid and between them they got the bottles safely on the table. The ripple of merriment still sounded in throaty chuckles as the Major chose a single bottle. Jeannine stepped back against the sideboard and waited. With a great deal of care Russell drew the cork and in a single movement each man was on his feet. Jeannine accepted the bottle and, moving slowly around the table, filled each glass to the brim. Presently, she stood before the goblet at Harley's place. For just an instant her lips quivered and the hand that poured the wine was trembling.

Jeannine stepped back to the wall, biting her lip until it paled. Major Russell raised his glass and the men of his command responded gravely. Their young faces were set in grim lines and into the eyes of all but one there came the hard light of controlled emotion. The Infant alone revealed to his mates the stark horror that was his. His face was gray and his firm boyish lips were drawn like a slit as he gripped himself in anticipation of the Major's toast.

Russell looked down the length of the table into the eyes of each man. As he spoke there crept into his voice a sinister note, cold as the wind that whipped through the wires above the lines, deadly as the whine of a bullet, relentless as the ripping of canvas on the wing.

"To our comrade in hell," he said.

Slowly he put the glass to his lips and drained it. The others, with the exception of the Infant again, did likewise, but Rogers gulped and choked as though the bubbling liquid were hot lead. Unconsciously, Jeannine pressed against the wall, one small hand held over her lips as if to crush back the cry of protest that came from her heart.

Russell set down his glass and, leaning over the table, reached for the goblet at the vacant place. Mockingly, like a man half mad with grief that

must not be shown, he raised it above his head, tilting the brim so that the wine fell upon the table slowly as blood drips from a mortal wound. In a moment which seemed like eternity the goblet was empty. Gripping it at the base, the Major crushed the bowl of the glass against the table, then turned abruptly and set it beside its shattered mates on the sideboard.

Jeannine, with horror in her eyes, found herself counting those ragged goblets in the dead silence. She knew there had been eleven, yet she recounted them slowly. Someone coughed and his flying mates started nervously.

"They say the thirteenth is lucky," remarked Martin, who liked to gamble, and his sardonic laugh lacked mirth.

The Major was back at his place. His Sphinx-like face turned to Rogers.

"Hop over to headquarters, Infant. I'll give you a requisition for another man . . . you can tell them another pin has been bowled over," he added, smiling bitterly.

When the unrelished meal was ended the men returned to their quarters, each to his own duty, glad to be left alone that he might recuperate his shattered nerves. Jeannine, when her chores were done, went to the hangars, lured by the sound of motors under test, forever curious about the fleet planes that had come to be so much a part of her life.

An oath rolled over an Irish tongue and exploded with a familiar brogue, so that she paused before Hangar No. 3. Gazing up toward the source of the oath she found Mike O'Rourke on a platform, beside him a Cockney mechanic from Cheapside in London. The latter clutched a collection of tools in either hand and O'Rourke was calling for them at frequent intervals.

"Whativer did yez do in London?" Mike was demanding. "Oi asked yez for a monkey wrench an' Oi git a claw hammer."

"Hi was a gentleman in ladies' dress goods, hif ye must knaow," replied the Cockney, a diminutive lad whose eyes and mind were as foggy as his native London.

Mike paused in his work to gaze at his companion with fine scorn.

"In ladies' dress goods, was it? Well, by th' saints, 'tis where yez b'long this minute, petticoats an' all. An' by th' way, whin yez address me say 'sir.' "

The Cockney bridled and his falsetto protest came shrilly to Jeannine.

“Hi sir my soo-perior officers an’ you aren’t.”

Again the big mechanic gazed at him from his greater height.

“Do yez see this?” he asked, dropping a heavy thumb on a great blot of grease on his tunic. “Well, that’s me chevrons. An’ as fer bein’ yer soo-perior, mind this.” Mike lifted a brawny fist and held it just beneath the Cockney’s pointed nose.

“Yes sir,” said the little man from Cheapside.

Jeannine, momentarily forgetful of tragedy, was restraining her laughter with difficulty. She saw that the Cockney was woefully unhappy and a sudden inspiration sent her into the hangar just beneath the platform. O’Rourke, busy over the motor of a plane, was unable to see her. She signalled to the Cockney, who presently understood.

A heap of greasy overalls lay on the floor near a tank of petrol. Jeannine donned a suit and in the next moment was climbing up to the platform behind O’Rourke. He was peering into the bowels of the engine and now and then demanded a tool from the Cockney.

Deftly, Jeannine took the instruments from the little man and he climbed quietly down to the floor, glad to be relieved of an odious task. Mike straightened and without turning about, barked an order.

“Now, Petticoats, hand me th’ propeller yonder.”

The propeller lay beside her. For a moment she struggled with it, even managed to raise it from the platform floor. Mike, growling about the delay, turned sharply and faced her. His bushy red brows arched as his sea-blue eyes widened.

“Well, how in th’—what are yez doin’ here? Oi’ve warned you toime an’ agin no wimmin is allowed in here. ’Tis aginst orders.”

Jeannine, smeared with oil, breathing rapidly from her exertions, smiled back at him.

“But M-Mike,” she laughed, “you told me I could help some time. You —you even promised I could grind valves.”

Mike scowled down into the hangar, searching for the Cockney.

“Yez better learn to fly,” he roared into the semi-gloom. “If ye shtay on th’ ground Oi’ll get ye sooner or later, Oi will.”

When he again faced Jeannine his red face beamed in a wide grin and he spread his massive hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"If the Major comes it'll cost me a month's pay, it will," he told her. "But if ye can't do better'n that Englishman, Oi'm a liar."

And so was it that Jeannine remained to work beside O'Rourke, who pretended with great sincerity that she was the best helper any mechanic ever had in His Majesty's service. As she worked her way insidiously into his good graces, Jeannine evolved yet another scheme of amusement.

"Could I sit in the pilot's seat?" she asked presently, when the propeller was in place.

He shook his head determinedly. " 'Tis aginst th' regulations."

"But Mike, no one would know."

He studied her for a moment with eyes that twinkled.

"Well, Oi might be bribed," he admitted. "A bottle av good red wine might make me forgetful, as th' sayin' is."

With a glad little laugh, Jeannine climbed down from the platform and ran from the hangar. Unnoticed by Mme. Berthelot, she descended to the cellar beneath the cottage, where the pungent bouquet of old wine hung heavily on the cool air. Directly, she was out again in the sunlight with the bottle thrust beneath her blouse. As she hurried across the road and out upon the field, the roar of a motor sounded overhead. She paused to scan the blue expanse of the late afternoon sky.

In a moment she found the plane and her breath caught as the motor idled and the ship turned lazily in a spectacular wing-over. The man aloft straightened out then and went into a steep climb, which as suddenly was checked for a tail spin. The adjutant, standing nearby in a group of officers, watched the stunting plane with practiced eye.

"He's probably our replacement," he suggested. "He seems to handle his ship decently enough."

"We'll know better after a show across the lines," said a pilot, cynically.

The newly arrived plane had straightened now and was sweeping down in a long oblique dive, like an eagle plunging for his prey.

Jeannine started along beside the edge of the field, her mind divided between two desires. She had remained unnoticed in her baggy uniform. Now, it was a choice of hurrying on to the hangar where Mike awaited his

wine, or of chancing detection while she watched the landing of this new pilot from headquarters. As it happened, she had no choice in the matter.

The gray plane suddenly straightened off over the field and the pilot cut the motor. To the flying men there it was obvious that he intended to bring up before the headquarters shed with a flourish. But to Jeannine, his maneuver was a surprise that brought with it a hideous rush of terror.

He eased the plane into a side-slip to reduce his speed, righted her sharply and came down directly on the edge of the field, racing upon Jeannine as she stood transfixed in her fright. It happened so suddenly that realization did not come to her until too late. She saw the pilot lean far out of his cockpit and wave at her in a signal to run. Yet still she stood in the path of the whirling propeller, as a frightened bird stands motionless, hypnotized, before the approach of a python.

The pilot bent low in his seat and reached for the stick. Without an instant's hesitation he pulled his ship over in a sharp angle. One wing tilted down and Jeannine closed her eyes as the wind from the speeding plane swept into her face. As she opened them again, the little chaser ploughed its nose into the field and the tail came up. There was the sound of ripping canvas and splintered wood, as the plane came to an inglorious halt.

Ignoring the officers and mechanics who were running toward him, the pilot leaped lightly from the cockpit. He walked rapidly back to the edge of the field where Jeannine stood dazed. She saw the set of his lean jaws, the cold flame in his eyes as he approached. Dimly, she heard his voice, clipped and even.

"Damn you," he said, "you should know better."

In a movement so swift that she scarcely saw it, his hand struck out and the palm crashed smartly against her cheek. She went down from the force of the blow like a leaf before a sudden puff of wind.

"As a mechanic," the young man continued bitterly, "you're a beastly failure."

He gazed down and instantly his mouth fell open in a startled expression of bewilderment. Jeannine's greasy cap had been knocked from her head and her thick brown hair lay in clusters about her brow. She was pressing one hand to the red mark on her cheek and her eyes were sparkling with tears.

"Good Lord," exclaimed the officer, bending over her, "I—I didn't know ____"

CHAPTER IV

JEANNINE'S REVENGE

Captain Philip Blythe, R.F.C., became abject in his apologies and he was infinitely tender as he attempted to raise Jeannine from the ground. She eluded his arms and sprang to her feet. For a ridiculous instant, the tall young officer of His Majesty's flying force was kneeling before the girl of France. She stamped one slim foot and her little hands clenched before his astonished face.

"You are one beeg bum," she exclaimed, in her own version of the queen's English.

She turned from him and walked with as much dignity as she could command, to a point some ten yards distant.

"But really, you know," Blythe's very contrite voice followed her, "I—I'm awfully sorry——"

The girl wheeled swiftly and with deft hands jerked off her suit of greasy overalls. She kicked at the brown heap of it on the ground and this time retreated toward the edge of the field with no further demonstration. There were hot tears of anger in her eyes, but she was careful that no one saw them.

Blythe watched her lithe figure and laughed softly to himself. A motorcycle with a sidecar passenger buckled out across the field and he turned to greet the adjutant who hopped out beside him.

"Are all your mechanics as lively as that one?" he asked, indicating the disappearing Jeannine.

"Not by a damn sight, Captain. You gave her rather a reception, didn't you?"

Amusement sounded in the adjutant's chuckle and Blythe flushed.

"D'ye know, old man, I popped her one. I thought it was a boy—so I knocked it out of the way."

“So we noticed,” laughed the other. “You’ll get a rubbing at mess tonight —striking a girl an’ all.”

“Lord, yes.” Blythe grinned ruefully. “I suppose she’ll spill it everywhere. British officer knocked her down. Brutes an’ all that sort of thing. Good for morale, what?”

“Oh, don’t worry about Jeannine, old man. She’s sporting. You’ll just have to stand for the spoofing.”

He took Blythe’s arm and they started back toward the hangar.

“Good crossing?” asked the adjutant.

The newcomer shrugged. “Fair. My leave was only half in—less, in fact, when the order came to report here.”

A group of officers awaited them at the hangar as they moved up, arm in arm. In the meanwhile, Jeannine had crossed hurriedly to the cottage, half angry, yet amused as she recollected the astonished expression on the face of the British captain.

She started to pass the niche in the gray wall where the little Saint Joan reposed in her seclusion. Moving in behind the shrubbery, Jeannine flung herself down before the shrine. She turned her piquant oil-streaked face upward as she spoke, as though to a near friend, in confidence and with a certain worldly note of revenge.

“Dear Saint Joan,” she began. “He is a flier and I shall always pray for them—even him. Bring him home each evening safe, blessed Saint, and all the others. But let me get even with that one.”

It was at the evening meal that Jeannine’s opportunity came, whether by arrangement with the saint or not being a matter between herself and the silent statue in the garden. The dining room, humble as it was by day, acquired new dignity in the softer glow of candle light. A jug in the center of the long table contained lilacs and their perfume was on the air. The plate and silver gleamed pleasantly, so that war seemed a thing men read of and talked about, rather than a presence in the room.

Jeannine moved through it lightly, touching the flowers, rearranging a plate. She went on into the kitchen. Mme. Berthelot looked up from her stove sharply. A shade of annoyance crossed her somber face.

“Why do you wear your best dress? It is not a Saint’s day.”

Jeannine paused and blank surprise registered in her innocent reply.

“I changed in the dark,” she explained. “It was a mistake. Now, it is too late——” she shrugged and smiled into her mother’s eyes.

The older woman raised her hands in a gesture of futility. There was disbelief in her eyes, but she held her tongue. Mme. Berthelot had long ago given up argument with her daughter.

Jeannine pivoted at the sound of footsteps. Major Russell, with young Blythe beside him entered the dining room. Behind them came the others, gay in the interval of companionship, immaculate in dress uniforms donned especially for the replacement officer just arrived. In their subdued laughter was the echo of merriment over cocktails in their quarters.

Major Russell paused at his place at the end of the table, indicating a chair on his right for Blythe. The others filed in and with informal gayety, each man stood behind his chair, gazing expectantly at the young captain in the position of honor.

“Who was the silly Yankee who said war is hell?” Blythe directed the inquiry to the group and slyly licked his lips.

“General Sherman,” replied Major Russell quickly, “was a man who kept his feet on the ground. I doubt if he ever had a cocktail just before a battle.”

“Of course not,” came from Marshall. “The old gentleman took his whisky neat.”

In the laugh that followed they took their seats as the Major waved a bronzed hand in signal.

“Contact, gentlemen,” he said. “This is in the nature of a flight in gastronomics.”

The door from the kitchen opened to admit Jeannine. She bore an armful of lilacs to be distributed, a spray at a time, before each place. The Major was first to rise, but only by an instant. The others were on their feet, smiling oddly. Blythe rose with them, eyeing his fellows swiftly. He did not, of course, recognize Jeannine in her Saint’s Day gown, nor did he quite understand why a group of officers rose attentively at the approach of a serving girl in a humble billet.

“Bon soir, messieurs.”

She greeted them gayly, flushing in her pleasure at their measured courtesy.

“Captain Blythe,” the major bent in a formal bow, “allow me, sir, to present Mam’selle Berthelot, the guardian angel of the Thirteenth.”

Blythe smiled into Jeannine’s laughing eyes and lowered his handsome head in response to her curtsy.

“The Thirteenth Flight is blessed,” he ventured gallantly.

Jeannine’s eyelids fluttered and in watching them, Blythe failed to catch the amused glances that passed among his fellows. As they again seated themselves he leaned toward the major.

“She’s marvelous, sir,” he said in an undertone. “Really, I didn’t know they came so beautiful in France.”

Jeannine, watching in the mirror, sensed that the stranger had spoken of her. She turned swiftly.

“Monsieur le Capitaine does not remember?” Her voice rang with amusement. “Yet we met in so strange a fashion.”

Blythe gazed up at her, puzzled, a little uneasily.

“Monsieur has the unique honor,” she resumed, still smiling. “He is the only officer who ever struck Jeannine to the ground.”

The newcomer drew back, startled. Recognition came slowly and his lean, wind-driven face flushed as he lowered his eyes. He was boyish when he again faced her, attempting to smile.

“You will forgive me?” he pleaded. “You must understand——”

“Understand,” she repeated. “Of course. Your airplane, he did not knock me down, so—you did, Monsieur.”

The men could no longer control their mirth. Blythe shifted unhappily and grinned. It was the Major who relieved his embarrassment for the moment. Russell drew from his pocket a strip of torn fuselage, bearing part of an enemy insignia. He handed it to Jeannine and she turned swiftly to place it among other trophies on the wall.

As she completed her task, she turned and saluted. It became apparent that this was something of a ceremony. Major Russell voiced a crisp command.

“Attention! About face.”

The fliers stiffened and obeyed.

"Single file to the right—forward—umph!"

As the first marcher came abreast with Jeannine he leaned down and kissed her uptilted lips. The second man did likewise, and all of them until Blythe came up. As he approached she drew back.

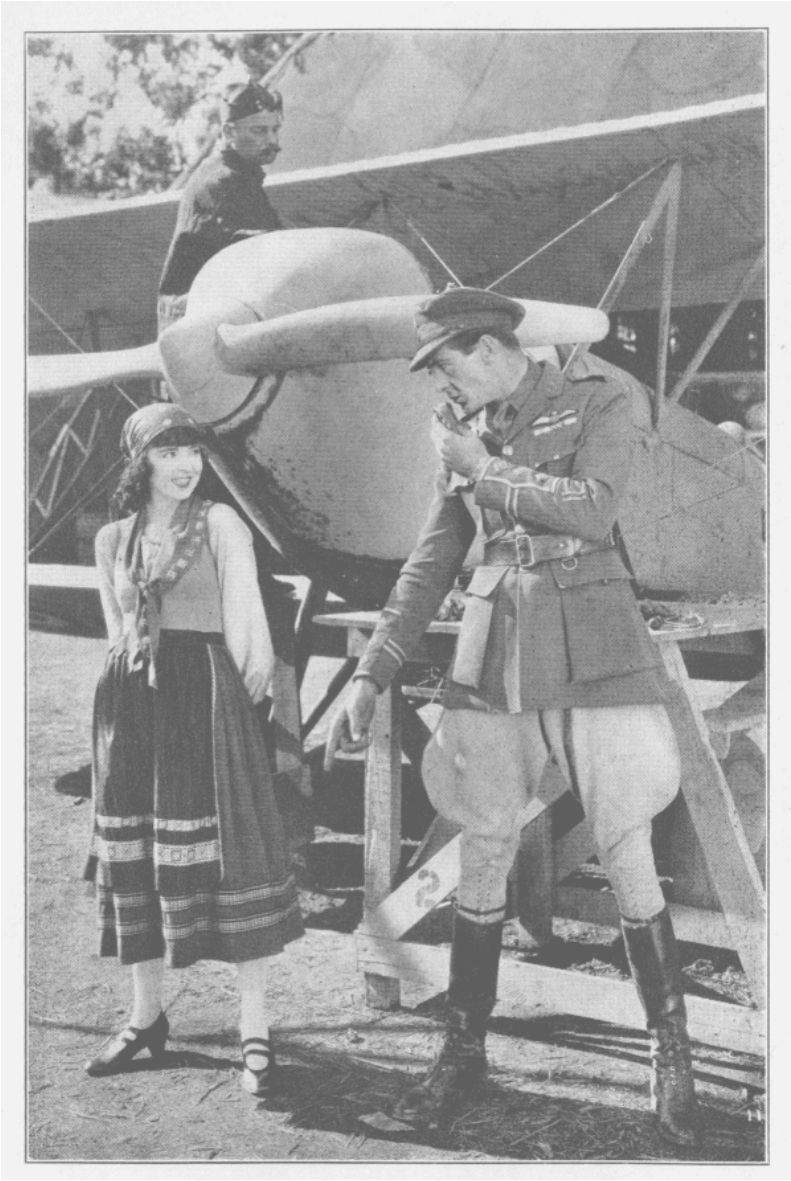
"I will save your kiss till you deserve it," she laughed, and eluded his arms.

He took the rebuff in good spirit and all through the dinner that followed, Jeannine continued to torture him and was aided and abetted by his colleagues at the table.

There was a special dispensation of chicken. It was "Happy" Conway who spoke into Jeannine's ear as she leaned over him. A golden brown leg lay on the plate which Jeannine set before the major. She deliberately served to the left, cunningly reversing the order so that the fowl came finally to Blythe. He refrained from comment as he received the uninviting extremity. His eyes were cast downward so that he failed to see the malicious gleam in Jeannine's eyes, and likewise missed the suppressed merriment of his fellows. Conway was innocently sober.

A First National Picture. *Lilac Time.*

JEANNINE, THE SQUADRON'S ADOPTED MASCOT.



A First National Picture. *Lilac Time.*

CAPTAIN BLYTHE DISLIKED HAVING HIS MACHINE MADE FUN OF.

A First National Picture. *Lilac Time.*

THEY GLARED ACCUSATIONS AT EACH OTHER.

A First National Picture. *Lilac Time.*

PHILIP THOUGHT SHE WAS DEAD—AND HE WAS AFRAID.

At length the meal was ended. The young captain rose with studied nonchalance and walked out with the Major, not deigning to turn his head as they passed Jeannine. Out of the room, Russell laughed softly.

"I say, old man, you took it remarkably well," he congratulated his new subordinate. "Your exit was perfect."

"The little devil stunted with me quite enough," laughed Blythe. "She's a vixen."

Hours later, when Jeannine and Mme. Berthelot had cleared the table and put away the last of the dishes, night was settled over the earth and the distant rumble of guns sounded from the Loos salient that extended south from La Bassée. Grandpère Julien had long since gone to his bed beneath the roof.

Jeannine moved out into the darkness. For a time she watched the fitful glow low in the western sky and listened to the sound, like the pounding of heavy surf. "Without conscious direction, she drifted among the lilac bushes and came, presently, to the dim statue in the recess. She stood for a moment in silence, then kneeling, spoke softly to the war saint.

"I thank you, blessed Saint, for your goodness. Today, they all came home safely. Tomorrow—may you watch over them again."

She paused and a faint smile curved her lips. "And I shall forgive Captain Philip, because he flies for France."

She became suddenly conscious of another presence. Swiftly she rose, her eyes widening. Blythe stood in the shadows. She saw that his face was serious. There was no mockery there and he had heard. They faced one another in silence. She smelled the aroma of the cigaret he tossed aside.

"So, you'll save no kiss for me?"

Blythe moved forward a single step and took her into his arms. Jeannine did not attempt to retreat. In all her young life she had not felt the strength of a man's arms about her waist. Not in this manner. She did not struggle when he drew her close and bent over her lips.

His lips met hers warmly, lingering. For a long moment she lay quietly in his arms. When she opened her eyes he was smiling and Jeannine suddenly struggled. She fought with all her strength, but this man from England only held her and continued to smile.

"For that," he said dreamily, "I shall kiss you again."

He did, immediately. Against his easy power she was helpless. His laugh maddened her as much as his arms.

"Will you be as strong against the Boche?" she demanded, as he released her.

The smile died on his face. Jeannine realized that her shaft had gone home.

"I'm sorry." His voice was cold and emotionless now and he stood very tall and straight. "I wanted to apologize," he went on. "You gave me no chance. Tonight, I—I forgot myself."

"Forgot," she repeated. "Always you fliers forget. But not any of them so much as you, Monsieur."

"But won't you accept my apology and be friends?" he persisted, gently, his smile returning a little wistfully.

"An' if I should?"

She had moved out from the lilacs and they were on the path that wound through the garden. There was a softer note in her question and Captain Blythe laughed.

"I think," he replied slowly, "that I should want to kiss to seal it."

Jeannine drew herself up to her full height, so that the tip of her head was even with his shoulder. Her eyes flamed into his.

"You—you are one beeg bum." Her favorite epithet struck him with biting emphasis and in a swift movement she raised herself on her toes and her palm smote him sharply across the cheek.

"There," she exclaimed, her voice quivering with rage. "You give me one sock—I give you one. Now forget."

She turned and ran, leaving him standing in the center of the path, tenderly rubbing his flushed cheek. He grinned after her in the darkness.

"Little back-fire," he muttered.

Blythe wheeled and moved back along the path to the road, then across and on to the hangar. In the gloom of the squat building he stood beside the DeHaviland pusher scout plane that was his while they both lasted. His hand caressed the fuselage as though it were the flank of an animal he loved.

"We've got somebody praying for us," he mused to the plane. "But she hates me like the very devil, old chap."

Idling beside the ship in the solitary shadows of the hangar, Blythe's thoughts, like those of every Englishman, wandered back to London and familiar things. He wondered dimly where his honorable father, General Sir Allerton Blythe, would be this night. And in the next moment, he was seeing again the lovely figure of Lady Iris Rankin, who was to be his wife.

Grating his heel on his discarded cigaret, Blythe shrugged and strode out into the night. At the door he paused to study the sky in the west. Low on the horizon it glowed dully and for an interval was black. The sound of the guns reached him faintly on the late breeze. When he swung back toward his quarters, his face was hard and suddenly matured.

He was thinking of dawn and the gray field before the hangars; the ships drawn up in order, with the mechanics testing them again at the last minute. It did not occur to him at all that his DeHaviland might be the one that would not return.

CHAPTER V

TRIAL FLIGHT

JEANNINE'S prayers were answered now each morning as the Thirteenth leveled back across the lines. She would watch them coming in the distance, trying to count as she always had, meeting with difficulty as they dropped from their high ceiling with incredible speed.

From that first flight in the mist of dawn, Captain Blythe had established himself as one of them. Unlike the others, however, he avoided Jeannine and her fiery spirit revolted more each day. Still, to herself, she admitted that the man was born to fly. The way he climbed steeply into the sun, the brilliance of his dazzling plunges toward earth; his nonchalant ease in the cockpit, all these impressed her.

The flight had returned again and the men were scattered about the field, or working in the hangars, studying neat round holes in the wings and fuselage, shrugging when they found one close to the office of their ship. Jeannine started into the field and a sentry blocked her way. She laughed in his face and went on. He turned his back, grinning sheepishly.

She passed around the corner of the hangar to come face to face with the adjutant. He halted, gazing at her sternly. Time and again she had been ordered to keep off the flying field and various sentries had been disciplined in proportion to her infractions. Jeannine smiled and her eyes went to his pleadingly.

From her blouse she withdrew a cruller, fresh from Mme. Berthelot's oven. He laughed as he accepted it and he too, turned his back while she proceeded on toward the open door of a hangar. Two men were working over a ship, both shapeless in greasy khaki, their faces and hands alike streaked with oil.

She recognized O'Rourke, the mechanic, instantly. It required a second glance to identify in the laboring figure beside him the dignified Captain Blythe. Neither of them marked her approach. She stood for some time watching Blythe up over the engine. As O'Rourke slowly turned the propeller, his superior studied the action of the valves with calculating eyes.

Jeannine had watched a similar procedure many times before, so that the impulse which prompted her at the moment was, in reality, a premeditated thing. She had considered it with O'Rourke as the victim. Now, fired by an intense desire to rouse this calm-eyed flier from England, even in wrath, she awaited her opportunity.

Presently, O'Rourke climbed on the platform beside Blythe.

"Here's where the damned friction is," said the Captain. "Look at that valve."

The Irishman stooped and peered at the defective part. When he straightened, nodding, Blythe bent down and squinted into the little port. Below, awaiting this moment, Jeannine rose on her toes and seized the propeller. Dragging down with her full weight, she pulled the blades over in a sudden turn.

A spurt of blackened oil shot from the valve squarely into Blythe's eye. He cursed and reached for his handkerchief, blindly. Jeannine's laugh rang merrily from below as she ran back into the hangar and paused beside the rudder of the plane.

From his commanding position on the platform Mike saw her and glared.

"Get out av here, ye minx," he bellowed. "How often have Oi told yez 'tis aginst orders? Now move along wit' yez."

Blythe, with the oil wiped from his eye, gazed at the girl for a fleeting moment and noted her position. Turning swiftly, he reached into the cockpit and yanked on the rudder bar. The response took Jeannine by surprise. The rudder swung behind her and suddenly a smart blow sent her stumbling. It was exactly as though Blythe had spanked her as he would a mischievous child.

Jeannine righted herself, chagrined. Then, eyeing him ruefully, she laughed.

"Very well, Monsieur," she cried. "You win again. But some time——"

She turned and ran from the hangar.

"Now that's over," said Blythe, quietly, "get those valves in, Mike. Then pull out the chocks and we'll test her."

Directly, with Blythe at the controls, O'Rourke kicked out the blocks beneath the wheels and the ship rolled gently out beyond the hangar, the

engine idling. On open ground, the wheels again were lightly blocked with planks carelessly flung before them. Blythe climbed from the cockpit to join the mechanic. They were standing attentively, listening to the slow ticking of the motor.

On the opposite side of the plane Jeannine peered curiously into the cockpit. With a hurried glance at the two men who were unaware of her, she climbed into the seat, childishly thrilled. The polished instrument board and the array of instruments held her eager eyes.

There was no warning for the men below. The engine burst into a terrific staccato roar and the ship fairly leaped. Blythe tried for it as the tail swung wickedly past his head, but failed and went sprawling. The mechanic raced out across the field in pursuit as futile as it was ludicrous. Rising, Blythe caught the gleam of wind-whipped hair as Jeannine's head appeared over the side of the careening DeHaviland.

"Great God," he cried, "that child—the damned little idiot."

At the opposite edge of the field a stone fence stretched down across the length of the Berthelot farm. The plane was headed toward it at fifty miles an hour, increasing as it moved. Berthelots long dead had laid each stone, painstakingly and at the cost of infinite labor, taking them from the fields in their arms, depositing each one just so.

As she stared out from the cockpit, Jeannine realized sickeningly, that she was doomed. She had seen enough of wild planes to know how they buckled and plunged when they met an obstruction. She had watched too, as mechanics pulled shapeless, torn bodies from smoking wreckage. Instinctively she began to search wildly with her eyes among the instruments. It was not in her nature to faint, no more than it was to die without attempting to save herself.

Once, she half turned and saw men running out in the wake of the ship. Then, bending down in the office, she seized the stick and her feet found the rudder bar. The plane swung sharply around, dragging on one wing that ripped noisily. She had turned completely and now was speeding straight back toward the hangar.

Jeannine's hand touched a slim lever on the stick. Dimly, she knew that some instrument would kill the engine. She pressed on the trigger and recoiled at the instant response.

She had launched a spray of steel jacketed bullets from the Lewis gun through the propeller field and they sang evilly over the heads of the men

who were rushing out from the hangar.

"Down," shouted Captain Blythe, falling flat and the others followed him to the ground.

He was up instantly as the gun was silenced. The plane came roaring in upon him and he stood like a sprinter, prepared to spring. The others spread out at his signal, each man intent on somehow flinging himself upon the ship as it passed. A single pressure on the switch would end its mad flight. Failure to reach that instrument, they realized with anguish, would bring tragedy far worse than a finish fight above the lines.

Jeannine by now had left the seat and was standing crouched in the cockpit. The ground skimmed beneath her so that she dared not leap. Once more, she gripped the stick and jammed it ahead. She closed her eyes and was only subconsciously aware of the awful crash that brought the earth and sky whirling around her hellishly.

The tail of the DeHaviland rose suddenly and the nose of the ship lifted, then dived and buried itself in the ground. Awkwardly, and, to the stricken men on the field, with terrible deliberation, the great plane turned over, then crashed heavily with the smashed undercarriage uppermost.

Blythe, in advance of the others, was first to reach the wreck. He crawled in madly, tearing at splintered wood and metal with bleeding hands. Thick smoke cleared for an instant as a breeze swept down and he saw the crumpled little figure in the cockpit.

He burrowed feverishly into the débris and only his legs were visible when the others arrived. A dozen pairs of hands lifted the broken ship with infinite care. Men who had become callous at the sight of death turned their eyes away as Blythe slowly backed out, half carrying, half dragging, the unconscious girl. From the road half a mile away a small truck dashed crazily out upon the field, approaching the wreck at breakneck speed.

"Careful, men." Blythe's voice was strangely calm. His face was drawn and hard, as it was when he climbed into the sun to jockey for position for life or death with an enemy.

"The engine missed her," he added, as tender hands relieved him of his burden. "I'm afraid she's hurt, though, badly."

The truck pulled up beside them with grinding brakes. Blythe straightened and passed a bleeding hand across his eyes, as though to wipe out some awful vision. He bent quickly over Jeannine, studying her face,

then lowered his head to listen for her heart. She stirred in his arms and her eyes opened slowly. A faint smile came to her trembling lips.

"I am so sorr-ee," she whispered. "I have wreck your beeg plane."

He drew her closer, so that her head rested against his shoulder and a glad note rang in his voice.

"Damn the ship," he exclaimed. "You—you are badly hurt?"

Jeannine shuddered and moved weakly against him. Her arm went about his neck and she clung as though in fear, even now, of the fate she had missed. Her face, upturned to his, was very close and pale. She opened her eyes again and Blythe bent his head to kiss her gently on the lips.

Quick color came to her cheeks and she straightened.

"I am—what you call him—shook up," she said. "I think I am ver' lucky, Monsieur."

"Come, we'll take you home in the truck." Blythe started to lift her and the men who had watched the brief scene, stooped to aid.

"No, no," Jeannine told him hurriedly, still with her arm about his shoulder, "I shall walk—no more do I ride today, merci."

Until then none had marked the swift, silent approach of an army Rolls. As the car halted beside the wreck, a young aide sprang from the driver's seat and opened the door, standing stiffly at attention. The men in the group saluted sharply, with the exception of Blythe, who yet was handicapped by Jeannine.

A handsome man in the uniform of a general stepped briskly to the ground and turning, assisted an exquisite young woman, charming in her tailored costume of the service at home. With fine deliberation, the man, keen-eyed and erect, spoke pleasantly in an undertone to his companion, and returned the salutes. His eyes, like those of the girl on his arm, went quickly to Blythe.

"What's the scrape?" he asked abruptly, with a certain familiarity.

Blythe somehow found himself relieved of Jeannine. He saluted smartly and smiled.

"Why, father, just fancy you in this part of the bush."

General Sir Allerton Blythe smiled grimly. "Yes, yes, quite odd. But see here, young man——"

His glance swept the circle and paused on the girl at his side. Blythe laughed and his tanned jaws reddened as he bowed in mock humility.

"My dear Iris," he greeted her, "I should have ignored the pater entirely. Another time I will. But there's been such a devil of a mess—look—" he half turned and indicated the wrecked plane with a gesture.

"That child there," waving toward Jeannine, "crashed. For a minute we thought——"

He let the sentence die expressively and bent over Lady Iris Rankin's hand. She laughed softly, forgiving him with the sound. When she spoke it was in the perfectly modulated tone of the gentlewoman, cool as a morning breeze off the English coast.

"Philip, you look as though you might have crashed yourself, dear boy. So glad to see you. Sir Allerton was good enough——"

"Father's top hole, y' know. Always doing little things."

The others had withdrawn unobtrusively, with Jeannine in their midst, proclaiming that she needed no assistance. Yet, she leaned on the wiry arms of two pilots and about her the others moved attentively, still doubting that she had come through so well as she seemed.

Sir Allerton, with the trained diplomacy of a British army officer, already had formed his own conclusions and come to his inevitable decision. Phil had been having an affair with the little French vixen, that much was obvious. It was deuced awkward to come in on it as they had, but of course, Lady Iris would understand. It meant nothing.

"We can only stay for tea," he put in now. "I'm on an inspection and happened by. Iris had a chance to come over, so we decided to call in. How are you getting on, Phil?"

"First rate, father. The Thirteenth is a splendid outfit. And how goes it with you?"

The white moustached old officer nodded. "So so, Phil. Just so so. There is much to worry about."

They were walking back toward the car, where the driver and the general's aide waited rigidly. Philip was describing the recent crash.

"Oh, let's walk," suggested Lady Iris. "Where are your quarters, Phil?"

Blythe laughed shortly. "My dear child, I'm not taking you to my quarters. Mme. Berthelot is the only woman in France who makes British

rate tea. That's because we pull her leg for it unmercifully."

In a few moments they were in the cool low-ceilinged dining room. Lady Alice moved over to the wall to examine the trophies. General Blythe and Philip were talking together of events at headquarters and back in England. Sir Allerton suddenly peered out at his son from beneath his shaggy white brows and his voice lowered.

"So you like the Thirteenth?" he asked and his tone was pitched to carry to the girl. Then, in a subdued growl, he added; "Don't make an ass of yourself, Phil. Remember who you are."

Young Blythe gazed levelly back at him and surprise was in his cool, steady eyes.

"Really, father, you're quite mistaken."

Lady Iris had come to the old sideboard with its row of broken glasses.

"What do these signify, Phil?" she called gayly. "Unsteady hands?"

"No," he told her gravely. "No, those are broken hopes, my dear." He went on then to explain the significance of the display.

She was very subdued when Mme. Berthelot came in from the kitchen bearing a tray. Her hewn face betrayed neither surprise nor humility at the sight of the British general and the lady of rank beside him.

"Mme. Berthelot saves our lives three times a day," said Philip smiling up at her. "The Thirteenth swears by her."

The woman set the tray on the table before Lady Iris and her expression softened in a fleeting smile. She made no reply.

"How is Jeannine now?" asked Philip, solicitously.

Mme. Berthelot shrugged. "She is ver' sorry."

"But I mean is she all right!" Philip persisted. "Not hurt a bit?"

"A scratch," replied the woman. "She is—what you pilots say—one ver' damn fool."

The general's deep chuckle mingled with Lady Iris's musical laugh. Phil grinned appreciatively as Mme. Berthelot wheeled and left the room with no further comment.

"What about this Jeannine, Phil?" Lady Iris spoke lightly. "The darling of the squadron, I suppose?"

“Quite,” he replied, innocently. “She’s a very temperamental youngster playing on the edge of hell. Really, d’ye know, it’s wonderful sometimes, to watch her hovering around waiting for the flight to return. They tell me she counts us every time—and prays for us when we take off. Fancy.”

“Lovely.” Lady Iris was studying him curiously. “I think she’s exquisite.”

General Sir Allerton was sipping his tea with true British appreciation.

CHAPTER VI

FLYING ORDERS

As JEANNINE moved slowly through the garden in the evening dusk the larks were singing to the dying sun. In the western sky there was a splendor of red and gold and blue, low on the horizon. Facing that magnificence as she had so often seen the fliers do at this hour, she knew that tomorrow would be day of high flight and lofty courage. If she read the signs aright the Thirteenth would rise in the misty dawn to disappear presently over the enemy lines.

Instinctively, she turned in among the lilacs to pause before her shrine. Her prayer was wordless. It was as though the statue in the shadows understood her thoughts, communicating them in turn to the higher power of the saint.

Voices interrupted her, coming from the roadside. A woman's soft laugh mingled with the heavier voices of men. Jeannine turned and peered between the bushes. The army Rolls was at the gate. Beside it stood Philip, his bronzed face glowing in the evening light. He was smiling into the upturned face of Lady Iris, and Jeannine knew that in a moment he would kiss her. General Sir Allerton was giving clipped directions to his aide.

"It's been wonderful—even this little glimpse of you." Philip's voice drifted back to the shrine.

"I wish I could stay." Lady Iris leaned a little toward him. "Oh, do be careful, dear boy. This can't go on much longer——"

Philip's gay laugh, strong, boyish, reassuring. Then confidently: "They're breaking now, Iris. Why by Jove, d'ye know, I'd not be surprised at all if we're out of it before fall."

Sir Allerton stood silently, his lined face grim with disillusion.

"Good bye, father. Thanks for coming over—and for bringing Iris."

"Au revoir, my boy. Good luck."

Their hands met strongly. Philip turned again to the girl beside him and kissed her tenderly on the lips. He stood back and watched as the big car moved silently and swiftly into the distance. Jeannine, hidden among her lilacs, brushed a hot tear from her eye. She turned and hurried back into the garden toward the house, so that Blythe would not see her.

Mme. Berthelot was preparing the evening meal. She looked up colorlessly as always, then quickly lowered her dull eyes over her task. She was an automaton that somehow functioned with no conscious effort. Days and nights linked one upon another like an endless chain. Some day a link would break and the machinery would stop. Mme. Berthelot seemed to speed the coming of the time.

When the men of the Thirteenth came into the cottage that evening they were straining at gayety. Their laughter was too abrupt, too forced. Their eyes questioned the smiles on their lips. It was always so on these nights before a flight. As the evening wore on and the wine bottles emptied, the tension would be relieved and the men would be themselves again.

Jeannine came from the kitchen bearing a tray. Tonight she was subdued. She went first to Major Russell, as was customary.

"Ah," he murmured, gravely. "We have with us the ground flier."

Jeannine read beneath his outward tolerance a reproach. Or perhaps it was her own knowledge of having done a foolish thing before these men she worshipped. She flushed and her eyes were hidden beneath lowered lids.

"That was a brilliant stunt, Jeannine." It was Weston, who had fought Von Richthofen and survived with nothing worse than a wrecked ship and a few bullets in his leg. "General Blythe probably enjoyed it," he added maliciously.

Philip glanced up at her swiftly and saw the pain in her expression.

"You can't spoof Jeannine about it, fellows. I was right beside the ship. As a matter of fact, General Blythe remarked as much when I reported the facts to him."

Jeannine thanked him with her eyes.

"It was all my fault," she exclaimed. "I so want to sit in the—cockpit. The little—what you call 'em—gadgets, they fascinate me."

She shrugged. "I touch one an'—pouff——"

They laughed at her gesture.

“You touched ’em all, didn’t you, Jeannine?” Again Major Russell spoke, this time with a chuckle in his voice.

Jeannine leaned over the table, gazing at him with widened eyes, reminiscent of her experience.

“Oh, Major, yes-s, every—every damn one.”

She left them quickly, fairly swept from the room on the gale of laughter that now was sincere.

“Gad, it was a miracle,” remarked Blythe.

“Yes, for all of us,” said Russell dryly. “One of your confounded Lewis gun slugs fairly singed my ear.”

“Thank God we’ve got an odd ship,” Blythe went on. “I can at least be with you in the morning. But I’ll have to report my negligence, of course, damn it. Another mark against my record at headquarters.”

“Oh, forget it,” Russell waved a careless hand. “Make it out a forced landing. It was, by gad, so you’ll not be stretching the truth.”

“Thanks, Major, I’d love to. But you see, the old gentleman was here. He might get hold of my report. No, hang it, I’ll have to tell some old stuffed shirt all about it.”

“But your father wouldn’t mention the thing,” Russell persisted, generously.

Blythe smiled. “You don’t know him, sir. No, I have to pay the penalty for being a general’s son. He’d drum me out of the service if he ever caught me lying. And anyhow, Major, I don’t care a damn. I’ll tell ’em what happened and if they don’t want me in the flight, why—hell, I can always enlist in the infantry, you know.”

Russell nodded. “Very well. But I’ll add my own notation on your report, Blythe. It’s just as well to checkmate some of those ground flying efficiency experts up there.”

“Thanks, Major. I’ll appreciate it.”

The meal was finished, but the men remained at their places tonight, as though by mutual consent. They lingered over their wine and talked the inevitable language of their kind, which forever deals with flying and its problems.

Major Russell himself called for more wine and there was generous applause.

"Drink, drink and be drunken, tomorrow we fly," cried someone, raising his glass aloft.

The Thirteenth rose on one of its notorious flights of undisciplined carousal. In all of His Majesty's flying force there was no group so well trained to fight against any odds, no pilots so reckless in their courage, nor yet were there any who flung discipline to the racing winds with so much abandon.

Someone with a rich baritone started an improvised song of the Thirteenth.

By day or night,
The Thirteenth Flight
Is in wrong always,
Never in right.

We like to fly,
There's reason why;
We elevate hell to
Our own blue sky.

The others came into the chorus, tapping their boots and their glasses to the lilting tune from a music hall song.

The higher we go the better we like it,
When ground is below it is easy to strike it,
And Oh! And Ah! And Oh!
The general staff is down on the ground, Oh,
With discipline, badges an' orders profound, Oh,
And Oh! And Ah! And Oh-o-o-o—!

That last exhaustive wail was drawn out like the cry of a haunted soul and as the Thirteenth drank it returned to the disrespectful chorus again and again. Nor was there a fairly good tenor voice missing in the harmony as Major Russell joined with his men in celebration of what the dawn might bring.

Rogers, "the Infant," alone remained taciturn and moody. Beside him a youngster, red of face and with shaggy, sun-bleached hair, was maudlin drunk. Rogers suddenly reached for a bottle of champagne and struggled

with the cork. It exploded and struck the wall, followed by a rush of the foaming wine.

"Direct hit," shouted the man beside him, pointing to an enemy insignia. The cork had struck it and dropped to the floor.

Rogers stared dully at the black cross. When he spoke his voice was hard and emotionless.

"Yes," he said. "Harley shot down that one. And a little while ago he was sitting in this chair."

The bitter reminder sounded down the table and was followed by sudden silence.

Wilson, he of the flushed face and tousled hair, laughed shakily and tottered as he raised his glass.

"To Harley," he cried, "wherever he is—and to those who join him later."

Sinister though it was, the toast drew only grins from those who heard it. The men were hardening themselves and in the same manner, as Major Russell had remarked, they were also hardening their arteries. They had need to be callous and now this protective veneer was exaggerated in the glow of the wine that throbbed through their veins.

It was "Happy" Conway who in the next moment caught and held the nervous attention of his fellows. He was poised unsteadily against the table, waving a green bottle.

"Lis'en fellows," he said, grinning stupidly, "I've got new toast, abs'lutely original 'n never tested till thish minute. Lis'en now."

His flying mates, who knew of this youngster's cool heroism in fantastic dog fights aloft, turned to him, amused.

"Here's to th' higher command," began Conway, listing somewhat further to starboard. "We fought all th' battles they planned——"

"Hear, hear," shouted a pilot. "Did you make it up all by yourself, Happy?"

"All by myself," said Conway, stubbornly. "Now lis'en, le'me finish th' damn thing."

He began his original toast once more.

"Here's to th' higher command;
We fought all the battles they planned.
These pink an' white chaps
Do their loops over maps;
May they jolly well crash an' be damned!"

Conway gazed slowly about for the applause. As he saw the expressions on the faces of his colleagues, he swung about to follow their pointed glances to the doorway. The adjutant was framed there in silhouette against the dark caped figure behind him. He had tried in vain to signal them, so that Conway's toast might be halted.

" 'Tenshun!"

Major Russell's command rang with metallic precision. The Thirteenth sobered. As the adjutant stepped aside, a haggard man followed him into the room and swept the military cape from his shoulders. He saluted wearily in reply to those of the men and the gold stars gleamed on his massive shoulders.

"Good evening, gentlemen." He chose to ignore their condition.

The adjutant drew a chair forward and the old general sat down heavily. He waved a heavy bronzed hand to the others in signal to be at ease. His tired, bloodshot eyes went to Russell.

"Major," he began, and his voice, weary as it was, crackled with authority, "I'm here on rather an unusual mission." He swept the others with a glance. "I want all your flight to hear what I have to say."

For a moment, while the men struggled inwardly to collect themselves, he studied the table cloth, drumming on it with the fingers of one hand.

When he resumed his voice was casual.

"No written orders are being issued. I am taking it on myself to tour this sector tonight. And I'd damn well rather be in bed, I can tell you, sir." He smiled grimly.

"Gentlemen," he looked slowly along the line of faces that now presented themselves, "every weapon in this sector goes into action tomorrow morning. It is vital that no enemy plane observes our movements."

Major Russell nodded quickly. His men smiled instinctively, anticipating the relentless flight to come. But something in the gaunt old general's eyes

froze their smiles. Yet his voice did not change when he spoke again.

"Accordingly, Major, you will take off in the morning as usual . . . and you will stay out until no enemy plane remains in the air."

Russell's composed face twitched oddly as the significance of the order registered in his brain. The others betrayed their nervous strain in one way or another, but the Major was the only one to speak.

"You mean, sir——"

Russell broke off the question, knowing his superior would understand. In reality, there were a dozen questions. Was the order to be translated literally? What if a man's petrol became exhausted? Would he ram an enemy plane and die with the two ships locked? Presuming a man, or a plane was badly hit, were they to try for their own lines, or stay aloft until that final smoking plunge?

"Major, I mean exactly what I have said."

Russell saluted as his superior rose. The others came to their feet and stood at attention. The adjutant sprang for the old man's cape and flung it about his shoulders. At the door, the general paused. There was a kindly glow in his eyes and his voice was softer.

"We have no doubts of the Thirteenth," he said. "I hope for the best, gentlemen. Good night."

For an electric instant after the door closed behind him, Russell and his group of devil-may-care youngsters gazed at one another blankly. It was he who broke the spell.

"Gad, fellows, we'll give them a circus, what?"

His short laugh rang hollowly and likewise those that echoed it.

Philip turned on Happy Conway reprovingly.

"See what you got us into," he feigned severity. "You and that damned toast. The old duffer heard that an' now see what he handed us."

"Tosh," replied Conway, now quite sober. "He had that in the bag for us when he came here. Say, Major," he faced about to Russell. "D'ye know, we forgot to offer the general a drink, by gad."

CHAPTER VII

THE INFANT MATURES

RUSSELL ignored the bottle of wine at his place and reached out for whisky and soda. On second thought he poured the liquor and drank it neat.

"Maybe you notice," he spoke in an amused drawl, "I didn't offer any toast."

"Thank the Lord," said Conway. "There might be a general around yet and we'd be ordered to shoot ourselves, perhaps."

Blythe had been watching the others. His eyes fastened and held on the white, drawn face of Rogers, who was staring absently into space.

"Just the same," he announced a little unsteadily, as his nerves relapsed, "I'm proposing one." His glass was upraised. "Here's to the seven candles ____"

Russell seized his arm. "Drop it, Blythe. No toasts yet. The mess rule, you know. The toasts come after we're ditched."

"Hell," the youth in Philip surged in rebellion. "We're as good as dead now. Come on, Major——"

The Thirteenth was watching the scene in silence. Philip gazed about and his lips curved in a mad smile.

"Here's to all of us," he said coolly, "flying in hell."

The tension broke and every man reached for his glass laughingly. Russell himself drained another tumbler of raw whisky. Only the Infant faltered.

Philip smashed the lip of his goblet against the table. The others, quick to fall into the spirit of his act, did likewise and followed him to the sideboard where they placed their ragged glasses in a row. Rogers, in the interval, had lurched to his feet and quit the room. His fellows, marking the expression on the Infant's face, understood and let him go without comment. Either he must be alone, or break up entirely. They all had been through it.

When he walked in the solitary shadows of the garden Rogers gave way to his emotions. The muffled voices of his flying mates came to him from the cottage, and when he consciously listened, the intermittent rumble from the front. He paused in the deepest shadows and suddenly flung himself down, burying his face in the grass wet with the dew of night. His youthful shoulders throbbed as he fought back an overwhelming desire to sob.

He stiffened at the sound of a footfall and looked up to find Jeannine bending over him. She dropped to the ground on her knees beside him and he felt her cool hand on his hot brow. Ashamed of his weakness, he again buried his face to avoid her quiet eyes. Understandingly, she soothed him, running slim fingers through his tangled hair. It was a caress, not of endearment, but of sympathy.

"Poor boy." Her voice was husky and soothing, like her touch. "I have cry, too, Monsieur. They all cry some time—like the-e-s."

The boy surrendered to the mingled fear and grief that tore at his soul. His shoulders rose and fell as he wept uncontrollably.

"Is it, perhaps, a girl at home?"

Wiser than her years, Jeannine had touched the chord in his heart that responded. So many times in her tempestuous life, brief though it had been, she had listened to these men speaking of women far away. She had watched their hard agate eyes grow soft and seen the lines in their wind-whipped faces disappear as they spoke of love. So many times had she gazed at little photographs. And so many of those boys had passed.

Rogers sat upright beside her. He nodded silently and thrusting his hand into a pocket, withdrew a small picture. He gazed at it swiftly in the light of the moon and offered it into her hand. Jeannine bent over the portrait closely. The face that returned her gaze was very young and with all the innocence of its youth. A bold, childish scrawl in the lower lefthand corner marked that the girl was "waiting—with all my love."

"It—it's not that I'm afraid to pass out," Rogers said, chokingly. "If I'd never known her—hell, it would be easy. But there's so much to live for now——"

"But you will live," Jeannine tried to encourage him. "Look, Monsieur, how many come back each day. You are young an' strong——"

"I'm willing to take my chances," he told her quickly. "But this—the Thirteenth hasn't got a chance—not a ghost of a chance, Jeannine."

She stared at him now and her own breath caught in her throat.

"But why, Monsieur? Is it not all, as you fliers say, in the lap of the gods? The Thirteenth Flight has as good a chance as any, n'est ce pas?"

He shook his head grimly. "No, Jeannine. The Thirteenth is doomed."

Her fingers tightened on his arm and her voice quivered.

"What—what you mean, Infant? Why——?"

Rogers could offer no explanation. He knew that it would be irregular to reveal his orders, even to her.

"You mean," she went on, hurriedly, "something have happened? Tonight? When those men came, I am walking in the garden here. I cannot hear what they say to you, Monsieur. Tell me, please. Jeannine should know."

Rogers remained silent.

"Ah, Jeannine must know," she pleaded. "But I understand now. Tomorrow you go up for the be-e-g show. What you call him, the dog fight? I know."

She studied his face closely and saw her confirmation there.

"Listen, dear boy, you have had a great many fights. Jeannine shall pray to Saint Joan—Oh, I shall pray hard, Monsieur. An' for you especial. So."

Her soft little laugh was forced and pathetic.

"I shall pray for all of you," she added.

"Do, Jeannine. We'll need it."

"But you must be brave," she persisted. "Courage, you call him. Nothing else counts so much," she mused, with a wisdom beyond her time of life. "You see, Monsieur, Jeannine has watch the Thirteenth since—oh, ever so long. They all have fear, like you an' me. But they laugh. That is to hide it. Ah, Jeannine understands. I laugh too. Many time, when there is no laugh inside—only the be-e-g hurt I cannot stop."

"Jeannine, you're fine." The boy was facing her and the momentary weakness had left him.

"No, I am one fool. That is the one side of me, Monsieur. When I feel like little girl again. But now, I am old woman—oh, so old. Sometimes, it seems I have live forever."

He regarded her gravely. “Tonight,” he said, “you are like my mother. At other times, you’re just a child.”

“Oui, oui,” she agreed quickly. “That is so. Tonight, I feel like the mother——”

“The little mother of the Thirteenth,” he finished for her. “And today you were the little sweetheart. You know, Jeannine, we call you our guardian angel.”

“Angel! Bah, I am a devil.”

She rose and they stood together, smiling.

“See, now you laugh,” she told him. “It is best, Monsieur. Laugh—like the devil. Be brave—like Captain Philip. He has a beautiful lady waiting for him too, Monsieur.”

“I shall try, Jeannine. I’m ashamed of myself for breaking. You’ve bucked me again, wonderfully.”

“It is nothing. You are brave at heart.”

“Good night, Jeannine. And thanks.”

“Good night.”

He wheeled and returned slowly toward the cottage. Jeannine stood in the shadows watching him for a moment and her eyes were grave. When she saw him open the door and join his fellows, she moved deeper into the lilacs and paused before the dark shrine of her patron saint. For a time she stood in silence, struggling to collect her confused thoughts.

“Blessed Saint,” she began, her voice quivering a little in its intensity, “there is an unknown danger now, I know not what.” She spoke in her own tongue and she had fallen to her knees with her hands clasped at her breast.

“They will not tell me. It is, perhaps, a great battle. These boys will need you—and I, too, beloved Saint. Bring them back safely tomorrow, I pray. And—” her prayer ended suddenly, while she opened her eyes to gaze up at the statue pleadingly.

“There is another thing, I would ask—a miracle, it is, but Blessed Saint Joan, I—I love him so. Could it ever be that Captain Philip might—love Jeannine—instead of the beautiful English lady?”

She continued to kneel though the prayer was ended. Her mind was so engrossed with her thoughts as to dull her senses, so that she did not hear the

rustle of the bushes, nor the padded sound of retreating footsteps on the path.

When Blythe came into the garden and discovered her at the shrine, he turned back. He was a little dizzy from the fumes of the wine and the night air was cool. Why, he asked himself, did he want to wait in the garden for Jeannine? He was unaccountably sentimental at the thought of her kneeling before the shrine, praying for the safety of the Thirteenth. A wave of tenderness swept him as he recalled her humiliation when she realized her folly with the DeHaviland.

Back among the men of the flight, Philip found himself watching the boy, Rogers, with a curious intensity. The Infant had resigned himself to his destiny. Like the others he was gay with the abandon born of desperation, trying to forget the past and to check the future as a blank.

The talk had swung naturally into anticipation of the morning.

"I hope we get some balloon strafing," said Conway. "I'd rather watch one of those Jerry sausage guards jump than eat—or drink," he added, laughing.

"You'll get it," replied the man beside him, with certainty.

Philip dropped into his seat beside Russell.

"Have you flown seven ninety-four?" he asked quietly. "I've only seen the old crate up once or twice."

The plane, designated as 794 in official records, was a replacement that had not been needed, or returned, when a smashed ship had been successfully repaired. It was a regular trick of flight groups to work this scheme in order that they might have an extra ship or two lying around for use in emergency. Of course, when an inspection officer came around there were always hurried explanations and frequently enough, they served.

Major Russell nodded. "Yes, I took her up, Phil. You can handle her all right. But just the same, I wish you had your own ship."

"Maybe I'd better go out and play with her a bit," suggested Philip.

Russell rose slowly, glancing around at his men.

"You fellows can do as you damn please," he said. "I'm going to turn in and get some sleep."

"Sleep," came the startled chorus. "Man, we've got ages ahead for that." The remark came from the irrepressible Conway.

“Come drink,” he paraphrased, holding up a bottle, “and in the fire of spring, drink hearty boys, and have your little fling; the birds of war have but a little way to stutter and, go down wing over wing.”

“The poet laureate of the Thirteenth,” jibed Philip. “Happy, old man, you ought to stay drunk to do your poetry. It’s marvelous stuff.”

“Sure,” Conway agreed, “stay drunk to do anything, old dear. It’s easier that way.”

Russell and Philip went out together and strode on across the road to the hangars.

“You’d better rout O’Rourke out of his bunk,” suggested the major. “If anybody can make 794 fly right side up, it’s that Irishman.”

At the door of the hangar they saw a light in the rear and in its dim glow a bulky figure was stooping beside the ghostly outline of a plane.

“By gad,” exclaimed Russell, “that’s him now. The old egg’s at work already.”

O’Rourke sighted them as they came into the area of his light. In his careless gesture with a great, greasy paw there was as much respect as a young subaltern gets into his accurate salute.

“Good evenin’,” he straightened. “Oi didn’t expect inny av yez would be afther comin’ in this night.”

“What do you think of it, O’Rourke?” Russell indicated the hulk of 794.

The mechanic scratched his head. “Well sir, b’ th’ toime Oi get through with her, she’ll be in shape, Oi’m thinkin’. Afther th’—th’ accident, Oi cal’clated th’ Captain, sir, would be wantin’ th’ ould crate.”

“Right-o,” said Philip, walking in to bend over the side for a glance at the office. He walked slowly around the fuselage, noting the patches where Vickers guns had left their savage marks.

“Well, Phil, I’ll be turning in, if you don’t mind.” Russell awaited him as he came around from the tail skids.

“All right, Major. I’ll fiddle around a bit with Mike. See you in the morning.”

O’Rourke returned to his work on the engine, while Philip resumed his careful inspection. The ship was of the pusher type with the motor aft. He was familiar with every inch of the model and knew their capabilities as a

horseman understands his mount. Working properly, 794 would climb to twenty thousand feet or more at incredible speed. On a straightaway course he could expect one hundred and sixty miles an hour air speed from her, and if she were true in every joint, he could dive nose on with the engine roaring, watching the earth come up at more than two hundred miles an hour.

From whatever position the ship might be flying, Phil was aware that he could straighten out and right himself with the engine throttled and the controls center. A light touch of his hand on the stick, gentle as he would handle a horse with a tender mouth, would send this plane into any crazy position he sought. He smiled confidently, as he mentally heard the singing wind in the wires, the drumming of the engine and the staccato rattle of the Lewis gun that fired through the propeller field.

"Well, Mike, I can't see anything wrong," he said, presently. "But we'll know more tomorrow, what?"

O'Rourke grinned. "Th' test is in th' air, sir, an' that's a fact."

"I'll be out a little early to tune her up." Philip moved into the shadows toward the door.

"I'll be waitin' for ye, sir," said Mike.

There were no lights in the cottage when Philip moved quietly from the road. The men had decided to sleep, apparently, in spite of Happy Conway. Philip smiled in the darkness and walked lightly. Poor devils. It would be the last sleep for some of them, perhaps for all, including himself. The last slumber, he corrected himself. That final sleep would come with dawn.

A slight movement among the lilac bushes drew his attention. He halted. Someone was there in the shadows. He listened for a moment and heard a voice murmuring. He went carefully on and paused nearer to the wall of the cottage. The spiced fragrance of the lilacs fell over the garden and he drew a long, deep breath of it. Now he distinguished the voice and the words.

Jeannine was at her shrine. It was too late for him to withdraw.

"Tonight I prayed for a miracle, oh Blessed Saint," she was pleading softly. "I have tried to sleep—but I cannot. There are too many thoughts. And so, I have come again. And I ask for only a little miracle now, beloved Saint Joan—just that he—that he could take me—in his arms again—just once—as he did today."

CHAPTER VIII

UNDERSTANDING

REALIZATION came to Philip in a torrent of mingled emotions. It seemed that the earth had become motionless and all that was upon it. The night breeze died, so that the lilac bushes ceased their restless movement. Jeannine too, stood now erect before the statue, silent and graven as the image. The rumble of the guns, no longer carried on the wind, had silenced. Philip was rigid, conscious of the hammering of his heart that the girl must hear.

The moment passed and he moved. Jeannine whirled and his hands, reaching out, found her shoulders. Slowly, he drew her to him.

"Jeannine."

She lay against his shoulder as a child might rest, weary from play. But only for an instant. Tears gleamed in her eyes as she tore herself from his arms and faced him, shamed that he had heard.

"You—you have no right." Her voice was low pitched in its intensity. "It is my shrine—my Saint. You laugh. It is sacrilege."

She controlled her emotion with an effort and her tone became calm.

"You English—have you no respect for God? Oh, but the others have. Only you." Bitterness crept in again and she sobbed. "You have come here before, Monsieur. Now go—go."

"Jeannine, you misunderstand. I did not know you were here."

There was a quality in his voice that caused her to study him swiftly, searching for the lurking smile that so frequently curved his reckless lips.

"I tried to walk away when I heard you——"

"Then you did hear?"

"Yes."

"Oh." She buried her face in her hands, fearing to let him see the color of shame that suffused it. "It was madness—it was pity. I am ver' sorry."

He took a step forward and swept her into his arms again. Now he was masterful, no longer apologetic or doubtful.

"You asked for a miracle—a little miracle," he spoke softly into her hair. "Darling—Jeannine—the miracle is that you thought of me. Don't you understand, can't you see—I love you."

He raised her face and his lips found her eyes, dampened with tears. She stirred in his embrace and Philip kissed her on the lips, gently as she leaned far back to avoid him.

"But you cannot—you love—" she struggled to down her desire to surrender.

"No, Jeannine, my own, I do not. For a long time I have been in doubt. But that began to disappear, even that first day when I saw you. It's been dissolving more and more, petite. When you took my ship—when I saw you out there helpless—then I knew. Darling, I loved you then. Tonight, when I found you here, I—I worshipped you. I do—I shall always."

"Then—you do not love the lady of England? You do not think of her when you fly——?"

Philip laughed and kissed her again.

"Jeannine, when I fly, I think of many things. I have thought of her, yes. Compared my feeling for her with what I feel for you. It is something different, dear girl. Lady Iris and I—we never loved, I think now. It was just that we grew up together in England. Life drifted. People thought we'd marry. We rather expected to, ourselves. It was like that."

A First National Picture. *Lilac Time.*

THE BRIGADIER, PHILIP'S FATHER, BROUGHT ALONG THE GIRL HE WANTED PHILIP TO MARRY.

A First National Picture. *Lilac Time.*

THE INFANT, WHO FEARED TO DIE MORE THAN HE FEARED TO LIVE.

A First National Picture. *Lilac Time.*

JEANNINE BROUGHT BACK THE COURAGE OF MANHOOD TO HIM.

A First National Picture. *Lilac Time.*

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE BIG DRIVE BEGAN.

He paused and looked down into her upturned eyes. She was questioning him with her gaze.

"Love is fire," he went on. "It isn't a cool, casual thing. Darling—it's like this. It's wanting to possess—and to give; to be the sort of person who

can always hold the love of the other. It can't be anything else. Love can't be reasonable, or reasoning."

She smiled and spoke dreamily. "I know, Philip—an' love, he can ne-vair die. It says so on our doorstep—in the stone. Those words, they have been there long time. Love can ne-vair die."

She moved closer into his arms and settled there happily.

"An' so, I—I love you, too."

Again their lips met and clung.

"My Jeannine." His voice choked with a sob. "I shall never smell the lilacs again without thinking of you."

"An' each morning, until you come back to me, I shall give Saint Joan the lilacs with my prayers for you. The candle shall always be lighted."

"Until I come back." He repeated the phrase and his eyes saddened. She felt the tremor of his body as he spoke, as though he had sagged in body and mind and soul at the sound of the words.

"What makes you say that—that way?" she asked quickly, with her hands reaching up for his shoulders.

He was looking over her head into the darkness, seeing only with his mind. When he spoke his voice was tender with regret.

"Because, Jeannine, mine, there is one chance in a thousand that I'll come back tomorrow."

Her body grew taut and she cried with sudden vehemence. "What—what is it you mean, my Philip. One chance—in a thousand——?"

"It isn't the way God intended things." He was bitter and his arms dropped to his sides, setting her free.

"I could have died easily before this. It didn't matter a damn. Now—oh, Jeannine child, it's going to be hard to take off this dawn."

"Philip, you are—you are mad," she seized his hands and held them against her warm cheeks. "You have always gone out an' you have always come back. Why now——?"

"I'm no coward. I know that. But nobody wants to die." It was as though he mused aloud and she were no longer with him.

“And I’m no hero, either. Even with this hellish war, life is sweet. Sweeter now than ever. Now—with you.”

She moved into his arms and they tightened about her.

“Jeannine mine, I didn’t care before. But with your love to live for—just as we begin to understand——”

His voice broke and he was a child again. But his weakness was only a fleeting thing. In a moment he drew himself up and smiled.

“I’m a silly fool.” He strove to recover his old casual manner. His hand caressed her shoulder and he bent to kiss her once again.

“Philip, I do not understand.” She clung to him pleadingly. “You have not tell me why you feel so—so bad.”

“I shouldn’t have said what I did,” he attempted to reassure her. “It’s just that I love you so much, Jeannine. I’m a cynic. That means,” he explained, “that I always think the worst of things. You see, darling, it was just that I feared something might happen to take you away from me.”

“No, no, my Philip. You cannot fool Jeannine. There is something—something I do not understand.”

He shook his head slowly. “There will always be things you will not understand, sweetheart. But tomorrow—why, it’s just another dog fight. I’m a fool for worrying you. Forget it, won’t you?”

“Come Philip, there is something I want you to see.”

She took his hand and led him along the winding path among the lilacs. Wonderingly, he followed until they came to the doorstep. She bent down to the stone.

“Look Philip, see what it says here.”

He leaned beside her and translated the inscription aloud.

“Love cannot die.”

“You see, Philip, that is so, do you not?”

“It is never love that dies,” he told her, softly. “It is only something that people thought was love. It is very true, Jeannine, my dear.”

They sat together on the doorstep like two children, as Berthelot women had sat with their lovers for generations.

“And is it, then so easy to be mistaken about love?” she asked, directly.

“Quite easy,” he told her, from his superior knowledge. “People are apt to mistake all sorts of emotions for it, Jeannine. It’s that that causes most of the trouble in the world. It’s mistaken notions of love and hate that cause war.”

She pondered over that for a moment.

“An’ how then, Philip, can you know you love me—that you are not mistaken, perhaps?”

He took her into his arms passionately and silenced her doubts with kisses. She returned them with an ardor equal to his own, surrendering to the ecstasy of his touch, thrilling to the power that was hers to command him. At length he answered her question.

“I know I love you because it kills all other love in me,” he told her. “I love England, Jeannine. Yet, tonight, I could be tempted to forget her, perhaps. It is so easy to say you would die for your country—and so difficult to do when there is love of this sort to live for. Do you understand?”

“I think I do, Philip. It is as though I—Jeannine Berthelot—had to choose between you an’ France, n’est ce pas?”

“Yes, that is it.”

“Then,” she raised her head proudly, “I should choose you, Philip—an’ if I die they could wrap my body in the flag of France. But to you I give my life, lover. It is like that with Jeannine.”

“But it isn’t so simple as that,” he argued. “Suppose, that because I want to live for you, I should refuse to fly in the morning.”

She laughed a little note of scorn.

“That is not the same. You could not do that. I would not want you to.”

“Exactly, you darling. And I’d rather crack up and lose you than not to fly and live.”

“But you shall not—what you call him—crack up,” she contended. “You will come back an’ Jeannine will stand in the garden to count—seven—you shall see.”

“Jeannine.” He bent over her hand, kissing her delicate fingertips.

“Yes, my own.”

“If I come back—when can we be married? Tomorrow afternoon, perhaps? The padre will be glad—we’ll have——”

He had been about to add that the Thirteenth Flight would celebrate with them, but the thought of morning drove back the hope. Bitterly he realized that his own optimism was forced.

"Pouf!" Jeannine exclaimed, merrily. "You would marry like you fly—one be-e-g jump an' you are gone. Silly lover, the padre would not consent. There are the banns—an' also, Philip, would you have a bride in rags?"

He agreed reluctantly. Perhaps, he thought, it were better to set no time after all, for the time might never arrive.

"An' now, beloved," she kissed him lightly, "you must go to bed. It is not long till dawn——"

"Not long." He repeated the words dully, caught himself and tried to be gay. "Very well, my own. It is such a little time, though. Stay here in the garden. I can not leave you—not for a moment now."

Jeannine smiled and patted his cheek. Gently, she drew his head down into her lap, running slim fingers through his hair.

"Then you shall sleep now," she decided. "You must have rest an' be strong for the morning."

Philip relaxed with a sigh of contentment. Her touch was soothing and he suddenly knew that he was fagged out, weary in mind and body. Yet, he did not sleep. Instead, he lapsed into a dreamy semi-consciousness, aware of Jeannine, yet far from the present on the wake of years that had passed.

In his mind's eye he saw again the wooded sweep of Blytheshire, with its footpaths through the trees. There was the kennel where old Sir Allerton kept the finest fox hounds in England, and the stables where his blooded horses were. A gravel drive led to the ancient home that surmounted the hill like a gray eagle standing guard. It was of stone, covered now with lichen.

He remembered how, as a boy, he had dimly wondered why Blytheshire House was not surrounded by a moat, as those he had seen pictured in books. In all other respects it was like them. In the high, dim reception hall were sets of armor, burnished and ominous. He recalled the fascinating reflections that struck from them in the glow of the great fireplace of an evening.

Sir Allerton had been tall and with less girth then, with a face perpetually reddened from the sun and wind. Always, as Philip recollected in his half dreaming, half wakeful consciousness, the governor had worn

loose, rough clothes that smelled of tobacco and horses, and sometimes of rum. He seemed to hear his father speaking to Lady Margaret, his mother.

" 'Egad, Marge, the little beggar wanted to ride Spitfire today. Fancy that, an' he doesn't have the leg to get a grip."

He had been the little beggar referred to. Philip stirred and smiled as it came to him how he had, on a day when his father was in London, mounted Spitfire and ridden as far as the end of the stable yard. At that point, the splendid animal revolted, refusing to lower his dignity by permitting the brown-legged boy to cling longer.

There was the tennis court where Sir Allerton played with masculine skill, and needed all of it, against Lady Margaret.

"Damn it, Phil," again he heard his father's laughing voice. "Hit the ball, boy, hit it. Stroke your racquet—keep in bounds—but hit the ball."

That had become a part of his character then and in after life. Keep in bounds, but hit the ball. He had tried always to do that at home, and later at Oxford. It was the rule that countless generations of Blythes had followed until it had become a tradition. Keep within the bounds of decency. There are things a gentleman will not do for king, or country, or for love. But always, when the time comes to strike, lunge out.

That was it. He had been failing the formula lately. The unthinking acceptance of possibilities as facts, for instance. His love for Lady Iris, which never existed. He had not kept in bounds here. Nor indeed had he hit the ball. He should have known long ago, by a process of introspection, that she was not his woman, nor was he the man who could make her happy. But instead, he had let the game go on.

And yet, his thoughts reeled onward, there was irony in this new turn of affairs. Sir Allerton and the family, Lady Iris herself, perhaps, would accuse him now of exactly the opposite. He could hear them pleading against this marriage of a Blythe to an obscure girl of France. From their standpoint, he would be out of all bounds, striking out wildly in an unconventional infatuation.

Well, let them think as they might. His hand moved and found the warm clasp of Jeannine's. He brushed her finger tips with his lips and smiled. As suddenly, the smile died and he muttered unintelligibly. The world had gone mad and after all, nothing mattered.

If tomorrow—today now—he went down as he expected to, with the song of the wires in his ears and the ship in flames—he would become a

hero and a Blythe to all of them. Hero, bah! Rather, to be truthful, an ineffectual atom in a machine, a futile nonentity that failed to get out of the way. If he lived, he would marry Jeannine, and most certainly become an outcast.

Philip moved uneasily and opened his eyes. He sat up quickly and Jeannine raised her arms above her head.

"Mon Dieu," she exclaimed softly, "there are needles in my arms, my lover. You have slept, oh, so uneasily. You should have gone to bed."

He drew her into his arms silently. In the east the first dull promise of day sent its shadowed gray across the horizon. The morning breeze was stirring the lilacs and the guns were grumbling heavily after their duties of the long red night. Dawn lay just beneath the hills.

"Au revoir, Jeannine, my own."

Philip's voice was steady and vibrant as he held her closely.

"You must go in, now. I was a brute to sleep. My darling child, I love you—I shall love you forever."

"An' that is how I love you, my Philip," she replied. "Love—he cannot die."

"Love cannot die." He repeated the phrase and smiled down into her eyes, misty and deep as pools.

"An' I shall be watching for you to come home," she told him.

He kissed her again. "Yes, Jeannine. Pray for us, little sweetheart. Your Saint Joan knows soldiers. Perhaps——"

"She will watch over you, my own. I shall ask her—Oh, ever so much."

CHAPTER IX

CONTACT!

FROM the dormer window of his bedroom Philip saw the work lights of the mechanics blinking on the field just beyond the hangars. Over in the western sky stars still glittered in their final brilliance. Now and then he could hear indistinctly, the muffled voices of men calling to one another from plane to plane.

Philip was shaving. He had bathed in his collapsible canvas tub. When he had rubbed his smooth jaws with questing fingers and was satisfied with his own barbering, he donned a fresh shirt of soft, white silk, whipcord breeches made by a London tailor and gleaming boots. At last he tied an immaculate black silk scarf and put on his regulation jacket, the polished shoulder straps fitting smoothly over his wide chest.

It was a final gesture. He gave the preparation no conscious thought. England sent thousands of such men out before the guns each day. They died with the mud of Flanders caked thick on their uniforms and matting their hair. They crawled to death sometimes, through blood and loathsome filth. But while they lived they appeared always in their natural rôles as gentlemen and soldiers.

From his inner pocket, Philip drew a small metal case. He opened it and removed a photograph and a sealed envelope, folded twice. He gazed for a moment at the picture, then put it aside on the table. He next read the address on the envelope in his own hand to Lady Iris. Slowly then, he tore the paper to small bits and scattered them from the window.

He watched the fluttering scraps until they settled on the ground, then looked up to the sky that was brightening rapidly in the east. A light breeze stirred the leaves and he nodded. Good flying weather. There would be fine visibility when the sun came up. He lit a cigaret and strolled from the room. There was a light at the Berthelot cottage. Buffet breakfast, he expected, with Mme. Berthelot passing back and forth from the kitchen.

It was as he anticipated. Russell and two others were eating when he joined them.

“Gad,” remarked the major, eyeing his fresh appearance, the neat rig, “you’re dressed for the party, Phil.”

“Dressed beef—on the hoof,” jeered Conway, grinning. He was in shapeless dungarees and already had been in the bowels of his engine. “If I can’t taste oil my grub won’t digest,” he added.

They laughed at anything this morning and the gayety increased as the others came in. Phil edged toward the kitchen door and touched Mme. Berthelot’s arm as she passed.

“Jeannine is asleep?” he asked quietly.

The woman looked at him steadily. “Oui, Jeannine is asleep. I heard her come in, Monsieur.” Her dull eyes searched his own.

“Has she told you——?”

“An’ what if you do not come back?” Her voice was toneless, yet accusing, as devoid of sentiment as hard metal. He saw that she misunderstood.

“That will be the fortune of war,” he told her, returning her gaze with frank eyes.

Mme. Berthelot shrugged and passed on. It was natural that she should be thus, he thought. Probably other young flying officers had attempted to make love to Jeannine. A girl so young, so alluring, could not escape these attentions behind the lines. To Mme. Berthelot he could be no different.

“O’Rourke reports your ship in order, Phil.” Major Russell interrupted his train of thought.

“Fine.” Philip smiled and joined the group, pulling himself from his abstraction. “If Mike says so, it is.”

Presently, they moved out to the hangars, smoking cigarets with swift, nervous inhalations. Each man went directly to his own ship to begin a minute inspection. The Lewis guns were adjusted to the fraction of an inch, so that in the action to come they would spit lead through the propeller field unerringly.

Russell walked out a little distance on the field and gazed up at the eastern sky, then studied his wrist watch. Turning, he nodded to the adjutant who stiffened and moved along the line of seven ships, holding his own watch in sight. The fliers synchronized their time pieces and climbed up into the cockpits.

O'Rourke strode around beside 794. His big red face turned up to grin at Phil.

"Oi think yez will find her in order, sir," he boomed.

Philip was strapping a square map on his knee, marked with red lines. He looked over the side returning the mechanic's smile.

"Thanks, Mike. Everything looks fit."

Major Russell came along the line, pausing before each of the men. He halted presently before 794.

"All right?" he called cheerily.

"Top hole, sir," replied Philip.

"Keep together," Russell's friendly voice changed oddly to that of the officer. "No stragglers today, Blythe. They'll be looking for cripples to beat hell. Your orders all in shape?"

"All in line, sir."

The Major passed on to the next plane. Directly, returning to his own ship, from which the streamers of the leader fluttered in the breeze, he glanced at his watch.

"Eight minutes," he called.

Philip nodded and waved.

"Turn her over, Mike. Let's hear it."

O'Rourke ran to the propeller.

"Switch off, sir?"

"Switch off."

"Contact."

Philip repeated the signal and switched on the ignition. The engine burst into a staccato roar. He tuned it down, idling, then gradually fed the petrol, toying, listening with trained ears to the varying song. Other engines tuned up and the field seemed to tremble beneath them.

From the edge of the field nearest the road the running figure of Jeannine appeared as she rounded the corner of a hangar. At first only a few mechanics saw her. She was almost beneath his wing when Philip looked down.

He switched off his engine and with a quick glance at his watch sprang to the ground. Shamelessly, he took her into his arms.

"Jeannine, darling, I—I thought you were sleeping."

"Sleeping—Philip, how could I? An' when I heard the engines—pouf! I must fly to you."

He kissed her again and again, oblivious of the grinning mechanics and the men in the planes, his flying mates. Major Russell watched the tableau, smiling himself, then his expression changed to one of anxiety and there was a shade of annoyance. He glanced at his watch and half started along the line toward 794, then paused.

"Au revoir, darling. Watch for us—be brave, petite." Philip smiled down at her, reassuringly.

She drew away reluctantly, her eyes bright with tears. Their salt taste was on his lips.

"Au revoir," she sobbed. "Go now—do not look back, my lover. I cannot —watch your face."

She turned and ran back toward the hangars. Philip watched her and the stark tragedy in his eyes froze the laughter on the lips of his comrades who saw it. In the next ship Happy Conway bent low in his office and came up with a flask. He raised it to his lips for a long drink, then held the container upside down. The liquor ran out upon the ground.

"Put that up for my headstone," he grinned at his mechanic, throwing the bottle down.

"Four hours of petrol," bawled Wentworth, pointing to his tank. "In four hours an' two minutes, Happy, you'll be damn dry for that drink you poured out."

"It wouldn't do any good in hell," retorted Conway. "The Americans will have it prohibition."

Major Russell waved from his cockpit and a mechanic pulled out the chocks from beneath his wheels. The plane moved out upon the field and turned into the wind. Six others followed it and the thunder of their engines carried on the wind to awaken the natives of Berle Le Bois. Russell sped down the stretch, his pennants whipping back in frenzied motions as he left the ground.

He circled once, peering out to make certain of his flight, then went into a steep climb. The Thirteenth wheeled into formation and was off. The hum of the motors gradually lessened to those left on the field as the planes found altitude. At three thousand feet Russell was yet climbing. At five thousand he decreased the angle and rose in a long oblique. The others hung on to his tail closely and in another moment were but silent, motionless dots in the sky to the men who remained at Berle Le Bois.

They crossed the British lines at eight thousand, staring down at the twisting trenches that were like the cut from a ragged blade. Below and flying with them, a bombing squad lumbered heavily toward the enemy lines. Above, hovering like gadflies, half a dozen observer planes were engaged in flashing their messages back to the artillery.

Philip, gazing down at the lines, marked that it was a quiet morning. He smiled grimly as he half turned and saw distantly behind the trenches the movement with which he was so familiar. The thin, winding roads back yonder seemed to crawl and always the movement was forward. Infantry was coming up, fresh from the rest areas; artillery was shifting and the machine guns were edging into new and advanced positions.

He leaned down in the office of 794 to study the instrument board. Frequently, he raised his head to watch Russell, alert for signals. The altimeter registered eleven thousand now and they were still climbing. At ten thousand perhaps, when they came over enemy country, the bombers below would loose their gifts. Already they would be peering through their bomb sights, gauging wind velocity and height.

Philip had served his time in a bombing plane. Accordingly, he knew that they would drop their messengers before they reached the objective. The bombs would fall in a curve at a muzzle velocity of a hundred miles an hour. He wanted to see that. Probably they would cut loose on an ammunition dump, or a train coming up with men and supplies.

His engine revolution counter reported that O'Rourke had done his work with customary skill. The big pusher engine was whirring in rhythmic perfection, so that 794 seemed to cut the air with the clean, sure power of a shark's fin in the water. They were over the desolate sweep of no man's land, pitted with shell holes, colorless and bare as a desert. Here and there, Philip could see small black forms, motionless. He shuddered involuntarily. It were better to be up here where one could not see them too closely—or inhale the air about them.

Suddenly, Russell began to climb. He signalled back and Philip, in common with the others, pulled back the stick gently. His ship nosed up and the earth began to fall over his tail. They were flying close, so that every man now was down to the actual business of it. A plane out of control for a speeding instant might easily tangle up with another. Their wing tips were separated by only a little distance and the men grinned at one another from their cockpits.

Engaged in the office, Philip was brought sharply to awareness by a sudden jolting of his ship. A hollow explosion warned him, as it did the others. Looking out he laughed at the cloud of white smoke below. The archies were awake. The Thirteenth continued to climb. They were pointing upward at fifteen thousand and the air was cold. In a little while, thought Philip, they would sight the dodging figures of the swift Rolands and the fun would begin.

He applied the rudder lightly, pushing the stick over for a turn, then pressed the trigger of his Lewis as a test. The drum spun into instant revolution and the gun sent a spray of bullets into space. Philip straightened again into formation. One by one the others tested their guns as though by tacit understanding. And all the while, their eyes were moving restlessly, questioning the vault of the sky above and below them on every side.

Russell flattened out at eighteen thousand and circled. The flight spread out on the turn like a flock of giant ducks. They could no longer see the earth and war seemed a distant, impossible dream. Peace was about them everywhere, and beauty; these and an overwhelming sense of cleanliness and purity in the azure above and the misty depths below. Death seemed far away, indeed, like the sound of screaming men, maddened with pain. All the harsh realities of life dissolved in the clear cold air and only the sense of power and even motion remained.

Philip thought with a pang of Jeannine. He saw her, in his mind's eye, standing among the lilacs there by the shrine. He imagined the sound of her voice, husky with emotion, as she prayed to her Saint Joan.

Praying for me, he thought. For all of us, but especially for me. Gad, it was irony, this flight. A month earlier it would have been a lark. A week ago, a part of the day's business. But now, with her kisses fresh on his lips, and four hours' petrol in the tank, it was torture worse than cowardice, infinitely worse than physical pain, more complicated than the mere fear of death.

He was holding his ship in formation by instinct, outwardly as alert as their leader. But subconsciously, he was back again in the garden with Jeannine. They were planning for the future. He would take her to Paris, London, Vienna. With a little travel, a bit of contact with the world outside of Berle Le Bois, she would be superior anywhere. Even as she was, he reflected stubbornly, no drawing room existed with sufficient background to justify her beauty.

No. For Jeannine, there must be sunlight and a garden; distant hills and a turquoise sky; the music of singing birds and a lilting laugh. And lilacs.

He would brush up on his French, the while he tutored her in English. Their—their children would be cosmopolitan. From his British characteristics they would acquire the love of horses, a skill with plunging boats in salt water, a native accuracy with the rifle and a sporting instinct in the conduct of their lives. From the French of Jeannine would come the gentle love of beautiful things, the understanding of music and art and the fire that had sprung into hot flame with the first of the Berthelots.

Watchful always of Russell's ship ahead, Philip caught the leader's signal as he pointed up at a sharp angle and climbed.

Their objective came instantly into full view. At perhaps twenty thousand feet a group of black monoplanes spun crazily as they turned over and, straightening, dived down toward the Thirteenth.

"Two to one." Philip reached for the stick as he watched Russell turn into a steep bank. The Rolands were diving with their engines on, careening into the seven DeHavilands at two hundred miles an hour. The foremost plane opened up with its Vickers gun and those on either side of it followed.

Instinctively, Philip knew what Major Russell's next maneuver would be. Straightening from the bank he turned the ship's nose upward again and in fifty seconds climbed a thousand feet with the six planes still in formation. Philip began to count the black planes as he saw them straighten off, too late to keep their positions of advantage over the Thirteenth. There were twelve of them in the group and hovering above, four more.

Russell signalled back and his Lewis gun blazed yellow and crimson streaks as a Roland flung across his nose. It was a dog fight now, every man for himself. A shadow drifted over Philip's head and he promptly shoved the stick ahead and dived. The shadow clung on and he kicked the rudder, sending old 794 into a slow wing-over. Somehow, he knew, he had to shake off that shadow. Over the shrieking of his wires and the voice of his engine,

Philip heard the persistent rattle of the Vickers and as he watched his wings, neat round holes appeared in the surface, as though they were bored by an invisible drill.

When he straightened, two thousand feet down, the Roland zoomed over his nose and Philip turned loose a spray of bullets. Now he was over the devil and the advantage was his.

CHAPTER X

THE HIGHEST COURAGE

THE ROLAND pilot, aware of his danger before he was fairly into it, turned over in a dazzling Immelman, so that Philip, to keep his gun on its twisting target, went into a dive. With the Roland directly under his nose he pressed the trigger. A spray of steel struck the black ship and as he swung off to avoid a collision, he saw the spurt of smoke and knew that he had scored.

They were flying together now, scarcely twenty feet between their wing tips. The man in the Roland gazed out, white faced, but grinning. He raised his left hand in a gallant wave that was almost a salute, and with his right opened fire upon Philip with an automatic. The first slug burned his shoulder like running flame and Philip ducked. He reappeared again with his own service revolver and facing the man deliberately, took careful aim.

As he fired, the German flung up both hands and his automatic was hurled into space. Fire burst from his tank and the man tumbled over awkwardly, hanging limp in his safety belt. The Roland was plunging down to oblivion, out of control and flaming. As he climbed again to rejoin the Thirteenth, Philip mercifully hoped the fellow had died from his bullet.

His shoulder throbbed with a pain that burned the length of his arm to his fingertips. He moved the arm constantly, to keep it from growing stiff, assuring himself that because he could do this no bone was shattered.

He had dropped considerably in the contest with the German. Above, scattered now over a wide area, he could see the DeHavilands darting like giant wasps as the Rolands attacked them. A lone plane, hovering off on the edge of the fight awaiting an opportunity, pointed down and Philip went up to meet him. As their guns opened simultaneously, he sent his ship into a sudden tail spin, intending to flatten out and loop, if luck was with him, to come up over the German.

“Damn.”

The Roland pilot, sensing his maneuver, swung off in a circle and bore down over him with every advantage. Dimly, Philip remembered his remark to Jeannine.

"There's one chance in a thousand that I'll come back."

And here, he thought swiftly, goes that single chance. The devil will cut me to pieces. Not a ghost of a show to dodge him. By God, I'll jump if he hits the tank. Better that than to burn. Oh, hell, to go out this way. Why didn't that other chap do a better job of it with his bullet?

Yet, even as his mind accepted the fact of death, Philip's hands were busy and his ship was going down wing over wing, crazily. He realized, of course, that the German would merely follow him down and send another burst from his Vickers gun into the bowels of the plane. This was only delaying the finish.

Over him where the others were fighting, Philip was conscious of another failure in the Thirteenth. He saw, as his own DeHaviland turned, a second plane from his group detach itself and go over in a slow fall. Smoke and flames spread from its tail and it was out of control.

It plunged in a straight line. For an instant the doomed plane distracted the Roland pilot and he pulled off to be well out of the way. It was in that terrific instant of suspense that Philip saw and recognized the man in the cockpit of the burning ship. Conway, no longer laughing. His staring eyes were gathering what they could in a last glimpse of existence.

Then, as suddenly, Philip realized that Conway had not altogether lost control. His rudder still responded. In a last magnificent gesture, Conway half rose from his seat, then fell back and reached for the stick. His ship careened off at a dizzy angle straight into the side of the waiting Roland. The crash sounded above the roaring of the engines.

"God." Philip groaned in anguish. As he sped out on a straightaway, then climbed abruptly, his vision cleared and he breathed again. He looked down now, less than a thousand feet and saw them. They were locked fast—DeHaviland and Roland—the wind-blown flames from the one licking angrily into the vitals of the other.

It was Conway's final gesture. How he would have laughed at that thought at the mess table—going down hugging an enemy ship—taking him along in that last, terrible fall.

The incident, from the moment Conway started to fall, had taken only two minutes from the aeons of time. Philip was back on a level with his own

flight in another moment, nursing his Lewis gun in the hope that it would not jam. Off on his left he sighted a plane in a bad way under the vicious attack of two Germans. As he headed straight into them, then rose in a fast climb, he recognized Rogers, the Infant, in the ship below.

He waved and Rogers made a pitiful, courageous attempt to smile in reply. One of the Rolands dived and Philip sent his ship into that devilish maneuver known as a falling-leaf. Wing over wing, he turned gently and at the proper moment, straightened, coming up in an almost vertical climb. By this time the plunging German had gone down a thousand feet and Philip was over the other.

He raked the plane with his hot Lewis and grinned as the pilot dived out of range. Philip went down after him, firing on his tail, aware that the second Roland was coming up and would be over him. Turn and turn about —dog eat dog—that was the game. Maybe the youngster would get the other fellow. Maybe he'd run. It would be damned interesting to see what the Infant would do, really.

In another moment he learned. Rogers, seeing the second Roland take a position over Philip, went straight at him with gun blazing. The black enemy ship zoomed off in a darting getaway, but he had paused too long. The Infant hung over him, pouring steel into the smoking engine. An explosion louder than the others was followed by the sudden pall of thick smoke and the German went down in a long, slanting dive.

In the interval, the Roland beneath Philip darted away for safety. Philip watched him and grunted, then waved his thanks to Rogers as he climbed. The Infant had proved himself.

Game little beggar, was the thought that struck Philip. Must watch out for him. His sort of courage is the reckless kind. Desperate. No limit to it and no caution.

Nosing for altitude, Philip tried again to count the ships of the Thirteenth Flight. Conway, of course, was out. Dully he wondered how many others. The Infant was hanging on and over on his left he saw Russell's plane, recognizing it by the fluttering streamers. The Major was busy with two Germans and a third was darting down toward him.

Philip sent 794 around in a vertical bank and caught a Roland playing for position over his tail. No time for counting any more now. He looped and the sudden maneuver found the enemy pilot unawares. The Roland turned and then dived for Rogers who was still climbing. Philip saw their guns

belch and came up, firing into the German's fuselage. As he swung off, the Infant continued his climb and the Roland limped back toward the rear of the lines, its engine missing. Rogers waved thanks in his own turn and Philip grinned back at him.

The fight had, by now, become mechanical. As long as the petrol lasted and the ship remained aloft, Philip worked the controls like an automaton, nerveless and without mercy, expecting no quarter and giving none. He pointed toward Russell, intending to aid him in his unequal struggle. There were three Germans now and Philip marveled that the flight leader was yet in the air.

Below them the lines were seething and the country behind on either side. The earth stretched out like a vast and indistinct map, obscured for long distances by heavy, rolling clouds of smoke. The barrage was down and behind it the British shock troops were advancing slowly, in snake-like lines that at this height seemed not to be men at all, but moving dots, separated one from another by a quarter of an inch of space.

The fight was scarcely begun. A glance at his wrist watch told Philip they had been at it less than half an hour. And in that time—again he attempted to count them. Rogers and Russell, and of course, himself. Two others had sought a higher ceiling. Conway and one other then, were down. Even as he made the mental calculation, Philip's straining eyes were drawn to the ship with the whipping streamers.

They'd gotten Russell at last. Even as 794 pointed up in a vertical climb, the flight leader's DeHaviland turned over and one wing sagged like a broken arm. Philip turned his gun on the nearest Roland and drew fire from the other two. He heard the high thin shriek of bullets cutting through his rigging and dully wondered when one of them would finish him. A queer pain tugged in his head, just between the eyes as he imagined a steel jacketed bullet striking there.

"Imagination," he muttered. It's all imagination, his contorted mind functioned outside itself. This is not real. Men twenty thousand feet in the air, endeavoring to kill each other. If God was in his heaven this thing was unreal, the ravings of a tortured intellect.

He was jerked savagely from his thoughts by the sight of Russell climbing out from his cockpit. His ship was out of control and spinning madly. Russell clung to a strut and for an instant his slim figure was outlined in silhouette against the sky. Then, very deliberately, he began to crawl out on the good wing.

“Bravo, good old Russell!” Philip cried aloud as he realized the major’s intention. He was trying to reach the wing tip so as to throw his weight against the broken wing. There was one chance in a million, perhaps, that he might right the plane and control it for a forced landing.

One of the Rolands suddenly deserted Philip and went down over the whirling DeHaviland. The other went into a series of fantastic loops to avoid the fire from his Lewis gun. For an awful moment Philip ceased firing as he watched the black plane and gathered the design of its pilot. It careened down almost beside the helpless Russell and circled once. As he came around again, the German pointed his Vickers at the man clinging on the wing and opened fire.

Russell seemed to spring out into the air. He was clear of his ship before his body began to whirl and disappeared in the murky air below. The plane turned over and with its nose straight up, followed to the fate of its pilot, leaving a trail of smoke hanging like a persistent memory.

Philip dived straight at the German with his engine wide open. As the dodging Roland appeared through the sights, he pressed the trigger, and held it.

“Damn you—damn you,” he grinned in his fury as the bullets took effect. Even when he knew the plane was helpless, spinning like a toy in the wind, he continued to send volley after volley of hot steel directly into it. The second Roland was over him, maneuvering to fire. Philip dived, looped again and came up with his gun spitting fire.

Like the four of his companions who were left, he fought now with hopeless desperation. Fear had disappeared altogether. His senses were dulled beyond the comprehension of fragile emotion. He had become a part of the machinery of his plane, an indispensable adjunct that must function, or the whole would down to that roaring inferno between the lines. Looking over his shoulder, Philip saw two more Rolands winging down to lend their weight to the argument.

“Come on,” he barked, slipping a new drum on the gun. “You’ve got me, damn you—but you’ll know you’re in a fight.”

He expected no help from what remained of the Thirteenth. They were outnumbered to begin with and their situation was far worse now. He found himself wondering about Rogers. Poor devil, they must have pinked him by now. It was wrong to send boys into this. Hellishly wrong. Even if they came out they would be blighted. Adult humanity itself should not be so

disillusioned about its merits, let alone the children. No boy could see men die as Russell had gone without losing something fine that was in him.

Philip concentrated on the German who was now just below him. The pilot dived out of range, confident of his prey as he saw two Rolands bearing down. Philip pulled back the stick and climbed up to meet them, sending a steel welcome up to the foremost. They divided, one roaring on each side of him as they plunged and looped to come up again, this time over his tail.

Three of them now, like angry hornets chasing a single insect. Philip went into a spin, vainly hoping to shake them off. They merely circled and when he straightened, dived on him with their guns playing a tattoo. It came to him in that final moment that his best choice was to ram. They were certain to get him now and he could not maneuver against three of them. But by ramming, he would finish at least one.

The Rolands spread like a three-pronged fan as he came up. He chose the one in the center, firing as he came within range. To his intense surprise the burst went home and it was only by swift action that he got out from under as the plane whirled down so close to his own that he could see the pilot, and read the frenzy in his eyes.

Instinctively, Philip sent his riddled plane into a climb, again intent on ramming the nearest German. The Roland suddenly sped off in a straight line and the other one tumbled down in a tail spin. Overhead, a DeHaviland circled and plunged after the first of the running planes. Philip drew a long breath and went down after the second. In the electric instant of its plunge, he thought he recognized Wentworth in the plane that had saved him.

He swung about in a wide circle, surprised, as the German below him turned and sped toward his lines, as a rabbit rushes for his warren. The Rolands were faster and Philip gave up the chase. As he straightened, his astonished eyes swept the sky and fixed upon a fleet of planes—twenty of them diving and looping as the black Rolands disappeared—and their wings bore the familiar insignia of the R.F.C.

Leaning over the side he watched the DeHaviland pouring its fire into the falling plane that had attacked him. Then, as the black ship burst into streaked flame, the other quit and came up, satisfied with his job. As he flew to Philip’s altitude and circled closely, Wentworth waved and pointed to the R.F.C. fleet that was roaring over them.

Philip's engine was coughing irregularly. The wings extending out on either side were fluttering in places where whole bursts of Vickers bullets had struck in a concentration of fire. Some wires were hanging loosely in the wind and Philip knew that his fuselage was scarred from nose to tail. For a time he had forgotten the pain in his shoulder, but it was burning again and he was weakening from loss of blood, so that he grew dizzy with each lurch of the ship.

He stared across the sky, searching for the sight of an enemy ship. The order for the day repeated itself in his mind. They were to stay aloft until no German planes remained. Well, apparently they had done it. These fellows up yonder had come on just in time. Another straining plunge, or more rips in the canvas and he would be checked out. Even as it was, he doubted that 794 could leg it back. A forced landing was the best he could expect.

Circling carefully, he studied the expanse of sky on all sides and above and below. Nowhere did there appear to be a Roland, or a Fokker. The newcomers were spreading out and among them, Philip tried without success to identify any ships of the Thirteenth.

Wearily, he pointed around and went down into an easy oblique. Until he was safely over the lines, he would stay at ten thousand feet. Then, with luck and if his strength held out, he could, perhaps, make a side-slip landing. God, how he wanted to lie down. His head throbbed and his muscles were numb. Would he actually land? Had the attack below gone through on schedule? Would Jeannine be watching for him there in her garden at Berle Le Bois?

He looked over the side to get his bearings. Yes, there were familiar landmarks. A ragged building that had once been a barn. A shell-wrecked bridge over a small stream. Queer, the movement down below. They seemed to be heading toward the rear now, and Berle Le Bois. Presently, far over his nose, he saw the white steeple of the little church. It seemed different.

"Gad," he exclaimed. "They've shelled it."

He straightened then and glanced upward, from force of habit. The hope that had been rising in his heart suddenly died. A thousand feet above him a gleaming red plane was hurtling down like the hand of death.

CHAPTER XI

MEANWHILE—BERLE LE BOIS

WHEN the Thirteenth Flight took off from the field at Berle Le Bois that significant morning, Jeannine had stood until her eyes blurred and her body ached from the tensity. A premonition of tragedy hung heavily over the mechanics and the others whose duty it was to wait.

At the edge of the road she passed the ordnance officer in conversation with the adjutant. His words struck chillingly upon her ears.

"They have their work cut out for them this morning. Every flight has the same orders. It's a clean-up."

"Another attempt to break the back-bone of the advance." The adjutant shrugged and his cynical face half turned toward Jeannine.

"Probably. It's unfortunate at this time. The Thirteenth is short-handed as the devil. And here's where the Germans seem to be concentrating their air strength. I can't understand——"

"Who the hell can?"

Jeannine moved on, out of hearing, sick at heart, afraid of her own futility. That was the torture; being able to do nothing. From the door of the cottage she watched the movements of the mechanics. They walked wearily, with their shoulders hunched in dejection. With them, she knew, it was not fear. They knew too much of war for that. Death held no terrors for them, but again, as with her, it was the futility.

The roar of an army cycle with the cut-out wide open sounded from the village street. The rider braked viciously as he saw the adjutant, halting the machine in a dozen lengths. He flung himself from the seat and ran up, drawing an order from his blouse as he saluted. The adjutant took the message quickly.

"We've got to move," he announced quietly. "Abandon the field. Clear the village. The Germans are moving up. We'll be under their artillery fire in ten minutes."

The order spread. Mechanics ran into the hangars to assemble their belongings. Other men were detailed to rout the villagers from their homes. They ran from door to door. A soldier halted briefly at the Berthelot cottage. Jeannine and her mother awaited him in the path.

"Get your stuff together," he barked. "You've got five minutes to move out, ma'am."

Already, whole families were assembling in the square by the fountain. Where children had played and tame pigeons had wheeled in the days of peace, all was now terror and confusion. It was ludicrous, too, if one had the heart to laugh. There were little hand drawn wagons, wheel barrows and even two donkey carts, piled high with household goods.

Squealing in protest at the interruption of their peaceful grubbing, half a dozen pigs added to the confusion while their owners tried desperately to keep them properly herded. There were honking geese and one bland goat, content in the satisfaction he found from chewing on the end of a quilt that lapped over the edge of a cart.

Mme. Berthelot watched the scene with her agate eyes unmoved. Behind her in his wheel chair, Grandpère Julien muttered in his beard.

"Come Jeannine." She touched the girl on the arm. "Get your belongings." Although she did not say it, the woman's manner indicated that as for herself and the old man, the Germans did not matter. But for Jeannine they would stay and face it out.

Jeannine was looking into the sky. She turned swiftly at hearing her mother's words.

"I—I cannot go."

"Fool. You shall go."

"But I cannot. I have——"

"The military will force you—would you wait here for the Germans to ——?"

Mme. Berthelot left her question unfinished, conveying as much as it would completed. She took Jeannine's arm in her strong grasp, drawing the girl into the cottage.

"Please, you do not understand." Again that pitiful cry. "I—I must wait here."

"We are going."

There was flat finality in the woman's voice. A new sound entered. The rhythmic tread of marching men, the rattle of equipment, the retching of leather. A sharp command, clipped and laconic in French. A company of French troops of the line was moving up to join its regiment. Somewhere farther along the regiment was swinging into its place in a division. On the road leading into Berle Le Bois artillery was pushing forward and more infantry.

Jeannine, from her window saw the patriarchal mayor step out from the little throng of villagers to greet the captain of the troops. She could not hear the words, but read their gestures.

"Move back to Nivanne," the officer said. "We'll be under shell fire here any moment." His tone was brusque, yet as he gazed at the people pity came into his hard steel eyes.

The mayor nodded and turned to his townspeople. The procession began to move, herded together at first, gradually straggling into a long line as families took their places. Soldiers were darting from door to door again, issuing sharper commands now, less kindly. One of them came to the Berthelots as Jeannine and her mother waited with Grandpère Julien.

"Come, move along," he snapped. "You're not going to a fête."

"Can he run?" demanded Mme. Berthelot, indicating the old man.

The soldier grinned. "He might," he said, more genially, "if a shell drops behind him."

Mme. Berthelot plodded on, pushing the wheelchair. A sheet containing food and her ancient, treasured silverware, was heaped in the chair at the feet of Grandpère. Jeannine drew back and her mother quickly seized her arm. Two French soldiers moved beside them for a time, urging them into the line. Others kept prodding the villagers ahead.

The refugees were driven close by the side of the road, making way for the incoming troops and artillery. The soldiers looked worn. Their packs seemed intolerably heavy. The faces of most of them were set and grim. A few were frankly frightened. Some laughed and called out to the fleeing villagers. Not a few of them saw Jeannine, waved kisses and called out friendly greetings to her.

Looking back she saw the activities on the flying field. Trucks were being loaded and men were running here and there about their swift duties.

This then, was the end of all that which had its beginning but yesterday. Life and death in the span of so few hours? Philip! Where are you? God be with you. Saint Joan, too. Even she must be left. But prayer remained. And love. Ah, yes. Love cannot die. That alone.

Her pace lagged and Mme. Berthelot tugged at her arm, watching her always from the corner of her eye.

They were clearing the field. That meant, of course, defeat. Philip, even if he should live and return for their rendezvous, could not land there. It would be enemy territory. He would go on, not knowing where to find her in all France, nor might she look forward to discovering him. It was the end. Irrevocable—relentless—darkness, unpenetrated by a shaft from the light of hope.

The straggling line reached a crossroad. In the shade of a tree stood a ramshackle cart with two wheels. A small donkey and a huge St. Bernard dog were hitched to the vehicle, beside which was a peasant woman. She was there to sell milk to the soldiers. A French captain, marking a tired woman at the head of the line, with a baby on her arm, gallantly served a dipperful which she accepted thankfully and held to the infant's lips.

In the line near the Berthelots a child had been crying all the way. Jeannine turned to the young mother.

"Let me get milk for the baby," she said.

The mother nodded, gladly surrendering her burden.

"Watch Grandpère, while I go ahead." Jeannine spoke to her mother and saw that stern face soften in a momentary smile.

The column moved on, slowly, painfully. While Jeannine gave milk to the infant, its mother lingered, waiting.

When the baby had satisfied itself and lay contented in Jeannine's arms, she fell into step with the mother instinctively. They were among the last of the stragglers. From her place ahead, Mme. Berthelot looked around and saw Jeannine was coming on.

"I should have stayed, but for him," said the mother, shrugging.

"And I, but for them." Jeannine looked ahead to her mother and Grandpère Julien.

"Your husband? Is he too——?"

“Worse than that. My lover. We had not loved till yesterday—scarcely. At dawn he flew to the lines. He—he will not come back.”

“You do not know.” The woman sought to comfort her. “They have miraculous escapes. My man, now—I know he will not return.”

Jeannine was watching the road broodingly. She was scarcely conscious of it when her companion lifted the child from her arms. The mention of Philip, bringing with it her promise to wait for him in Berle Le Bois, fired her brain with a new resolve. Her manner changed. She became cunning, dropping behind the column and walking far down in the ditch beside the road.

A clump of trees and underbrush lay just ahead. As the drooping people of Berle Le Bois dragged themselves onward, Jeannine darted into the shelter of the trees. She was unobserved. Infrequently, she followed the slow moving column with her eyes, remaining always well behind the bushes. Not even the soldiers, passing back toward Berle Le Bois, could see her.

Gradually, the bobbing heads disappeared over the brow of a rise, then the stragglers and at length she could see only the gleam of helmets and equipment and the movement on the road was all in her direction.

When it seemed that the villagers had passed well out of range, Jeannine began her slow progress back toward Berle Le Bois. Mme. Berthelot, she thought, would believe that she was somewhere in the shuffling procession until it was too late to attempt a return, even should the soldiers permit. As for the sweating, cursing men who were pushing on now in her own direction, Jeannine entertained no fear.

“Where to, pretty one?”

A mud spattered lieutenant walked beside her, studying her curiously.

“My home is near.”

“It won’t be for long, petite. You’d best turn back while you can.”

“No, Lieutenant, not yet. The French will hold them back.”

He smiled at the implied compliment. “Perhaps. But we can’t drive back the shells, you know. That is expecting too much—even of poilus.”

Jeannine shrugged and attempted a smile.

“You have a lover in the service?” His critical gaze swept over her appreciatively.

“Yes, Lieutenant. He flies today.” She looked off toward the sky toward the front.

“Lucky.”

His men were passing them. Jeannine’s pace was not up to their long, even stride.

“Bon jour, Mam’selle.” He laughed into her eyes and ran ahead. “May he come down safely—to your arms.”

She was questioned many times by officers and hailed by the men, but now they allowed her to pass. The order to evacuate Berle Le Bois had been directed only to the civilian population. These men knew nothing of it.

The guns were finding the range of the village before she paused at the first cottage. Already, the first columns of the advancing French had passed through, heading steadily into the teeth of the storm. Those who followed did not slacken their pace, but their ranks were broken as they dodged into fields and bypaths as the shells came shrieking overhead. A field hospital had been established in the little woods beyond the flying field.

Jeannine broke into a run as she reached the turn in the road that brought her home into view beyond. She saw with a shock that the roof was sagging on the garden side, just above the niche where was her shrine to Saint Joan. She crossed herself as she hurried on, turned into the winding path and disappeared among the shadows of the lilacs.

The shrine was undisturbed. Yet she could not pray, dared not trust herself to speak. Only her eyes were eloquent as she looked into the sky. Far off over the lines she saw them—moving dots, so high as to be indistinguishable. Below them, irregular white clouds of smoke formed swiftly, scattered, and floated into oblivion. Archie shells, spurting death about them in fragments of hurtling steel. She could not tell which were enemy and which were her own ships, nor was there any way to judge whether they fought above the German lines or over the French.

She breathed a wordless prayer for Philip, another for the Thirteenth. Fleetingly, she thought of her mother and Grandpère Julien. They would be safe from shells by now. Give them food and shelter and what comfort could be found. To them and all the people of Berle Le Bois this thing was equally horrible as it was to the men who fought. They—the broken civilians—could only suffer and wait. They had lost their loved ones. Now their homes. What, in the name of God, remained?

She shrank back against the stone wall of the cottage at the new note in the air. It hurt her head, this shrill high sound, mingling with a deeper, more menacing tone as the shells came lower. A soldier in the center of the road pointed up to a distant speck. A German plane, hovering over the village, finding the range.

Jeannine watched him, drawing in her mind's eye the picture as he bent over the wireless apparatus in his ship. She had seen the strange paraphernalia in planes of the Thirteenth, the antennæ and transmitters, the ebonized Morse key wired up to the box on the little shelf. With this, she knew, he was sending back his message.

In a moment he could stare down and find his answer.

A shell splintered the roof of a cottage down the road. Before the great black cloud of dust and smoke could clear, another fell. She ceased to count them. It was to demolish the village. So furious a hail could be sent across for no less a purpose than that. To destroy a little village, she thought with scorn. Fear again had deserted her. She stood leaning against the doorframe watching the havoc, as she had, on many occasions from the same place, reveled in the approach of a storm.

They were not unalike, she thought. The fiery gleams that spat out when the shells burst were very like the lightning. The roar of the shells which went overhead, the concussions as others fell, became a symphony that was akin to thunder when the clouds hung low.

Jeannine gasped and shrank back into the door at a new scene that held her tortured eyes. The fire was falling now upon the field where the canvas tents of the emergency hospital had been raised. An ambulance seemed to dissolve before her gaze, grotesquely. She saw a wheel spinning in midair in the dense smoke.

The cottage shook so that she wondered if her own body were quivering, yet could not be certain. Her senses were half numbed. She was no longer thinking consciously of anything. It was amazement, not pity, that assailed her as she watched the soldier in the road—the same one who had pointed to the German range-finder—pitch full length and in the next moment, when she looked at him curiously, there was only a twisted shape in the dirt, headless, still twitching.

The field hospital was obliterated. A pail of smoke lay over the ground and running through it now and then, she saw dimly the figures of men. A few lived. She could not see the others.

Jeannine raised her face to the sky. It came to her in that moment that if she was to die, she would want to be looking up into that vista where Philip disappeared. A little cry suddenly escaped her.

A plane was diving down toward Berle Le Bois. The pilot was fighting for control, but smoke was streaking from his ship and he twisted in a series of freakish motions as he descended. He came on and Jeannine gripped the doorframe until her knuckles grew white and her hands were in pain of which she was unaware. In a moment she made out the insignia beneath his wing.

It was one of the Thirteenth Flight.

Then, from an altitude which her eyes had not swept, there darted a second ship, straight down. She could hear the roar of its engine. She forced back a scream. The higher plane was gleaming red—a German. She saw the thin streaks of fire as his gun turned loose its steel upon the falling ship.

CHAPTER XII

THE RED WINS

THERE was no time for preparation even had Philip been physically able to make it. He flew straight, nursing his wounded plane for the work to come. Questions rose in his mind as he studied the instruments and fired the Lewis in a gesture to the pilot above. The Germans, then, had advanced, otherwise this glittering plane from the Richthofen circus would not be here. There would be others presently. . . . The R.F.C. planes were far back over the lines.

He identified the Richthofen ship by its color. None but the gallant ace and the men of his command dared advertise themselves so conspicuously. It was characteristic of Philip that he grinned painfully as he glanced up. At least, he would have a singular honor. To die under the gun of a red plane was second only to shooting one down.

As the pilot whipped his diving chaser into line, with its nose pointing down on the tail of 794, Philip gently pulled the stick and kicked the rudder bar. Straining in every wire, the torn DeHaviland fell back on its tail and went down. As a result, the German's first burst of steel missed its target and Philip found himself with yet another chance to live.

Straightening, he shot into a loop and came up with his Lewis releasing a burst of bullets into the crimson fuselage over him. The German's machine, faster and with finer control, darted off before the attack and disappeared above and behind Philip's tail. Now if ever was the Prussian's opportunity. He held the coveted position which is nearly always the prelude to the end. Philip struggled to get out from under, but even as he seized the controls he knew that his doom was sealed.

A thousand swift thoughts went shocking through his mind, like volts through a wire, while he waited for the sickening sound that would announce a vital bullet, or the black oblivion that would release him from responsibility. He recalled that a drowning man is believed to review his life in those brief moments just before he dies.

Dimly, he wondered if those on the ground who watched the fight were friends or enemies, and how it appeared to them in this quivering instant before its finish. Jeannine—was she safe—could she, from her place near the shrine, see him now? Would she be praying? Would there be lilacs on the other side when he passed?

Love cannot die. Little ineffectual man might return to the dust from whence he came; continents might crumble and new oceans take their places; the stars might fall and the moon, but love, once aroused, lived on.

Lady Iris. How cool and self-possessed she had been, always. She would be like that when the brief report announced him missing, probably killed in action. There might be tears at last where none could see. But tomorrow she would be recovered, going about her duties in London, clear eyed and calm. The world was better for people like that. They were the cooling breeze on a desert, the soothing notes in a world of harsh discord.

Sir Allerton. Ah, he would be proud. And grieved. But proud first. Philip could hear his gruff voice, see his strong, lined face.

"Yes, Philip was shot down, damn 'em. They'll pay. I tell you sir, they'll pay dearly."

The staccato rattle of the Vickers gun. Queer, metallic sounds as the bullets struck. His engine was missing. Warm oil spattered back into the office, smearing his face. He wiped it off with his hand. Strange! The oil was blood red.

Damn! Why wouldn't that rudder kick in? Where was the trigger? Hell, the flooring was going out beneath him. Z-z-z-z-z-z-s-s-sh! A wing ripping out. He reached out blindly for the controls. If he could go into a wing-over before the devil hit the tank. . . .

His sight cleared. For an instant, his brain, too. The red plane was flying almost beside him now, his nose pointed down along with his own. They were like two riders driving their mounts down a steep grade. He stared out from the cockpit into the face of the German. The fellow was bare headed and his eyes were blue like a child's. He was grinning.

Silly of him, at a time like this. Suddenly the other ship veered off and climbed. He had to look backward and up beneath his wing to see it now. The significance of it came terribly. It was the last turn of fate's wheel and the red had won. The German was diving upon him again, his Vickers belching red and yellow darts.

Christ! This was it—the grand finale.

Philip fell forward in his safety belt and sagged. He could no longer hear the tattoo of bullets, nor the rumble of the artillery below. Even the broken gasping of his engine fell on deaf ears, yet he was conscious of the awful shrieking of the wind. He saw the ground whirling far below, then an expanse of sky and again the earth. That meant he was turning over out of control.

In a few seconds more . . .

That shattered white steeple in Berle Le Bois kept revolving in his vision. He remembered the place. It was less than a mile from the landing field. Old 794 wheeled and groaned. One cylinder was out altogether. Would the plane hold together until it crashed? Or, would it disintegrate a few hundred feet above the earth and let him hurtle down in the débris, a part of it?

Philip somehow found the stick and kicked out for the rudder bar. He toyed subconsciously with the switch. He was even aware that he ought to obey orders and turn the ship up. The red plane was still there and the orders were . . .

But he couldn't, damn it, he couldn't. His plane wouldn't lift. He was going down in a steep bank. The earth came up at incredible speed. He straightened off and banked once again, striving now to reach a little patch of open ground that lay just beyond the ragged steeple. Inside himself he seemed to watch his own ghastly grin. It would be no three-point landing this time. . . .

Sight deserted him and feeling. So this was death. . . .

The plane straightened off fifty feet above the ground, then plunged. Those few who were in the village to see it, marked that the engine detached itself just before the broken body struck. Beneath the shattered fuselage and wings lay Philip. The great engine half buried itself thirty feet away.

They saw too, as they stood transfixed, yet another scene that had been withheld from the fallen pilot. For a long moment after the red plane hovered over its falling victim, it was apparent that the German, too, was in trouble.

His ship, flashing in the sun, bucked strangely and its nose went down. As his speed increased it was evident that he, too, was out of control, descending almost in the path of the torn DeHaviland. The German managed to sling his plane around so as to head for the shell torn field that had been

home for the Thirteenth. He was struggling in the cockpit as Philip had done, fighting to the last moment for control. And, like Philip, he failed. . . .

From a corner of the Berthelot cottage, now sagging on a crumbling foundation, Jeannine had seen the battle. She was alone. All the rest had deserted the village, herded together by the soldiers, hurried and relentless.

At first, owing to the altitude of the fight, Jeannine had been unable to distinguish the planes. Then, as they dropped lower, she recognized the gleaming brilliance of the German. But, it was not until she ran from the corner of the cottage, out across the village to the little field, that she knew the DeHaviland. Its number stared her in the eye from the twisted débris—794.

The acrid smell of burning oil assailed her, and a pall of smoke. She went down on her knees calling hysterically to the silent, crumpled figure she could see. She forced her strength, and crawled in among the twisted struts and the torn metal. Desperately now, she struggled over the snap catch on Philip's safety belt. In a moment she had it open and began to drag him out.

Inch by inch, she succeeded. She was trying so hard to be gentle and it was so difficult.

"Philip!" She pleaded, bending low over his ear. "Philip, you mus' answer. It is I—Jeannine."

New terrors engulfed her at his silence, and she began the struggle over again, hoping wordlessly that he would groan. Mon Dieu, it would be better than this . . . this awful silence that was—could it be death? She half screamed and put one hand against her mouth.

More calmly, she asked herself could it be anything else? After that horrible scene there in the heavens? She returned to the grim task. From the handful of survivors in Berle Le Bois she could expect no aid. They had remained only because they could not go—sickness and wounds. The shelling had been concentrated, owing to the flight field which the Germans had long marked as an objective.

No, she would have to do it alone. She would dig his grave with her own hands. She recoiled at the thought. In the cottage there would be a British flag and to be sure, the tricolor of France. She would place them at the head, with a piece of the fuselage from his ship. . . .

As her course became clear in her mind, Jeannine finally drew the broken body of her lover out upon clear earth. She flung herself upon his

breast now, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Ah, Philip—it cannot be. It is not true."

She sat up, staring down into his face through her tears. Could it be that his eyelids fluttered. Did that torn hand move ever so slightly? She bent quickly to lift his shoulders.

"Philip—lover—it is I—Jeannine."

For an instant his eyes opened and his lips curved in a faint smile.

"Jeannine—I said I'd come back—and I did—come back."

Wordlessly she answered him with kisses, holding his head close to her breast, crooning softly in a sort of half hysteria. Philip was again lost in coma.

"We must get to the cottage, Philip."

She spoke bravely, seeking to penetrate his numbed senses.

"Come lover, you mus' help Jeannine—she will nurse you—we mus' not die, my own."

She used the plural subconsciously, expressing her own thought that if he failed to live, then she too, would die inwardly even though existence wore on. Philip stirred in her arms.

"I'll try—hard," he promised, in a far away whisper.

Half lifting, half dragging him, she made slow progress across the field. They paused frequently and always she had to fight his apathy. Time and again she forced him into a consciousness that he seemed no longer to desire. When he opened his eyes they were glazed in pain and there were queer lines about his drawn lips. At last, they came to the door of the cottage.

Philip sagged and his breath came in odd gasps. In spite of it, he tried to smile.

"I'm afraid—Jeannine darling—he got me——"

He shuddered and went into merciful oblivion. Jeannine struggled to drag him into the cottage. Frenzied, she clutched at his wounded shoulder and little by little, drew him across the sill. Then, with all of her strength, she lifted him to the couch that had been for Grandpère Julien.

She drew sweet water from the well, straining it through cheesecloth to clear it of particles of débris which had come with the shelling. With this she bathed his head and his shoulder, forcing herself to touch the great red wounds. In the dining room later, she found brandy and forced the fiery liquor into his throat. He was breathing, though ever so faintly and when his face was clean the flesh was ghastly pale.

It was when Philip began to mumble strange incomprehensible things that she heard the sound of motors and the rough progress of trucks over the cobblestones. She sprang from his side and ran to the door. A British ambulance careened by and the driver grinned at her and waved, shaking his head when she motioned for him to halt.

Jeannine darted into the littered street toward a second ambulance. The driver and an aide watched her approach and the engine slowed.

"Monsieur, you mus' get Capitaine Philip—he is ver' badly hurt——"

"Captain," repeated the driver sharply. "Captain who?"

Quickly she explained and the two men followed her to the cottage. Like all their kind, they had enormous respect for the fliers and with it all, a great curiosity to see how a wounded eagle took his fate on the ground. The aide bent over Philip, listened to his heart and professionally felt his pulse.

"He's in a bad way," he told the driver. "Get the stretcher." He looked curiously at Jeannine. "Friend of yours?" He nodded toward the still figure on the couch.

"My ver' good friend," said Jeannine steadily.

"He's in bad shape," he went on, brutally, without intending to be. The ambulance men had need to be callous.

"You mean—he—he will die?"

The aide shrugged. The driver returned with the stretcher. Together, while Jeannine watched with fearful eyes, they lifted Philip and, she thought, put him down with careless lack of consideration.

"You mus' be careful," she warned them quickly. "Not so—so rough."

They grinned and started out, the driver at Philip's head, the aide at his feet. Philip lay on his back with his hands crossed on his breast. Jeannine shuddered, marking how like a corpse he was. His white face, emotionless and drawn. The stillness of him.

They slid the stretcher into the ambulance and the driver climbed up into the seat. The aide sprang after him and Jeannine started to follow.

"Here, where are you going?" asked the aide, sharply.

"With you—with him—I mus' stay close, Monsieur——"

"Can't do." The man shook his head with the laconic ultimatum.

"Oh, but you are mistaken," she choked back a sob and stared at him, wide-eyed. "You do not understand, Monsieur. He will need me—he will want me when he awakens."

Still the aide shook his head and now spoke gruffly. "Against orders. You'd better get out of this, too, Miss. The Heinies are due in here any minute——"

The engine coughed and the ambulance jerked ahead. Jeannine seized the fender and ran alongside, pleading breathlessly.

"Please, just let me go with him. Oh, Monsieur, he will need me—you do not understand."

Grimly, the man in the seat refused and reaching down, detached her hand. She continued to run beside them as the machine gained speed, lurching over the torn cobbles. She kept repeating with pitiful monotony, slurring her words as she pleaded.

"You do not onerstand—he will need me, Monsieur—he is so hurt— Oh, please, please, you do not onerstand."

She stumbled and went down on her knees. Rising, she pushed on after the ambulance, crying out to the men, calling for Philip. Her blue dress was torn and stained. She had bruised her knees on the cobbles and limped a little as she ran. The ambulance was passing from the edge of the village when at last she fell beside the road, surrendering.

For a long time she watched it. Her eyes dried and fierce hatred took the place of grief. Raising her little fists to heaven she swore in the way she had heard Grandpère Julien curse in the agony of his affliction. Her anger was no longer directed at the ambulance men, but at the enemy. That hell-ship of bright red that had hovered over Philip. The sleek black wasps that had darted over Berle Le Bois.

At length, too weary even for hate, Jeannine rose weakly and made her way back to the cottage. It was here she had made her rendezvous with Philip and here she would remain. Let the Germans come. Grandpère

Julien’s musket hung over the mantel. There was a sword too, rusty and dull edged. But at least, they would never take her.

CHAPTER XIII

TEMPTATION

A SHELL had struck the wall of the cottage above the shrine of Jeannine's Saint Joan. The little statue was shrouded in a covering of powdered stone as Jeannine halted before it now. For the first time she marked that the granite face was turned upward, facing into the west where Philip had flown at dawn.

"Ah, Blessed Saint," she cried, "you too, you see up there what I have seen. You understand."

She spoke in French, pouring out her heart before the image as she might have done in the confessional, with only the white haired padre there to hear.

"It is not for me, Jeannine, to curse what the good God ordains. He would not let us have the war but for our sins. But, please, beloved Saint Joan, I do not understand—why Philip should—should die. He is so young—so good—so strong."

Her entreaty ended in a sob. "Please let him live—there must be sacrifice—but please, beloved Saint, please let my Philip live."

She remained there on her knees that pained. Broken bits of rock lay all about her and the lilac bushes too, were powdered, their fragrance mingling with the pungent odor of smoke from the shells. A sound on the gravel path caught her ear. She rose swiftly and wheeled to face the intruder.

At first she saw nothing. Then, as her gaze was drawn, fascinated, to the ground at the corner of the cottage, she stared into the most hideous face she had ever seen, more terrible than a weird spectre in a nightmare.

Matted blonde hair lay low over a blood stained forehead. A pair of blue eyes, pale watery blue, stared up at her. The face was smeared with oil and blood and the mouth was drawn in a grimace like the grin of a death's head. The man was crawling, dragging himself, on broken, bleeding hands. His legs, thrust out behind him, were useless, dragging like the broken body of a lizard that had been clubbed in the spine.

Jeannine sprang back, stifling a scream. Suddenly a light of cunning glittered in her eyes. She watched the man come on another span of inches. She recognized the hated uniform. When he half lifted himself she saw the Iron Cross on his breast. Slowly, as he made progress, Jeannine retreated. Neither of them spoke. The man's lips moved, but no sound came.

This then, she realized, was the man who had flown the red plane. It was because of him that Philip lay now on a jolting stretcher in the ambulance, perhaps dead.

With infinite deliberation, Jeannine stooped with one hand reaching out across the path blindly. Not for an instant did she take her eyes from those staring blue ones beyond. Her fingers came upon a ragged splinter of rock and clutched it. She lifted it and the stone was heavy. Its sharp edges were deadly. Slowly, she rose, watching the staring eyes as they were fixed upon the weapon in her hand.

Ah, he understood. She could see it in those dazed eyes that were like the sky after a rain. Yet, strangely enough, the man did not falter. Little by little he crawled on, moving nearer each instant to the fate that he must know awaited him. He was helpless. One blow in the head with the rock and she would have revenge. Jeannine raised the stone over her shoulder and tensed her muscles.

The German crawled on. When he lay almost at her feet, he seemed to be signalling with his eyes, begging her to strike the blow. Jeannine drew back. The stone fell from her nerveless fingers. In the suffering face beneath her horrified gaze she saw something of the same expression that had been in Philip's.

It was youth that lay there dying at her feet. Strong, carefree youth, with singing heart and surging blood, curious about life, careless about death in its happy ignorance. What mattered it if he were German or French, black or white? He was youth. He was suffering. And soon he would be dead.

The boy was fumbling pitifully at his tunic. His head sagged and he choked, gibbering sounds came from his throat. Jeannine stooped swiftly and unbuttoned the coat. His red, torn hand pushed slowly into a pocket and felt about, then as slowly was withdrawn. It clutched a stained photograph that fell from the fingers almost instantly.

Jeannine retrieved it and studied the face that returned her gaze. It was that of a blonde, plump fräulein, smiling blandly and yet with a sort of

confidence and divine faith. A round childish scrawl had written of love and a promise to be fulfilled.

She nodded and placed the photograph back in the clutching fingers. The grimacing mouth quivered and for an instant the blue eyes were half hidden beneath lowered lashes. The man's face softened and he smiled. Jeannine put her arm under his head and braced his weight against her. She would let him rest for a moment, then get him brandy.

He coughed. The paroxysm ended as abruptly as it began. Blood came from his mouth and he straightened with sudden power, then fell back. His body quivered and lay quietly. The enemy was dead.

She gently removed her arm and knelt over him for a moment. His face was no longer hideous. Somehow, she was not afraid now. Peace had settled over the man's face and the smile had lingered. It is not death that is terrible, she mused. It is, rather, life and its needless tortures. But for that, this boy on the garden path might well have been her friend. She knew that he had been brave and gallant. Had she not seen him fight?

In life he had been her enemy. In death he was a child, a futile sacrifice on the altar of the war god. She rose unsteadily and looked about the familiar garden. How different it seemed. The crumbling wall of the cottage, the dull lavender of the lilacs beneath the powdered stone, the lingering odor of smoke.

Somewhere, this boy from the other side must be given a decent burial. Was it real, this day? Was she, Jeannine, about to dig a grave for a soldier of the enemy? She, who only a little time ago, had been about to dig one for the man she loved? She went around behind the cottage and found a pick and a shovel. That was her answer to her own questioning.

It was a laborious task. Strong as her muscles rippled beneath her smooth, white flesh, Jeannine could do but a sorry job of it. Hours later, it seemed, a shallow trench scarred her garden in the shadow of the lilacs. With failing strength she wrapped the corpse in a sheet taken from her own bed. Then, struggling with the burden, she rolled the body into its resting place and feverishly worked to cover it with the rich loam. At length, she stood at the head of the grave, resting on the slim handle of the pick.

She had removed the German's identification tag from his neck and with it the photograph. Now, from the dining room wall she took down one of the insignias so prized by the Thirteenth.

Presently, she had erected a staff at the head of the grave. With a bit of cord she made the insignia fast at its tip, and hung the German disc where it could not be missed. Wrapping the photograph in a piece of oiled paper, she left it on the grave.

That finished, Jeannine went back to the shrine for a final prayer.

"Beloved Saint Joan, it is adieu. My prayers, wherever I may go, will be always to you. Intercede for me, Blessed Saint, I pray you. It may be that I have fallen low in your eyes—for I have given aid to the enemy—and buried him. . . .

"But it is not for Jeannine—this war. I have not the hate that it demands, dear Saint. My anger flares and dies like candle light. My love is like a beacon that is forever glowing. It is, Blessed Saint Joan, as the words on the doorstep—love cannot die . . . and hate— Oh, most beloved, it must die or else the whole world cannot survive."

For a lingering moment she bowed before the shrine, then turned away and entered the cottage. There were a few treasured things there. She would gather them together and take them away with her. Perhaps, in time, she would catch up with the others from Berle Le Bois. But first, and despite all obstacles, she must find Philip.

They would have taken him, of course, to one of the big hospitals far behind the lines. Well, by inquiring as she traveled, it might be that she could find him. The soldiers were kindly men. She would have preferred to go among the French, for they would understand. The British, not knowing, would treat her lightly, perhaps, and laugh. That would be hard.

Nevertheless, she set out presently with her possessions wrapped in a shawl and she looked back at the cottage only once.

Her leave-taking now was unlike her first one of the morning, just after Philip had disappeared in the distant sky with the Thirteenth. Then, the road had been crowded with terrified villagers. Soldiers herded them together and drove the stragglers onward. The allied advance had failed and the enemy troops were moving in, bending the line of defense like a bow.

Now, she passed only scattered patrols who eyed her curiously and the guns on both sides were growling intermittently. Now at least, she had the small comfort of this crumb of knowledge. Philip had returned—alive.

A British sergeant, mud stained and bluff, raised a huge hairy hand in signal to his patrol. The men, marching at ease, halted thankfully and some of them flung themselves full length on the ground beside the road.

“ ’Ow now, Miss,” his booming voice was hard, but there was a twinkle in his bloodshot eyes, “where is it you’re a-strollin’ to, I s’y?”

She explained, a little frightened.

“An’ could you now, Monsieur, perhaps tell me where they would take Captain Blythe?”

The sergeant grinned. “Nobody knaows where the hell nobody goes,” he told her. “You s’y ’e was a captain?”

She nodded, hopefully.

“Well Miss, ’e might be at Dijon. There’s a base ’orspital there an’ it’s as close as any.”

Frank admiration shone in his eyes as he looked her over, approving her slim figure, her piquant oval face.

“Dijon?” He tilted his helmet at a new angle and shook his head. “Farther’n a lady should walk, Miss. Now if there weren’t a war going on, blimy, I should go ’long.”

She thanked him, ignoring his pleasantry. He scratched his head and watched her as she moved away.

“Them fliers has all the luck,” he exclaimed. “ ’E goes to blighty an’ has ’er a-followin’ ’im. Gawd, what more could a man ask?”

His men laughed raucously. Jeannine, plodding wearily on, heard the sergeant’s cracked baritone. He was attempting a verse from a flying song she had heard at Berle Le Bois, a music hall ditty imported from London.

I’m an air man, I’m an air man,
And I fly, fly, fly, fly, fly;
In the air so high,
The swallows cannot catch me
No matter how they try;
I’m an air man, I’m an air man,
And I fly, fly, fly, fly, fl-y-y-y!

Afternoon came and a dozen times she repeated her experience with the sergeant. A worn young subaltern halted her, painfully conscious of the stubble on his chin as his hand constantly stroked it. More than the others he was sympathetic and seemed to understand.

“You’d better give it up,” he advised. “They may have taken him to any of a dozen hospitals. Lord, child, he’ll be on his way to blighty—England—before you reach him.” When he spoke of England his voice changed and his eyes were wistful.

“But I mus’ find him, Monsieur,” she said simply.

“I hope you do. But don’t build up hope. If you’re picked up along the road by some officer, he’ll ship you back behind the lines like that.” He snapped his finger.

The road was becoming more congested. She drew aside many times for plunging trucks. Motorcycles sped past, flinging mud upon her. Detachments of men waved and called as she stood aside to let them pass. The movement now was back toward Berle Le Bois, like the ebb and flow of tide. Of all the men she questioned, Jeannine received no definite news of the battle.

Some said the Germans had entered Berle Le Bois and were coming on. Others were equally certain that the enemy advance had been checked and he was even now retreating to his own lines. Behind her the sound of the artillery increased and more and more frequently she paused to watch the lumbering caissons move up.

All about her were the stark signs of conflict. In ditches beside the road she came upon overturned trucks. The stench of dead horses assailed her nostrils frequently. And more often than she cared to remember, she saw odd, shapeless things sprawled in the mud, their terrible faces staring unseeingly into the sky. Always, wheeling and gliding overhead, were the carrion birds, patiently confident.

She overtook an increasing number of casuals, like herself seeking the comparative comfort farther back of the lines. It was from these men, in point of fact, that she gathered most of her meager information.

“Hi s’y, sister,” called a cockney private, “ ’ave you any vin rouge about ’e, naow?”

She looked at the bloody rag about his head, the dried streaks on his face and pity came into her eyes. She smiled and shook her head.

“I am ver’ sorry. I have nothing.”

“ ’Ard lines, petite,” he replied familiarly, yet with no disrespect. “No grub, either?”

She quickly unwrapped the little supply of food and treasured things in the shawl. She produced half a loaf of bread, baked but yesterday by Mme. Berthelot in the great brick oven. The cockney waved a grimy hand.

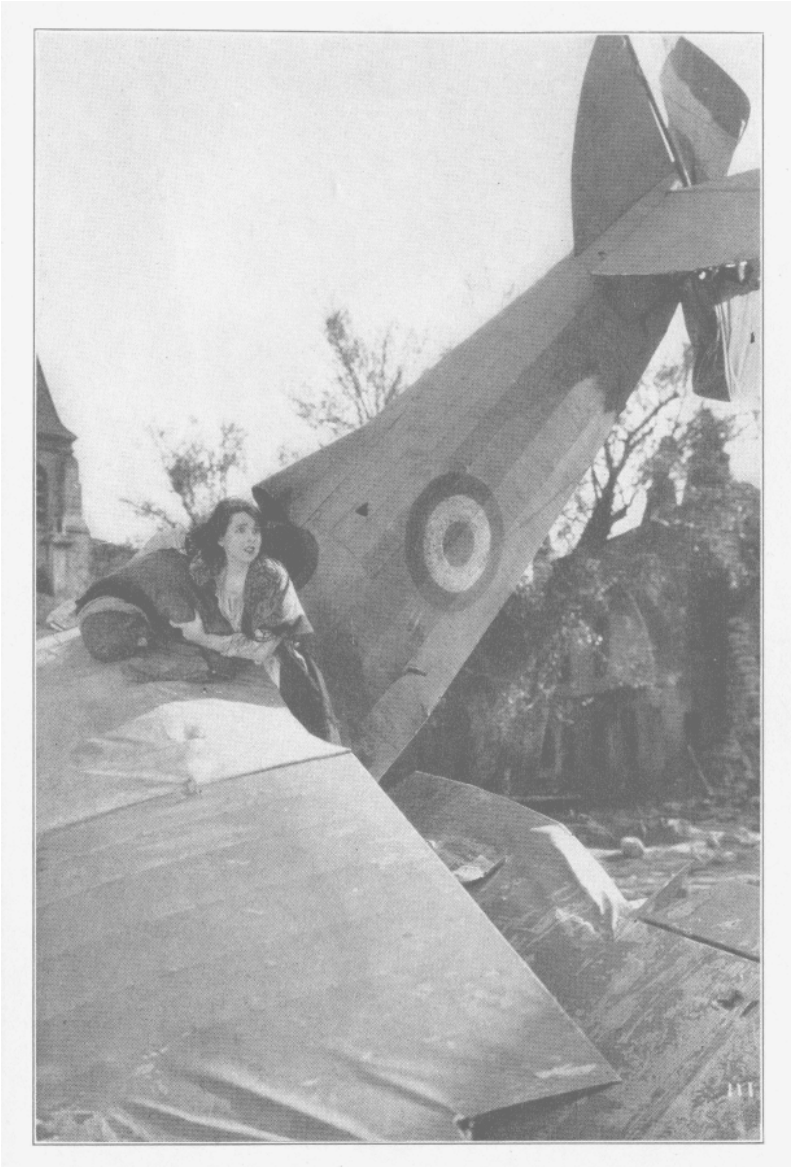
"No, no, 'e didn't understand," he protested, and in turn, opened his kit. " 'Ere, sister, 'e take this. It 'urts my teeth, it do." He handed her a cake of chocolate. She declined, but he insisted.

A First National Picture. *Lilac Time.*

THE LAST GOOD BYE KISS.

A First National Picture. *Lilac Time.*

WITH THE ENEMY'S ONRUSH, THE PEASANTS TOOK TO THE HIGHWAY.



A First National Picture. *Lilac Time.*

JEANNINE WAS ALONE IN THE DESERTED VILLAGE WHEN THE PLANE STRUCK.

A First National Picture. *Lilac Time.*

AFTER THE CONFLICT WAS OVER—JEANNINE AND HER CAPTAIN RE-UNITED.

She lifted herself to the broken stone wall where he leaned and nibbled deliciously. To rest was good; to eat was better. She had not realized before how tired she was, nor how hungry. While he watched her, Jeannine told the man her story and ended with the inevitable questions.

"Gawd," he replied, " 'e'll be well cared for, bein' a captain. An' what's more, wif the R.F.C. Not sayin' as 'e don't deserve it all, Miss. Flyin' is hell."

"But Captain Phil—Blythe, he always say the infantr-e-e has much the harder—what you call him—job."

The cockney nodded sagely. " 'E's talkin' through 'is 'elmet, 'e is. The ground for this 'un. When you falls, Miss, the bump comes easier, 'e do."

She laughed in spite of herself and the thin little man joined.

She left him in a little while, with his kindly hope in her ears.

" 'Ope you finds 'im, Miss. 'E'll be lookin' for you 'ard."

She came to the outskirts of a straggling village. Here the shells had missed their objective, for while the squat cottages and the church were

unscathed, the fields were torn and the road already being repaired by a detachment of soldiers.

The afternoon was dragging into evening. Jeannine's legs ached and she longed for food and a bed. She paused before the door of a cottage and saw a bent, toothless woman inside. The aged female sensed her presence and turned, then hobbled clumsily to the door, calling to Jeannine in French.

"Mon Dieu, a woman—and young. Come in, my child."

Jeannine smiled and entered.

"Thank you, Madame. I have come a long way—from Berle Le Bois. I am very tired."

"From Berle Le Bois, eh? The devils, then have taken it?" Her piercing eyes glinted with ancient fire.

"They were coming—when I went away."

"Alone? Where is your family, daughter? All dead——?"

She spoke in so matter-of-fact a tone that Jeannine shuddered. The woman noted it and shrugged.

"Ah, you will get over the fear of that word," she predicted. "It is meaningless to me. Two sons already, child. Fine, strong boys. The soldiers would have sent me out. I laughed at them. An old hag—let the Germans come. They have not the graciousness to kill me." She turned her keen eyes on the girl.

"But now, it is different. You would be a prize worth having. But have you eaten, child? I cannot offer much, but such as there is——" She busied herself over her little store of supplies.

CHAPTER XIV

FRIENDS ON THE ROAD

JEANNINE faced the kindly, cynical old woman across the table in the low ceilinged kitchen. Over strong tea and black bread, she told her story and found her strange hostess a patient listener. Only now and then did the woman venture to interrupt. Her name, she had said, was Yves—Christiene Yves, and she had been born in this village, married here and without a doubt would remain till the end of her time.

"An' so," Jeannine concluded, "when they take Captain Philip away, I too, mus' go. I shall find him—he will need me so."

Mme. Yves raised her piercing eyes over her cup. "A British captain." In her words there was an odd quality of vague and haunting doubt. "Are you certain, child, it is worth while?"

Jeannine did not understand.

"I mean, petite, are you sure of him? A British captain, you know——"

Ah, that was it then? The difference in their stations. Mme. Yves was wondering if Philip had meant all that he said. She was questioning his sincerity.

"Yes, yes, Madame, a thousand times yes. You do not know Philip."

Studying the older woman's face, Jeannine read the swift thoughts in her mind. The son of a general making love to the daughter of a peasant widow on the night before a battle. A scented garden and a mellow moon. An intoxication of beauty and pathos in an atmosphere that cried for promises and love. Death, perhaps, lurking in the shadows of approaching dawn.

What was it the Persian poet had written in his song of life?

"*Ah, take the cash, and let the credit go.*"

She was thinking, perhaps, that Philip had contemplated that.

"You must understand," Jeannine told her, "he said good bye. He did not think he would return, really. He wanted to—I think he prayed."

Was it possible, she asked herself, that it could have been only last night? It seemed ages ago in retrospect and as though she had loved Philip forever, before the world was bleeding in this desecration.

Mme. Yves nodded.

"Tonight, you will stay here, child. Tomorrow, we shall see what can be done. I know what you feel. Look at me. Yes, I understand, petite. I too, have loved."

A surge of emotion for this woman swept Jeannine and the tears came to her eyes. She fought them back.

"Let them flow, my dear. Tears are good for us. They wash out, perhaps, the visions of things we have seen. It is better so."

She rose and walking around the table, her hand lay comfortingly on the girl's shoulder.

"Come, a night's rest and the world will seem different."

She led the way to a flight of stairs that were like a ladder. Jeannine followed her to the little loft beneath the slanting roof, where a dormer window opened out upon the road. Mme. Yves lighted a candle and pointed to a clean white cot.

"My youngest son slept there."

Jeannine's look expressed her understanding and a wave of silent sympathy passed between them.

"You will hear the men on the road," the woman went on. "But you are used to that. It kept me awake at first. They curse so bitterly when they stumble."

She paused. "It's better though, when they're going to the front, than when they come back. I've never learned to bear their screams and groans—the wounded ones."

"Yes. At Berle Le Bois we heard them, too." She thought of Philip's lined face, the wounds, his awful stillness, and shuddered.

Mme. Yves waited until she was in bed, then blew out the candle. In the deep gloom the woman leaned over her, touching her brow with a motherly hand.

"Try to forget, child. You will be tempted to sit by the window—to watch the soldiers—and to think. You must be braver than that. I used to

count the stars. Don't try it, petite. It is the way to madness."

"You are so good." Jeannine reached out for her hand. "It is—it is like heaven to be here."

"Like heaven?"

There was a lingering silence.

"In a way, child. I understand. Heaven can be close to hell at times. Good night."

"Good night, Madame."

Jeannine heard her move slowly down the treacherous stairs and for a long time sounds drifted up from below. Mme. Yves was restless. A dim light on the stairs still shone when at length Jeannine fell into a deep sleep of exhaustion.

Voices awakened her when the light of day was flooding in from the dormer window. She sprang from the cot to look out at the scene on the road. It was as though an endless chain had been revolving in a great circle all through the night. Men and horses and trucks were moving ahead, duplicates of those which she had watched yesterday.

Indeed, they might have been the same. Haggard faces, some of them still breaking into merriment on easy provocation, muttered curses beneath heavy packs, the glint of rifles and the stream of light blue uniforms, moving sluggishly like a current on a bed of slate clay. The same sounds—steady pound of studded shoes on the earth, the clatter of equipment and the straining of leather.

Mme. Yves' voice in a swift burst of French: "Wait, my friend, there are others. My stock of food is not for an army."

A deep laugh and a pleasant reply in the nonchalant tone of a soldier: "Ah, but Madame, without me, what would the army be? Feed me, give me wine, and I shall win this fight alone."

Mme. Yves, amused, quick with her retort; "You are a great trencherman, to be sure. Do you so well in the trenches?"

Again his merry laugh. Jeannine dressed hurriedly. She found a bowl and a pitcher of water on a little stand. In a few moments she climbed down the stairs, cautiously, looking at the scene below her. Mme. Yves was standing beside the table. Seated, a laughing young lieutenant of the French was engaged over his food.

“Ah, this—this cannon voice disturbed you?” Mme. Yves indicated the soldier.

“No, no, Madame. It was time. I have slept enough.”

The lieutenant sprang to his feet.

“Another one driven from her home.” Mme. Yves offered no introduction.

Concern showed on the young officer’s face. Still, he smiled as he looked at Jeannine.

“One so beautiful will not be long without a home.”

“Bah, as though that matters.” The old woman was scornful. “Always you soldiers say such things. You laugh and go into battle. Either you die or you come back. It is the women who wait—who really suffer.”

“Not always,” he insisted, placing a chair for Jeannine.

“Always,” replied Mme. Yves.

“In my company,” he chuckled, “there is an instance to prove you wrong. A poilu named Jacques. You may, or may not know, Madame, that in this army, when a soldier is granted leave, word is sent to his home in advance of his arrival.”

He looked at them humorously, drained his cup and resumed.

“That, of course,” he said, “is to give the good wives warning.”

“You are a pig.” Mme. Yves was stern, but her eyes twinkled.

The lieutenant shrugged.

“I have been called worse. Nevertheless, Madame, Jacques, as I say, got leave. The notification went properly to his home in Paris and he followed it. He found everything in order and as it should be. His wife, little darling, flung out her arms to welcome him.”

“Certainly, certainly. And what does your story prove?”

“Ah, but wait. Jacques had three days’ leave. On the second day there arrived at his humble home a case of Burgundy.”

“Well?”

The lieutenant burst into hearty laughter.

“Exactly. That is what Jacques said. And his wife could not answer. Now he is back in the company. And he, Madame, must be satisfied with our common red wine.”

Mme. Yves stalked back to the kitchen. The officer’s voice followed her. “You see, we must keep up the morale of the men. That, Madame, is why the announcements are sent in advance of their leaves.”

A second man appeared in the open door. The lieutenant stiffened and his hand rose rigidly.

“Bon jour, Madame.” A portly colonel greeted her and casually returned his subordinate’s salute. His eyes went quickly to Jeannine.

“Ah, it is not only the coffee then, that lures the lieutenant.”

“Come, Colonel. There are cinnamon buns, too. We have been listening to the chatter of this boy—what is the news? Are we lost?” Mme. Yves fired her questions rapidly.

“Lost?” The man’s voice crashed harshly. “Never, Madame. We may retire, temporarily. We are part of the ebb and flow of it. But always, we return. You shall see. You see us now—going forward.”

He looked up from his chair for her approval. The woman poured black coffee into a thick cup and nodded.

“And who is this, Madame? A niece?” He indicated Jeannine, bluffly.

“A refugee from Berle Le Bois. The child came in last night, Colonel. Perhaps you can help her. With your influence——”

He raised a huge hand in protest. “Help her, perhaps. But influence—bah, a colonel has none, Madame. However,” he inclined his leonine head toward Jeannine.

Mme. Yves explained. The colonel heard it attentively, while he sipped his coffee, eating three of the cinnamon buns. The lieutenant, with a gesture to Mme. Yves and Jeannine, had made his inconspicuous departure, unnoticed by his superior.

“You say this officer is the son of General Blythe?” asked the colonel, when at length Jeannine’s story had been told.

“Exactly.”

He studied the rough planks of the floor, worn and undulated from the tread of feet that had marched away forever.

“And he is your lover?” He spoke to Jeannine.

“We were to be married as soon as the banns were called, Colonel.”

“It should not be difficult. I will see. Yes, I will see.” He spoke half to himself, then addressed Mme. Yves. “I will make inquiries. If I discover anything I shall send a message to you here.”

“Oh, it is good of you, Colonel.” Jeannine thanked him impetuously.

“It is nothing—nothing at all.” He flushed pleasantly, however, beneath her gaze.

As he rose, the Colonel drew some notes from his pocket and thrust several of them into the hand of Mme. Yves.

“God bless you,” she told him fervently.

“We need His blessing. Bon jour, Madame—Mam’selle.”

As he stepped heavily out to the path that led to the road, the Colonel failed to see a poilu slip from beside the cottage and enter the door.

“What now?” demanded Mme. Yves. “Coffee, I suppose.”

The man grinned and twirled his black moustache. “You do not know me, Madame. It was Henri Lenoeux who told me to come here. You remember him?”

“Henri Lenoeux?” She repeated the name. “I do not. Who is he?”

“A soldier of France, Madame. You fed him. He spoke of your coffee and cinnamon buns. Henri told me only yesterday morning. Within the hour I saw him die. He it was who told you of America—he had been there.”

“Ah. Come. Yes, I remember. Poor boy.”

Again the woman poured from her inexhaustible coffee pot and again a man drank thirstily and rose, blessing her.

“How do you manage?” asked Jeannine. “First a lieutenant, then a colonel, now a poilu. They must come in droves.”

“They do, petite. They do. And I do the best I can. They are all alike, generals and poilus, to me. No, there is a difference. You saw the colonel give me money?”

Jeannine nodded.

“Many of the officers do that. So I buy more coffee and more flour. And I can give more poilus a warming drink. I tell you, child, they need

something in their bellies more than a sinking sensation of fear. Was it not Napoleon himself who glorified the bellies of his fighting men?"

Jeannine smiled as she acknowledged the truth of Mme. Yves' assertion. Yet she wondered at the woman's indefatigable enthusiasm, her tireless body.

Through all that day she assisted Mme. Yves as soldiers who knew of her ministrations came in. Some of them had been there before. Others had been told by comrades. A few left money. There was one——

"Madame, I cannot repay you," he said. He was a boy, scarcely nineteen. "But," he paused and looked bashfully at Jeannine. "I have something here that you might treasure. It is nothing to me. They gave it to me for the work of a moment. You have earned it through the days and the months. Will you accept it, Madame, please?"

From the inside of his tunic, where it might not be seen, the soldier produced a Croix de Guerre.

"You have a mother. Send it home to her." Mme. Yves was almost ungracious to hide how deeply she was touched.

"My mother is dead."

"A sweetheart, then."

He smiled fleetingly. "No, I have been too busy with fighting."

She took the medal and studied it on both surfaces, touching the green and red of its pendant ribbon.

"Very well. I shall keep it for you. When the war is over, write to me. I shall send it to you. You will think more of it then."

It was afternoon of the third day when a motorcycle drew up before the cottage and a messenger entered.

"Madame Yves?"

At her nod he thrust an official envelope into her hand.

"The colonel said there would be no answer."

"Wait," she commanded, sharply. "Come in here, my son. The colonel did not tell you of my coffee, apparently."

His expression of surprise changed to one of amusement and he followed her into the house, grinning. She set the great pot over the fire and

ripped the envelope. Jeannine watched her closely.

"It says nothing, child." Mme. Yves handed the message to her abruptly. "The colonel did the best he could. However, there is a hope."

Jeannine read the large scrawling letters, on official stationery, presented in the military form.

> TO: Madame Yves, Bois de Dames Crossroads.
> FROM: Col. Andre Lament, C.O. 123rd. Inf.
> SUBJECT: Whereabouts of Capt. Philip Blythe, R.F.C.
> VIA: Official channels.
> Madame: It has been impossible to establish the whereabouts of the above named officer in this area. However, it is my personal opinion that he may be, with other officers of the British Flying Corps, in the Base Hospital at Dijon.

It was signed respectfully by the Colonel, with a flourish.

"I shall go to Dijon." Jeannine placed the message on the table and her eyes glowed with a new flame. Cold and impersonal as the words appeared on paper, they yet conveyed to her the warmth of hope, however faint.

"Tomorrow," said Mme. Yves.

Jeannine turned to the door to study the sky and the restless movement on the road that still persisted, though with slower tempo now. There were only the stragglers and the belated trucks that had broken down when the divisions moved up. Presently, she faced the older woman and nodded.

"Tomorrow then, Madame. At first, it seemed I should leave now. You have been so good to me—I have been a burden on you too long."

"A burden. It is not so. You have helped me. If you—" she hesitated to complete the thought, then finished it resolutely. "If you do not find him, I want you to come back to me. We will find your mother. In the meanwhile, you will be safe here. We can do much together."

The messenger had finished his coffee and buns. He rose, about to thank Mme. Yves.

"You tell Colonel Lamont there was an answer," she said. "Tell him I thanked him. And you might let him know whether you liked that coffee or not," she added.

CHAPTER XV

BARRIERS

BEFORE the sun was high Jeannine and Mme. Yves stood in the doorway of the cottage, each drawn by strange conflicting emotions.

"Remember, petite, you are to return if——"

"Yes, Madame, I shall. But I will find him. Perhaps—we may come back to you together. Who knows?"

The older woman smiled, but there was not the light of hope in her eyes.

"Adieu, my friend. You have been good." Jeannine took the thin, worn hand and lifted it to her lips.

"It is not adieu, child. Only au revoir. We shall meet again."

Mme. Yves had filled a parcel with food and unknown to Jeannine, had thrust half a dozen bills from her meager stock of francs into a pocket of the girl's apron. She lingered at the door waving again and again as the figure of her diminutive guest dwindled in the distance.

Jeannine's progress on the road to Dijon was a repetition of her travels before. She talked frequently to soldiers and always there were the wounded and the sick, making their way by slow stages to the nearest relief stations. There were mostly French in this area, since the troop movement, so that she found ready understanding and quick sympathy. Yet, she kept wishing to herself that she would come upon the familiar khaki of the British. They might know more of the hospital at Dijon.

Presently, as she reached the brow of a hill from where she could look beyond into the sloping valley, Jeannine saw a group of many buildings and the figures of men. The buildings were long and low, flat roofed and their raw lumber gleamed yellow in the sunlight. In the distance ahead, she also sighted the peak of a steeple that marked a village. She had come upon a rest area and now she quickened her steps, confident that she would gather information.

Two soldiers approached her from the opposite direction. They wore the arm bands of the military police and they eyed her sharply.

“ ’Ullo, sister,” said the foremost, as they halted, blocking her path. “Where to, I s’y?”

She smiled at the familiar twang of their accent and spoke with confidence.

“Dijon,” she told them. “Is it ver’ much farther now?”

“Dijon, eh?” The first speaker looked quickly at his companion and something passed between them.

“What’s your nyme, Miss? Where do ’e come from?”

“Jeannine Berthelot, from Berle Le Bois.”

They grinned in accord.

“That’s what Hi thought. Naow it’s this w’y, Miss. You’ll ’ave to come with us. They’re waitin’ at Nivanne for ’e. The old lydy ’as got ’Is Majesty’s ’ole harmy a-lookin’ for ’e.”

She gasped as she realized the significance of his words. They would take her back to Mme. Berthelot at Nivanne. That would mean delay and confusion, long argument. In the meanwhile, Philip might be at Dijon, waiting. Perhaps dying. Or—most awful thought, dead.

“But, Monsieur, I cannot do that. You see, I mus’ go to Dijon.”

They were unmoved by her insistence.

“ ’E carn’t do that, sister.” The leader was gentle, but firm. “Orders is to take ’e back to Nivanne.”

Jeannine thought swiftly, calling on all her cunning.

“I am to see Captain Blythe at Dijon.”

The name might have an effect on them.

“He is the son of General Blythe, Monsieur, an’ he will be waiting for me.”

The M.P. shook his head and again a swift meaning glance passed between him and his companion.

“Sorry, but orders is orders, Miss.”

So that was the game. Swift, unreasoning anger surged in her and Jeannine's eyes grew misty in the heat of their own fire. Her mother, General Blythe, the whole British army, were against her. They would connive to keep her and Philip apart. They would even use force, the same grim power that they used against the enemy. Fighting men were blocking her path.

She tried to cajole them with her smile, to win them with her frank honesty.

"You do not understand, Monsieurs. Captain Blythe and I are to be married. He is—so badly hurt—you see, I mus' find him."

They were sympathetic, but unrelenting.

"Too bad," said the spokesman. "We carn't let 'e go, Miss. Orders."

She saw that it was useless to resist them. She shrugged and turned away to hide the hot tears that fell despite her effort to resist them. They coursed down her cheeks, leaving little winding trails where the dust of the road had settled.

"We'll take 'e in a truck," the M.P. spoke kindly.

They waited beside the road until a careening supply truck came along that was heading back to the cross road leading to Nivanne. Jeannine braced herself against the shocks and was silent. Her companions kept up a running fire of talk between themselves. The driver and a helper looked back at her occasionally, curious, but silent.

At the Nivanne highway they alighted and the truck went on.

"Yer sweetheart, naow, 'e'll jolly well be 'ome," suggested the second M.P., consolingly. "Send 'im a letter, Miss, carn't yer?"

Jeannine returned his gaze and shrugged. He subsided. In a little time another truck swung from the main road and they signalled. The driver, seeing their arm bands, pulled up with brakes shrieking.

"Nivanne?" called one of her escorts.

"Right-o."

They climbed on and went bumping toward the horizon beyond which lay the town. There was an hour of this, then the outlying cottages and beyond the houses, and cobbled streets. They went first to a wooden barracks and there Jeannine, walking between her guards, was escorted into a small office. An orderly at the door required them to wait, then motioned

them to enter. At a desk sat a harried major of His Majesty's service. The M.P. escorts saluted.

"Sir, this 'ere is the lydy wanted in gen'ral orders. She was 'eadin' fer Dijon an' we picked 'er up, sir."

The Major nodded.

"Very well. Report back to your stations." He looked up sharply at Jeannine. "You stay here, Miss."

He shuffled through a heap of papers and drew one away.

"Simms!"

The orderly appeared at the barked command like an automaton.

"Take this girl to her mother—that old woman who's been raising hell around here." He again eyed Jeannine. "Look here, young woman, we've got trouble enough without chasing you around. Now you stay with your mother, or——"

"But, Monsieur——"

"No buts about it. All right, Simms."

The orderly took her by the arm and Jeannine went out beside him.

"Aren't 'e the bear, though?" said the man gently, when they were well out of hearing. " 'E acts lite 'e'd eat one up."

Jeannine looked about at the strange sights of the town. It was much more crowded than Berle Le Bois, owing to the refugees who had come from half a dozen villages closer to the lines. Everywhere she saw them and could distinguish them from the natives by their worn clothes and the tired, haggard faces. On the narrow sweep of grass before a cottage across the road she saw a wheelchair and in it, the shriveled figure of Grandpère Julien. She started to cross and the orderly looked at her quickly.

"Knaow the place?"

Mme. Berthelot, by some sixth sense, was drawn to the door at that moment. She looked exactly as she had at Berle Le Bois, even to the pan in her gnarled hand. Her expression did not change as Jeannine approached, nor did she move.

"It is good to see you." Jeannine burst into French, happy in spite of her disappointment, at the sight of her mother.

“Eh, one would scarcely think so.”

Yet, the dour woman in the door smiled thinly and extended her hand. Jeannine ran to her, kissing her cheeks, then turned and leaned over the old man.

“Grandpère.”

The hollow cheeked veteran responded to her caress with his eyes.

“Good girls did not follow the army in my day,” he cackled shrilly.

“Nor have I been following it, Grandpère. Ah, you need not worry. Jeannine had good reason.”

The orderly grinned at them, nodding to Mme. Berthelot before he turned away to rejoin his testy superior. Jeannine heard the voices of women in the rear.

“They have taken us in,” her mother explained. “Mon Dieu, they needed someone here who could cook food. What they had was swill.”

She stood, tall and austere, looking down at Jeannine. Her manner changed. She became hard and her voice grated unpleasantly.

“You disobeyed me on the road. You are a fool. A thousand like you have chased officers. They laugh. Now forget him. The soldiers here were angry when I told them—that major.”

Jeannine drew back and faced her mother with a dignity that she had just acquired. There was no anger in her words, only firmness, and the woman looked at her strangely while she spoke.

“You are like all the others. You do not understand. The great General Blythe—he, too, is like you. The soldiers—everyone. Yet I tell you, Philip and I shall be together. Nothing can stop us. Not all the armies of the world. Only we understand.”

Mme. Berthelot shrugged. “You will learn. But it is a bitter lesson. The son of a general is not for such as you.”

“Then are the Berthelots so low? Is it that I should hide my face? Shall I bow like a servant to every poilu?”

Her mother bridled, as Jeannine had known she would do.

“A Berthelot bows to no one,” she said proudly. “It is not that, my child. It is a matter of money—position—circumstance.”

Jeannine smiled and was calm again, assured and without rancor.

“Between Philip and me there are no such things. Oh, why cannot you be like Mme. Yves?”

She drew her mother down on the step and told her of the old woman who had taken her in.

“She understood. She encouraged me. Look, she even put money into my pocket to help me on the road.”

Mme. Berthelot’s slate eyes grew warm. She nodded quietly. “Yes, yes, of course. But you are not her child, Jeannine. If things happened, it was the fortune of war. If you suffered, it might cut her mind, but not her heart. You, too, must understand, my child. I have suffered already. I am not so sure that I could hear more. If I seem harsh——”

This was a new thing. Jeannine looked at her mother curiously and was almost shocked to see a single tear well slowly and glisten in the corner of that steady eye, that was usually so cold.

“Mother of mine, don’t, please. I do understand. It is only of me you are thinking. I do understand. I am a bad, thoughtless girl. But truly, I do not intend to be. It is only—that—I love him. I love him so.”

She flung herself into her mother’s arms and wept against the thin shoulder. The woman held her close and stifled a sob.

Not since she was a child had Jeannine wept thus, knowing the comfort of her mother’s understanding, surrendering to the maternal sympathy that had always been beneath the surface. Mme. Berthelot was first to recover herself.

“How do you know the captain is at Dijon, petite?” She spoke now in a gentler voice than Jeannine had heard her use for many months.

“I am not certain. It is the most likely place for him. Unless—unless they sent him home to England, or—he died.”

There was a silence.

“Why not write a letter? It would be delivered to him. By his answer you would know.”

Jeannine shook her head. “I know his answer, my mother. I must go. He will be waiting for me.”

She described her journey back to Berle Le Bois after she had drifted from the file of refugees, told of the shelling and the gaping rent in their cottage roof. Her mother listened with avid interest. As she continued with her story of the air battle and Philip's fall, Jeannine loosed her emotions, punctuating her narrative with the expressive gestures of her kind.

She told next of the dying German and her determination to kill him, then of her change of heart. As she spoke her voice grew softer.

"And you buried him—a German—in our garden?" Mme. Berthelot was incredulous.

"Where else?"

"Mon Dieu, it seems impossible. A German soldier among the lilacs your father planted."

Jeannine raised her tired eyes and struggled to smile. "Yes, yes, it is strange. With father buried somewhere on the German side."

Mme. Berthelot rose, drawn by a sudden thought.

"Wait a moment, child. I have an idea. Perhaps——"

She went into the cottage and in a few moments returned, holding a small bag. From this she drew a metal disc on a string and a faded ribbon from which suspended the Croix de Guerre.

"I have not the heart to hold you," she said and her voice was calm again. "You are a child no longer and you must know your own mind. Take these. They were your father's. With them no soldier will molest you. Wait till morning, child, then go. And God be with you."

Jeannine accepted the little tag which had identified her father among all the thousands in the lines and the pendant medal which had distinguished him among the few. Presently, she raised her eyes from a study of the trinkets and looked steadily into the face of the older woman.

"I am glad, my mother. I would rather that you understood than all others. With these, I will find him. They will help me wherever I go. In the morning——"

Mme. Berthelot nodded. Indicating the interior of the house, she spoke again in her level tones and her face once more was stern like a granite mask.

"Come. These women know that I have a daughter. It is well that they should see you."

CHAPTER XVI

DIJON

FROM NIVANNE there was no railroad, so that Jeannine trudged the roads again for weary distances. On occasion a truck drew up beside her and she was offered a welcome lift as far as the driver was going. Only infrequently was she questioned and then, when she explained and produced the disc and her father's Croix de Guerre, they served as an infallible pass.

A motorcycle with a side car attachment and two riders whirled up beside her, flinging mud upon her dress.

"Bon jour, Mam'selle." A gay French voice from a strange looking youth who leaned from the side car, bare headed. She saw then that he wore a baggy flying suit, his tunic showing at the throat where it was open. "Come—you are welcome."

She paused for a moment and accepted, climbing in beside him. The driver laughed and started the machine with a lurch. Jeannine felt her companion's arm go about her shoulders, as though he would protect her from the shocks of their passage. Above the tumult of their engine he talked.

"You go to Dijon?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Luck that I crashed," he went on. "Otherwise I would have missed you." His arm tightened about her.

He shouted the tale of his exploit as they sped through traffic. He had been forced down, fortunately behind the French lines. The plane was a wreck. By truck and now by side car he was making his way back to his squadron.

"It was intended," he told her ardently. "I rushing for Dijon—you on foot—we meet. What could be better? It was written."

Jeannine leaned forward, drawing away from his arm.

"I am going to Dijon to meet a flyer," she told him. "Perhaps you have heard of him. Captain Blythe? We are to be married."

“British?”

“The Thirteenth Flight. He is, I think, in the hospital.”

“Ah.”

The Frenchman withdrew his arm and his manner changed. “My regards to the Captain when you meet him, Mam’selle. And tell him that one French flier envies him—ah, very much.”

They roared into the outskirts of the town and the driver slackened the pace. Traffic became more congested. Here there were people everywhere, more of them than Jeannine had ever seen in a town, except when the military had possession. These were largely civilians. The buildings were greater and the streets were partly paved. There were motor cars and shops.

The cycle drew up at the curb.

“Here I leave you, Mam’selle. Ask anyone for the hospital. It lies on the hill at the back of town. With all my heart, I wish you happiness.”

“You have been kind, Monsieur. And you.” She turned to the driver.

The flying officer helped her gallantly to the walk and bent for an instant over her hand. People passing stared at them curiously and smiled. In another moment she was mingling with them, half dazed in the unaccustomed activity. She maneuvered to walk on the inside, nearest the shop windows.

The dust of the roads was on her and her hair was blown by the wind, yet Jeannine was unaware that she attracted attention. She was likewise unconscious of the smiles that were caused by the sight of her little bundle, a gay shawl wrapped about all her worldly possessions, which dangled from her hand. Smart officers in trim uniforms looked at her slim ankles and smiled at her daringly. Jeannine innocently smiled back.

A shopkeeper approached her eagerly, noting the longing in her eyes as she looked upon a dress in his window.

“Pardon, Monsieur,” she halted. “Perhaps you can direct me to the base hospital of Dijon?”

He paused, disappointed. “Yes, Mam’selle. It is there,” he pointed up the long street, “near the edge of town. You cannot miss it. Perhaps you want something for a patient—step inside—there are many things.”

“Thank you, not now.”

The nearness of the hospital weighed upon her heavily. She was almost afraid to go on. The knowledge that in a few minutes she would know the truth terrified her. Philip was lying there in a white bed waiting. No, they had sent him back to England. Or perhaps—there were always cemeteries near the hospitals. Row upon row of white crosses with little flags whipping in the breeze.

The thought sent a dull sickness through her and vaguely she was conscious of faltering. It would be worse than death now, when hope had risen so strong on the long road. She wondered, if he were alive, how badly wounded he might be and to what extent he had recovered. Would he know her? Could he speak?

The street now became a place of cottages, with pigs in their pens, and occasionally, a cow grazing in the weeds nearby. Half a mile ahead, in what had been in time of peace a luxurious estate, was the hospital. The main building stood above all the others overlooking the town, as its feudal owner himself might well have done in the period of Louis XIV. More recently, it had been a museum.

The traffic in the street flowed to and from the hospital and was essentially of it. Trucks, army cars, now and then an ambulance, with only rarely a civilian vehicle, moved swiftly past. On the sloping lawns she could see the figures of men. Some of them reclined in canvas chairs, others moved about haltingly, crippled.

On the screened galleries were white cots, bathed in the kindly French sunlight, swept by the soft breeze. As she drew nearer, Jeannine slackened her pace until her progress was slow indeed. It was an unconscious thing, for she was searching the grounds with her eyes, trying to anticipate what lay before her.

Oddly she remembered how she had danced into the dining room of the cottage at Berle Le Bois that night when Harley died. She had tried so foolishly to make them laugh and forget. Now, if she were to face Philip, she must be brave. There must be no tears, no surrender to the feminine instinct for weeping.

She came to the base of the broad stone stairs that reached up to the impressive door. Through the glass she saw white clad nurses moving about. With a supreme effort she braced herself and climbed resolutely, rehearsing her approach to those who held so much in their keeping.

Inside the door, Jeannine paused in a high old fashioned room that had once been a gorgeous reception hall. The woodwork of its lower walls was carved and polished by time. Glittering crystal hung in an exquisite cluster from the ceiling where some mural decorator of an earlier generation had painted a turquoise sky.

A middle aged woman in khaki uniform occupied a modern desk that seemed incongruous in its setting. She looked up from a mass of papers as Jeannine hesitated before her. The girl struggled to make her voice sound natural.

"Captain Philip Blythe, Madame, he is here?"

The woman regarded her curiously, not unkindly.

"Just a moment."

She began to finger a card index beside her. Presently, she found what she sought and nodded.

"Yes, he is here. His condition is serious." She added this last mechanically, as though she anticipated the next question.

Jeannine trembled and felt the blood surging to her head. She put her hand out on the desk to steady herself.

"Ah. An' where is he, Madame?"

"He cannot be seen. No visitors are permitted yet."

As she saw the girl's face turn pale, marked the odd tightening of her lips, the woman added: "Unless you are a relative——?"

"No. Just—a friend—a ver' dear friend, Madame."

The woman shrugged. It would be impossible. The rules were very strict. Captain Blythe was in a bad way. The surgeon had given explicit orders that he was not to be disturbed. Only relatives might see him at all and then only by special permission.

Jeannine could no longer restrain her emotions and her voice quivered.

"But Madame, you see, it is like th-e-e-s. Captain Blythe an' I—we are to be married. I have come long way—from Berle Le Bois—he will need me now. Is he—will he live, Madame?"

"His condition is serious. That is all I can tell you."

"An' could I not see him—jus' for one little moment?"

"Sorry."

Jeannine sobbed, leaning brokenly against the desk. Nurses and orderlies passing through the hall looked at her fleetingly and went on. The sound of sobbing, the sight of tears, was not new to them. Suddenly, Jeannine straightened, facing the woman before her.

"Then Madame, could you send word to him that I—Jeannine—am here? He will understand."

There was a moment's hesitation.

"Wait in there."

To Jeannine she indicated a smaller room off the hall in which a number of people sat in chairs ranged around the walls.

"Ah, thank you, Madame. Captain Philip—he will understand."

The woman nodded curtly and pressed a button on the desk. As Jeannine found a seat in the crowded little room, she saw an orderly halt at the desk. The woman spoke to him and he nodded, moving up the stairs.

Always without self-consciousness, Jeannine was scarcely aware of the others in the room. She was a strange figure among them. In her abstraction she had forgotten the dust on her garments, the queer little bundle in the shawl on the floor at her feet. Her shoes and stockings were spotted with mud from the road and her face was worn with long brooding.

She was dimly conscious of the hospital smells that permeated the halls. The thick sweet aroma of ether, the sharp tang of antiseptics, mingled on the air. All sound was muffled, though without apparent effort. The hospital attachés moved briskly in the corridors, spoke casually and often they laughed as they passed.

Ah, Mon Dieu, how could one laugh in this? Jeannine lived on through the endless wait, lost in her own thoughts. Step by step she followed the course of events since that night with Philip in the garden. It was such a little while ago, yet ages had passed and the world had altered. Was not the sight of him flying into battle suffering enough?

But no, there must be the terrible vision of his plunge. Then the suspense, followed by the knowledge that he lived. And that happiness shattered when they took him away from her. The hopes and disappointments on the road. Up and down, high and low. Must life be like this forever? Was it just a procession of peaks and valleys that the footsore traveler must follow to the horizon?

And now this. The end of the search. Lifted to the heights in the knowledge that she had found Philip alive, she must again go down into the shadowy ravines of doubt and dread, waiting. . . .

Was there no high place of security anywhere? A place where the vista ahead was full of sunshine and flowers, the trail behind forgotten?

An old woman in the adjoining chair leaned forward and tapped her on the knee, speaking in French.

"You must not think, petite. Wait till they tell you. I know. Twice before have I sat in this room as you see me now."

Jeannine turned slowly, endeavoring to force her mind back to the present reality.

"Your sons?" Her voice sounded far away and unlike herself.

"My son to begin with, child. They let me wait for a long time before I could see him. When I came again he was dead."

Jeannine shuddered at the old woman's calm acceptance.

"Then my husband—older than I. A shell—he died before I got here. It was some time before they told me."

"And now?" Jeannine voiced the query huskily.

"My second son. Eighteen—a baby."

Jeannine lowered her gaze and her hand fell on that of the woman, soothingly.

"You have suffered much."

"Eh, indeed. One gets used to it, child. With the sons, I expected something of this. They were in the lines. With my husband—at home in his chair, it was different. It was peaceful, almost. Then the shell—from miles away. That—" her thin voice cracked, "that was somehow even more terrible. I—twenty feet away—and the shell would not take me."

Jeannine looked her understanding wordlessly.

"And you," the woman pursued. "Is it—a brother? A lover, perhaps?"

Jeannine told her.

"As I say, you must not think things, petite. After it is over we become accustomed to the loss. So will you, in time, child."

To become accustomed to the loss. Jeannine repeated the phrase in her mind. Was that then, the high mark of achievement? Was it for that alone that certain ones must survive?

"What about your son? The one you are waiting for now?"

There was a hint of disbelief in the question, a doubt that this seared woman already had hardened herself to the loss. Jeannine saw that her manner had not escaped the other woman.

"I only wait," came the swift reply. "I do not permit myself to imagine. A thousand men are wounded, but some of them are given life. One may always hope."

"Ah, Madame, you are brave. With me, it is not so. I am a coward. I fear —I fear the next moment that it may bring some new pain."

A wan smile softened the worn face. "You are brave, petite. The fact of your presence here is enough, even if I had not heard your story. You are like all women. You will crawl in torture to know the truth—and when it comes, you will bear up under it. It has been so always, my child. It is the way of all women."

Jeannine half turned at the soft sound of rubber soled shoes in the corridor. The orderly leaned over the desk beyond and spoke to the woman there. She nodded and at the same moment, a heavier tread fell upon the marble floor. From her chair near the door, Jeannine saw the gleam of military boots descending the stairs, then the immaculate figure of an officer.

As her eyes went to his face when he reached the main floor, Jeannine gasped and rose swiftly. She glided toward him impetuously, forgetful of his high rank, oblivious of the others who stared at her amazed. The man who faced her was General Sir Allerton Blythe.

"Please, Monsieur le Generale—may I see Philip?"

Her voice trembled, betraying the smile that curved her lips. She stood before him looking up into his stern face that did not relax. Sir Allerton returned her gaze unemotionally, almost stonily. In that first instant of surprise he did not recognize her.

The woman at the desk had risen quickly, but now, with her eyes on the General, she waited. The orderly stood rigidly in his place, uncertain what to do, compromising by doing nothing. The instant seemed to lag on into eternity. Jeannine did not move. Time had ceased and life itself seemed to cling on the General's reply.

“Philip is dead.”

His a voice was calm. The expression of his face remained as though it had been chiseled. His penetrating eyes beneath their shaggy white brows looked steadily into her own.

“Ah.”

Jeannine’s hand moved in a little gesture and fell again to her side. She retreated a step, still with her unwavering gaze fixed on Sir Allerton.

“Philip—is—dead!”

She repeated it softly and turned toward the great door. She walked slowly, erect, yet it seemed that some vast suffocating burden weighted her steps. She moved out to the broad, sweeping stairs, blindly. She did not look back.

CHAPTER XVII

FORTITUDE

General Sir Allerton Blythe watched Jeannine for a moment and turned to the woman at the desk. He spoke a few words crisply and she shook her head, replying in a tone inaudible to the others who were near. Alone among those who watched the scene and guessed at its significance, the old woman who had comforted Jeannine was affected by its climax. Half aloud, she mused.

"She will suffer now. Each moment will seem like a year, for a time. But she will accustom herself to suffering, by and by—as we all do."

General Sir Allerton wheeled and moved up the stairs, his head bowed in thought. At the head of the winding, elaborate staircase, he turned down the corridor and paused before a door which bore the numerals 313. The moody expression on his face gave way to a smile as he entered.

Philip lay on a high white bed, beside him in a wide armed chair, Lady Iris. His face, once the color of oiled wood, was drawn and white. No answering smile came to his lips as his father faced him.

"Was it—was it Jeannine?"

"No, no. Certainly not. What would she be doing here?"

The old soldier struggled to keep the annoyance from his tone. Philip was looking straight into his eyes, searching for the truth.

"And now, my son, it is time for you to sleep. We shall see you again."

"Very well, sir." Philip's voice was noncommittal. He lay rigidly on his back. Both his arms were swathed in bandages that covered splints and a white bandage thickly encircled his head.

"Is there anything you want, Philip? Anything at all?" Lady Iris leaned over him.

"Nothing," Philip told her gently. "Nothing that you could bring, my dear."

"Au revoir. Try to rest, won't you."

Philip watched them leave together and his eyes glowed as the door closed behind them. He could not hear their words as they passed along the corridor.

"The boy is out of his head, Iris. This idiotic infatuation will be forgotten as soon as he is himself again."

Lady Iris smiled fleetingly and for an instant her face was wistful.

"I'm afraid not, Sir Allerton. You men aren't endowed with a great deal of penetration in matters of this sort. Philip is mad about the girl. Just as soon as he is able to reason, I intend to relieve him of—of any obligation."

"Come, come, Iris. You talk like a child. The boy is sick in mind and body. Can't you see that?"

"Not sick," she corrected him sagely. "Just wounded, my dear General."

Philip, deprived of the power to move about in his restless uncertainty, controlled his nerves with a reserve power of will. Silently, he cursed himself for his failure to make the situation clear to Lady Iris. He had hoped, when the orderly entered the room with his whispered message to the attentive Sir Allerton, that it would be Jeannine. In that case, he intended to announce himself before them all; to make a clean breast of it and to clear the atmosphere of doubt for once and all.

Thank heaven, it was not yet too late. Even if Jeannine were lost to him forever, he knew now that the memory of her would remain. It would be impossible to love a memory and live a lie, harsh as the alternative might be to Lady Iris.

His fancy roamed back to Berle Le Bois and played horrible tricks with him. Had the Germans resumed their shelling of the town, his vivid imagination told him, it was unlikely that Jeannine could have escaped unhurt. He already knew that the village had not been taken, but beyond this his inquiries at the hospital had been in vain.

The thought attacked him viciously, as it had a thousand times before. Dimly, he wondered if what the surgeons and the nurses said was true. He did not want to live. He offered no resistance to the spectre they were forever fighting off. That fleeting taste of love had left him with no desire to go on, lacking it.

Philip's eyes went to a book on the bedside table. Its green cover was stained and worn. They had sent it on with his kit, the one possession he had

brought out of civilization and peace, and clung to through the maelstrom of war. He recalled how the writer, through one of his characters, had summed up the whole of existence and wondered if the philosophy it expressed was true.

The book was Hugh Walpole's "Fortitude" and the passage, long since committed to memory, moved through his mind like some vast panorama, each phrase drawing its own sharp picture.

> ". . . out of the heart of the storm there came voices:—
>
> Blessed be Pain and Torment and every torture of the body. . . . Blessed be Plague and Pestilence and the Illness of Nations. . . .
>
> Blessed be all Loss and the Failure of Friends and the Sacrifice of Love. . . .
>
> Blessed be the Destruction of all Possessions, the Ruin of all Prosperity, Fine Cities, and Great Palaces. . . .
>
> Blessed be the Disappointment of all Ambitions. . . .
>
> Blessed be all Failure and the Ruin of every Earthly Hope. . . .
>
> Blessed be all Sorrows, Torments, Hardships, Endurances that demand Courage. . . .
>
> Blessed be these things—for of these things cometh the making of a Man. . . ."

If all that were true, he reasoned, then there was justification for the war itself. If to lose everything that had seemed to be worthwhile in life, qualified one to become a first rate man, the world would find a new type of honor and of ideals when again there was peace. So many of the survivors would have lost everything—excepting their lives.

Material loss didn't matter. His mentality shrugged at that. The destruction of property, the wrecking of cities—these could be repaired. But the failure of friends and the sacrifice of love; the disappointment of ambition and the ruin of hope?

Courage. That was the thing. Courage to carry on despite the losses. You had it, or, when the suffering became too great you broke beneath it. There was the test of a man. That was what was meant by fortitude. Well, he would carry on. But he would fly his own colors. When Lady Iris and Sir Allerton returned, he would unfurl them.

When they again came into the room Philip lay awake, staring unseeingly at the ceiling in his abstraction.

"You have been able to sleep, Philip? You look much better. Rested." Sir Allerton looked to Lady Iris for confirmation and she agreed.

"Father, I wish you'd do me a great favor."

"Anything, my boy. Anything in my power." The old man looked down questioningly.

Philip returned his gaze steadily. "In that case, it is simple. You have the authority. I want you to make inquiry at Berle Le Bois for Jeannine Berthelot."

Sir Allerton's ruddy face took on a deeper shade and his heavy brows lowered over eyes that suddenly took on a light of stubborn indignation.

"Come now, Philip. You are not well. You would not ask that, otherwise. You must see how impossible it is."

"Why?"

"That is obvious."

"I don't see it, father."

"Then you're more obtuse than I ever thought, sir. Does it occur to you that an officer of His Majesty's service does not use his authority to look for a—a nameless child?"

Philip turned to Lady Iris. He found her studying him strangely, with nothing of animosity in her expression.

"I think I understand, Sir Allerton." She spoke quietly and a half smile touched her lips and was gone. "We've discussed that, you know, and——"

"Well, I'll be damned if I'll listen to such nonsense." Sir Allerton rumbled and paused for a moment to turn an angry glance on Philip. "I'm going to leave you two together. Iris, I want you to talk sense to this boy. You know my opinion."

He wheeled and strode from the room impatiently. Lady Iris stroked Philip's cheek lightly and drew a chair beside his bed.

"I meant to talk to you about this before, Iris." Philip looked unwaveringly into her eyes. "You've been sporting about it. But of course, you'd understand. You always have."

“We have had a pretty good insight into one another, haven’t we, Philip?”

There was something boyishly eager about him and a wistful quality crept into his voice.

“You see, Iris, I’ve never thought of anyone but you. We always could laugh at things. As you say, we understood one another, even from childhood. It was—well, it was almost a foregone conclusion that you’d—marry me, wasn’t it?”

She nodded and laughed softly.

“That’s just it, Philip. It was a foregone conclusion. Why, my dear boy, we’ve never even been jealous of each other, have we? I’m quite certain I’ve never really been angry with you. I’m not the least jealous this moment, but I ought to be. We’ve let people jump at conclusions, Philip. Now they’ll just have to jump back.”

He lay silently for a time, thinking.

“Hang it,” he said at length, “I’m a rotter, Iris. I’ve gone on and on, without taking into consideration——”

“That I’ve been getting past the marriageable age,” she cut in swiftly. “But it’s been my fault as much as yours, Phil.”

He started to protest.

“No, this isn’t a time for chivalry,” she continued, relentlessly. “You meant just that. It’s what you were thinking. But really, my dear, it doesn’t matter, even if it’s true. I’ve never loved you emotionally, any more than you have me. We’ve fallen into the habit of thinking we love each other—that we are to marry—and have an estate in England—and raise children. Isn’t it so?”

“Yes. And I’d have gone on believing it, but for Jeannine. I can’t describe it, Iris. I can’t understand it. But I’ve never wanted anything in my life as I want her. Everything about her interests me—even her—inferiority. I mean,” he added quickly, “her social and intellectual inferiority. I want to cultivate her—watch her develop.”

“Of course.” Lady Iris became whimsical. “No man understands love when he feels it, my dear. It’s a woman’s master claim to sex superiority that she knows love instinctively. Jeannine now—she loved you that day when you lifted her out of that smash. You loved her, too. Neither of you would have admitted it. I doubt if you knew it. But Jeannine did.”

Philip was watching her slim hand resting on her knee. His ring glittered on her third finger. Her eyes followed his gaze and she laughed musically, starting to remove it.

"I would have forgotten that. It's become a habit—like all possessions."

"Please, Iris. Let's not get into heroics. I want you to keep that—a sort of memento——"

"Oh, a remembrance of our childhood, is that it? Very well, Phil. I'll keep it. But I warn you, I shan't wear it. As you intimated a while ago, it's kept all the eligible young men away. I simply don't intend to die single, my dear—I have a particular aversion to ancient virgins."

Philip was confused by her gayety, glad that she was unhurt, admiring her more than he had in all of their maturity.

"You needn't wear it." He fell into her mood readily. "And I predict that within the season your engagement will be announced. You'll reign supreme as a hostess, Iris, long after I'm forgotten. I'll be ostracized—an outcast. Will you ever let me come to you then—and pour out my troubles?"

"That may happen," she told him. "But only for a little while, Philip. Sir Allerton worships you. He'll damn you temporarily. As for coming to me," she became serious now and rose, looking down at him with the faint tracery of a smile on her lips, "we'll always be friends, Phil. Nothing can shatter that. And you'll always have troubles, I suppose. Men of your type do—impetuous, reckless, devil-may-care—but you're always loved by someone."

She bent down quickly and kissed him.

"Iris"—he flushed and his voice caught, "I say, you're awfully fine. There's no one quite like you——"

Her cool hand lay on his brow and she was bending over him in a gesture of close understanding when the door opened.

"Gad, it's damned pleasant to see you two are patched up." General Blythe beamed upon them as he entered the room.

Lady Iris straightened and there was a peculiar sparkle in her eyes that he mistook for gayety.

"Really, Sir Allerton, Philip and I never understood one another so well. But, I'm afraid—it's you who require the explanations."

The General halted at her expression and looked first at her, then at Philip.

"Iris quite agrees with me, father. I've told her the whole story. We've been foolish—to let you and everybody else go on thinking as you do. Iris and I are friends. We'll always be friends. But we're not going to be married, father."

"The devil."

Old Blythe reddened and stood rigid, as though a division passed before him in review.

"And may I have more of this—this damned foolishness?" he demanded.

Lady Iris faced him.

"It's quite simple, Sir Allerton. I think Philip has said it all. We're the best of friends. But I don't love him—not as a husband. And he loves Jeannine Berthelot. Certainly, there's nothing difficult to understand about that. She's charming. I've just been wishing him the greatest happiness in the world."

Sir Allerton controlled his emotion obviously.

"Then does this mean, Philip, that you really intend to marry this—this French girl?"

"If I can find her, father. And I shall never quit searching for her."

In the fleeting silence that was pregnant with Sir Allerton's anger, Lady Iris moved toward the door.

"I'm going for a turn in the conservatory," she announced. "And I do hope, Sir Allerton, that you'll try to understand."

When she had gone, the general sank heavily into a chair.

"You're not serious about this, Philip?"

"Yes father, I am. More serious than I've ever been about anything in my life."

"You realize what it will do," the older man went on, schooling his voice, struggling to reason with his son. "It will cast a stigma on the name, my boy. The Blythe men have been proud of their women. The blood's been pure English clear back."

“You’ll find no stain in Berthelot blood, father. They’re as old in France as we are in England. As for Jeannine, when you know her, you will see. I tell you sir, she is a woman for you to be proud of.”

Sir Allerton lost his iron control for a swift instant. “Damn it, Phil, you talk like a fool. Consider the army. What will they say at headquarters? The son of Allerton Blythe marrying some obscure servant in a French billet.”

Philip moved slightly and his expression hardened.

“Damn headquarters,” he said. “What they say won’t matter. It doesn’t matter a hell of a lot what they say, even in matters of warfare. And as for the French billet, sir, remember this. Jeannine is not a servant—she’s as much a soldier as—as you are, sir. She’s carrying on—that’s what we’re all trying to do—carrying on.”

CHAPTER XVIII

LILACS

DIJON was the same when Jeannine made her way from the hospital to the street below. She looked upon the people and the shops dully, aware of them with only half a mind. Philip is dead. The words kept revolving in her brain with unrelenting cruelty. Yet the town moved and throbbed about her as it had before.

Then, with high hopes lifting up her heart, she had seen the place and the people differently. The sunshine that had been radiant and soft now became a vast brilliance which revealed nothing, gave forth no warmth and was what it was—an expanse of nothingness.

It was like the life that stretched out ahead of her. An expanse of nothingness. A void. Philip was dead. Berle Le Bois was a chaos of shattered cottages. Somewhere was a garden of lilacs and among them a grave . . . and here in Dijon Philip was dead.

Jeannine crossed the street and would have been run down but for the drivers who shouted at her and swerved. She did not hear them. A little park reached out across a gentle slope in view of the hospital windows. There were benches along a path and sunning themselves everywhere, convalescent poilus and Englishmen in hospital uniforms.

She was seeing them, yet was unaware of them as men. They were images, some of them animated, some sitting quietly in the sunlight. She heard them when they spoke, but her brain did not register what they said. She was reminding herself over and again that Philip was not among them.

The spicy scent of lilacs wafted familiarly to her and she halted, looking about her. An ancient hag, bent and drawn by her labors of the years, pushed a small two-wheeled cart along the path, offering flowers and potted plants to all who passed. She did not have many sales among the soldiers.

Jeannine approached her.

"The lilacs, Madame. How much?"

"One franc, daughter. A big spray for your soldier sweetheart."

A single spray of lilacs for Philip's grave? Jeannine looked at the great lavender heap and breathed luxuriously, though suffering at their beauty and their scent. Her stock of francs was low—pitifully low. She would need all of it to carry her back to Nivanne. Unless—did she intend to return to Nivanne? Ah well, that could be decided later.

"Your price is high," she protested softly. "I have only——"

"The season is late, child. The lilacs are going. There will be no more in a little while, till spring. An old woman must live."

"Oui, oui, and the winter is long." Jeannine raised her hand and began to remove a ring, a gold band that had been long among the Berthelots.

"Your lover is badly hurt?" inquired the woman.

"Dead."

Jeannine removed the ring.

"Put it back, my child. Put it back and take lilacs."

The flower woman drew from her supply a dozen sprays and bound them swiftly with a cord.

"You and I—we appreciate them," she said. "It is too late for the dead—but it gives us satisfaction."

"But you cannot give them away," Jeannine protested. "You too, must eat——"

"I give away more than I sell. Each day, I heap them on the graves, child. I have two graves of my own, you see—my two sons."

She forced the lilacs into Jeannine's hand and smiled frostily.

"Take them. They are God's gift—not mine."

"May God reward you, old mother."

"Adieu, child. Grieve not too much. Forget, if you can. Forgetfulness is one of life's few mercies."

Jeannine watched her as she wheeled her little wagon down the path, acknowledging the greetings of the men who spoke to her. Presently, when the flower woman disappeared around a curve, Jeannine turned and walked slowly back toward the hospital. This time she walked with purpose.

As she paused at the base of the steps an ambulance whirled into the driveway noisily. She watched the attendants lift men on stretchers swiftly,

with apparent carelessness, but actually with tender care. She heard the groan of the last soldier as he was lowered from the ambulance and her eyes widened in horror as she saw the slow dripping of blood that trailed the stretcher on its way into the hospital.

An orderly came to the door as the patient disappeared. Jeannine approached him and he leaned against the wall, watching her curiously.

"Please, Monsieur, will you take these to Captain Philip Blythe?"

She held out the lilacs and her hand trembled. The man accepted them and his smile disappeared as he read the tragedy in her eyes.

"An' could you have them put beside his cheek, please?" Her voice sank almost to a whisper. "Captain Philip—you understand—he is dead."

"I'll try, miss. Friend of yours, is he?"

Jeannine bowed her head. "My ver' good friend, Monsieur."

"Shall I leave any word? Your name—or, anything?"

"He—it will be understood."

The orderly looked at her with sympathy in his eyes, marked the weariness in her face, the droop of her mouth and understandingly noted the dust on her clothes.

"Thank you, Monsieur. You are ver' kind," she added.

As he entered the hospital with the flowers in his hand, Jeannine once more turned away and moved slowly back toward the park. There would be a little while to rest. The thought of food sickened her. She wanted only to think. There was a decision to be made and it was for her to make alone. Life demanded effort. She had learned that and now she questioned whether a future without Philip would be worth the struggle. She wondered if it were in her to summon the courage that such an effort would require.

She came to a bench upon which were two convalescent officers, slouched dejectedly. She scarcely saw them, although she was aware of their scrutiny. Men always looked at her. As she appeared now, there was more than masculine admiration in their gaze, more than mere curiosity.

"Jeannine."

She whirled at the sound, breathlessly. One of the men half rose, reaching out with his free hand. The other hung in a sling over his chest.

"Ah—Rogers—Mon Dieu!"

The Infant of the Thirteenth Flight braced himself and in a moment, she was holding his hand in both her own.

"God, Jeannine, it's like a resurrection to see you. I've thought of you—dozens of times. Here—I can walk—tell me. What of yourself? Berle Le Bois? Everything."

He walked beside her and his companion on the bench watched them listlessly, with eyes that had been drawn by pain and disillusionment.

"I thought, Monsieur Rogers, that you—you had died—like the others."

He laughed grimly. His face had grown older, his manner more mature. He was like tempered steel now, hardened in white heat.

"No. Thanks to Blythe, I'm out of it. Steel plate in my head—a useless arm. But I'm alive—after a fashion, Jeannine."

At the sound of that name she quivered.

"Captain Blythe—he saved you?"

"He jolly well did, Jeannine, or I'd have been a goner. He picked a Boche off me in the nick of time."

He omitted mention of his own exploit in return.

"An' then?" Jeannine's question was scarcely audible.

"One of the damned devils got him later," said Rogers. "He was half way home. I didn't see him after he pulled me out. We got help from another squadron and I was flying with them. Thought Phil had come up with us. He'd started back instead—toward Berle Le Bois."

"An' you never heard of him?"

Rogers looked at her strangely. "Why, yes, of course. You've seen him, haven't you?"

"At Berle Le Bois," she told him. "Before he—died."

"Before he died?"

Rogers halted sharply, facing her. His eyes bored into hers questingly. "What do you mean, Jeannine? Phil didn't die. He's right here—in this hospital."

She nodded. "Yes, I know. I came after him. I was too late. Philip—he died—today."

Rogers put out his good hand, gripping her arm roughly.

"Who told you that?"

"His father, Monsieur, the General. Himself, he told me but a little while ago."

"Great God."

Rogers dropped his hand and his head bowed.

"It was only yesterday I talked to him. You must be wrong, Jeannine. He was coming around in jolly good shape, I tell you. Talking about his plans—about you——"

"About me?" she spoke softly, scarcely breathing.

"Oh, he always talked about you. Told how you were waiting for him at Berle Le Bois—he could remember only a little of that—he was trying to locate you. Worried sick that you'd been caught in the shelling. Couldn't understand why you didn't come to him—all that sort of thing."

An empty bench invited them and they took it as though by mutual consent.

"You say he remembered—Berle Le Bois?" she asked quaveringly.

"He remembered the crash. And you, dragging him to the cottage."

Jeannine choked back a sob, forcing herself to hear all that Rogers could tell her, living over again her torture as he talked.

"You see, Jeannine, Phil got here ahead of me. We didn't see each other for days—I didn't even know he was here. One of the surgeons told me. When I could get around I went to see him. He was still in a bad way, but he was carrying on. Lately, he's been picking up. Why, they said he'd be out almost as soon as I would——"

"It is not right—Philip—my own." Jeannine could fight back her suffering no longer. She wept silently. The tears would not come, only terrible sobs that seemed to tear at her heart and slow its beating. Rogers took her hand helplessly.

"Poor little girl." He tried to comfort her and failed. "You're right, Jeannine. He was the best one of the lot. I wish—I honestly wish it could have been me—I'm no use now, this way. I'll just go on living—for no reason at all. Phil—he would have been big——"

"You mus' not talk so." She half succeeded in controlling herself. "There is still the girl, Monsieur—the one of the little picture."

"Yes. But look at me, Jeannine. Useless—maimed——"

"She will not think so. An' you are not, Infant. Fate is what it is. You mus' get well an' go back to her in England. I—Jeannine—shall stay in France. Always I shall have Philip—already I am old. Now, with Philip gone—I mus' live for a long time, perhaps. But I tell you, Monsieur Rogers, it will be all for that night—all the years shall be jus' that one night."

He clung to her hand. "I understand, Jeannine. Do you remember—that night—you told me, love cannot die?"

"Ah, oui, oui, love cannot die. It used to sound strange to me at home. All things die, I thought. An' now, when all other things are dead—still there is love."

"Tell me more about Philip, Jeannine. What did General Blythe have to say about him?"

She described her meeting with Sir Allerton. "That was all he said," she explained. "Jus' that Philip is—dead."

"Didn't you see Philip at all?"

"No. Monsieur, the General, he was ver' stern. He turn away an' go back. I—I was afraid. An' so, I too, went away. But listen, Infant," she brightened, "I sent to Philip the lilacs—to be put beside him. He would want lilacs, I know."

For a few moments Rogers did not trust himself to speak.

"And what are you going to do now, Jeannine?" he asked, presently.

She shrugged. "I do not know. It does not matter."

"But it does matter, dear child. It matters a great deal. We've got to carry on, you know. Philip would have told you that. It was his pet theory, Jeannine—the idea of courage. I suppose he never had a chance to tell you. He carried a book around with him—by an Englishman. Used to set it up as a sort of chart for his own guidance."

"Philip—he would always have courage," she said simply.

"Fortitude—he lived for it. He would want you to have it. Can't I help you in some way, Jeannine? Anything—anything in the world in my power, little friend."

"There is nothing. An' you, Monsieur? Do you go back to England?"

Rogers nodded moodily. “Yes. I’ll be one of those parasites that hang on—talking about glory, I suppose. Showing my stump as though I’m glad the hand was lost for England. The usual rot.”

“Ah, you mus’ not talk so, Infant. It is not—what you call him in your country—not sporting.”

He smiled sadly and admitted the truth of her shaft.

“Sometimes Jeannine, I wonder if this business of being a good loser isn’t just a pretense—a damned lie. Nobody likes to lose. You can grin about it and pooh-pooh it all you please, but you’re not being sincere. When you lose you’re hurt.”

“Oui, oui, my friend. That is so. When we lose we are hurt. But what use to cry out so as to hurt others? But I—I am not the one to speak so to you, Monsieur. I—who cannot lose without tears.”

He caressed her hand gently and his eyes were soft with pity.

“You’ll carry on, Jeannine. You’re the bravest girl I ever knew.”

They were silent for a time, each lost in thoughts of the past, memories, oddly enough, that were of Berle Le Bois and the Thirteenth Flight at Berthelot cottage.

“When do you go back to England?” she asked, presently.

“I’ve been expecting my discharge here any day. Now—I’m going to apply for it today. I want to go back—with Philip. They’ll bury him at home, of course.”

“Ah, I was hoping you would do that.”

“Why, Jeannine?”

“Then you will know—where he is. You will write to me. An’ perhaps, some day, I can go to England—an’ stop beside his grave. You would do that, Infant, for me?”

“Indeed I shall, Jeannine. I’ll do more. I’ll send you the money to come. It won’t be a gift, Jeannine—or a loan. The Thirteenth owes you a great deal. I suppose I’m the last of the flight, so it’s my debt. You understand?”

He had risen and was standing before her boyishly eager. Jeannine smiled up at him.

“The Thirteenth owes me nothing—nothing,” she told him. “Money will be here, Monsieur, when I am to go. You will stay close to Philip—an’ tell

me where he lies. That is all, Infant."

"I will, Jeannine."

"Thank you, Monsieur. An' now, you mus' go. You will see him, I know. You will find the lilacs near him."

"And you—where are you going now?"

"To the church. See the cross?" She indicated the slim white spire in the distance. "I mus' light a candle for him now."

"I will come back here, Jeannine. Wait for me. Then, if you wish, I will take you in—to see him."

She raised a protesting hand and again her grief tore at her cruelly.

"No, no, Infant. I could not bear to see him there. Philip—he lives in my memory forever—as he was at Berle Le Bois."

CHAPTER XIX

AWAKENING

General Sir Allerton faced his son with a light of new understanding in his eyes. Until Philip spoke in this bitter tone, he had supposed the boy to be a victim of feverish wartime infatuation. Now, in Philip's harsh manner he read a grim determination that he was swift to recognize as a trait of the Blythe clan.

"I grant you that the girl is to be commended," he admitted, in a tone of conciliation. "I'm not trying to detract from her qualities, Phil, not for a moment. I'm trying to point out the common sense road to you."

"Thank you, father." Philip too, became less vitriolic. "But really, you know, I'm going to choose my own road. This isn't a thing to be argued, or reasoned. It may be true that Jeannine's social standing doesn't rate with ours. But you see, pater, I don't care a damn about social standing. And I love Jeannine."

He spoke with finality. Sir Allerton's heavy face clouded, but he controlled his emotion admirably. He spoke now more in the manner of an officer to one of inferior rank, than as father to son.

"You understand, Philip, I forbid this thing. I want you to give it serious thought while you're here."

"It has had my serious thought, sir. I've decided."

General Blythe ignored the retort. He dismissed the subject from his military mind, schooled to frame commands and expect obedience.

"Iris will be back soon. Shall I order our dinner in your room?"

"I'd prefer that you didn't, sir. I'm not in the least hungry."

"You might at least be a gentleman, Philip. You're being beastly to Iris."

"She doesn't think so, father. I believe you'd get a better understanding by talking to her. Suppose you two have dinner and let me sleep. I'm damned tired."

“Very well.” Sir Allerton hesitated. “I’m sorry you can’t see my point, Philip. It’s the first time we’ve ever come down like this—it’s crass.”

“I see your point,” Philip replied, a little wearily. “But I don’t accept it.”

The old man left the room silently, looking older, somehow less erect and warlike than he had before. Philip closed his eyes and gave himself to his reflections. Now that he had cleared the air of doubt, he felt better, more at peace with himself and the world. His first problem lay in recovery. Then he would find Jeannine.

In an incredibly short time he was asleep. . . .

Sir Allerton, moving ponderously along the hospital corridor toward the conservatory, found himself confronting a young patient in uniform who saluted smartly with his one good hand. He returned the gesture carelessly. Why the devil did these fools follow regulations in a hospital? It was distracting. Hanged if he wouldn’t wear civilian clothes when he came again.

“Sir—I beg pardon. May I speak to you a moment?”

The youth stood rigidly in his path.

“What is it?” The general spoke testily, assuming his army poise.

“I’m Lieutenant Rogers, sir—of the Thirteenth Flight—your son, Philip—I’m told he is—dead, sir.”

“Dead?”

For the moment, General Blythe forgot his brutal announcement to the shabby girl in the hall below.

“I talked with him only yesterday, sir. It’s hard to——”

“Why, damn me, Phil is as much alive as you are. Where’d you get the idea——?”

The general broke off the question unfinished as he recollected Jeannine.

“I was in the park sir, when Jeannine—that’s the little girl from Berle Le Bois—came dragging along like a corpse herself. It was she who told me ——”

“Ah, that’s it. I understand.” Sir Allerton looked at Rogers shrewdly. “Yes, I told her that myself. It was a harsh method—even cruel—but, look here, Rogers, do you know anything of her? Do you know that Philip has an idea he’s going to marry her?”

Rogers looked puzzled, then his face grew white and his muscles became taut beneath his uniform.

"Yes sir, I do. She—why, I tell you sir, the girl is suffering the tortures of the damned. I can find her yet—" he half raised his hand in a departing salute.

"Hold on here." General Blythe's words were a command. "You'll do nothing of the sort."

Rogers stiffened and stood at attention.

"I want this—this Jeannine—to go to her people, where she belongs," the General resumed. "And furthermore, Rogers, you'll say nothing either to her, or to Philip about this. So far as she's concerned, he is dead. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well."

"But sir, you can't understand what she's——"

General Blythe waved a hand in a gesture of dismissal.

"She'll get over it." He adopted a kindlier tone now, more patronizing. "You youngsters are too full of romance. You flew with Philip. Doesn't it occur to you that a man of his position can't marry a girl of that sort?"

Rogers moved uneasily.

"Why, if I may so, sir, Jeannine isn't at all what you seem to think. The men of the Thirteenth fairly worshipped her. She was an angel to us. She used to——"

"Tommy rot. She was a pretty girl. And you were away from home and your own sort. This is all a parcel of sentimental slush."

It would not do to contradict a general. Rogers thought swiftly and forgot that he was a soldier of His Majesty's Royal Flying Corps.

"I beg your pardon sir," he said, very quietly, standing straight and slim before the bulk of the General. "I am in a most peculiar situation. I am honor bound to tell Jeannine about this, sir. I am bound as a friend to tell Philip. But you forbid that. I—I shall have to explain to her."

General Blythe was on his own ground instantly. Here was an inferior who sought to defy him.

“You mean Rogers, that you will disobey my order?”

“I shall have to, sir, if you make it an order.”

“You know the penalty for insubordination?”

“I do, sir.”

Vague though his knowledge was of the military machine, Rogers sensed that he had the General at a disadvantage. This, he felt, was personal insubordination. Moreover, he doubted that General Blythe would want the matter brought before a court martial. He waited in silence.

“Before you do this,” General Blythe dropped his commanding tone, “go to your room and think it over. I can understand your viewpoint perfectly. Try to understand mine, my boy. I’m an old man. I’ve seen too many young officers do this sort of thing. It’s natural for me not to want my son doing it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Rogers stood while the General strode away, drawn by conflicting doubts and emotions. Not for an instant did he waver in his determination to find Jeannine and tell her that Philip was alive. He paused now, only to chart his course with Philip. In any event, he decided, Jeannine must be told first. That was his duty of the moment.

Accordingly, he moved back toward the stairs intending to make his way across to the park. Jeannine would return when she had knelt before the slim candle that burned for Philip in the little church of Dijon. In the sunlight of the park he would tell her. Perhaps this was his great opportunity to repay her and Philip, in a measure.

Philip, in the meanwhile, slept dreamlessly, the first unworried rest he had enjoyed for days. His brain, having made its decision, drifted into unconsciousness, relieved of its burden. He had, in those last drowsy moments before sleep, determined to recover speedily. It would be some time before he could be sent back into service and it was during that interval he hoped, that he would find Jeannine.

When the orderly tapped softly on his door, Philip did not hear him. The man entered on rubber soles bearing Jeannine’s lilacs. He looked at Philip curiously. Suddenly he drew back, aware that the man on the bed was breathing.

“Hell,” he muttered softly.

Philip stirred, but did not open his eyes. The orderly knew that he was in the right room—313—listed on the chart below for Captain Philip Blythe, R.F.C. The girl had said Captain Philip Blythe. But she also had said he was dead. Well, the man reasoned swiftly, she had a surprise coming. He would leave the flowers anyway, as she had asked. He bent down and placed them carefully beside Philip's cheek. In a moment he had gone.

Philip moved uneasily in his sleep. His consciousness was roused by the scent of lilacs. His eyes opened slowly and he saw the familiar room. They closed again and his mind, functioning like an idled motor, carried him into a state half between wakefulness and sleep. He was back in the garden at Berle Le Bois. Jeannine was in his arms and the air was fragrant. Shortly after dawn he was to take off with the Thirteenth and there would be no returning.

"But, I shall come back. By God, I shall come back." His lips mumbled unintelligibly as his racing brain formed the promise.

"An' I shall be waiting for you, Philip, my own. Here in the garden of the lilacs, I shall be waiting."

Jeannine's voice, soft and flowing huskily in the moonlight. He knew its cadence, loved its inflections. She was in his arms, responding to his kisses, her heart beats throbbing against his own. . . .

He awakened sharply. The spiced aroma of the flowers struck on his senses now no longer numbed by sleep. The lilacs touched his cheek and he cried out.

"Jeannine—you have come to me."

Only the silence answered. He struggled with the bandages that bound his shattered arms. The right arm was useless. Life was returning to the left one and with this he fought, oblivious of the shooting pains that seared into his shoulder. The bandage slipped and he drew the arm free, slowly. His fingers went about the stems of the lilacs beside him. He buried his face in the blossoms, inhaling their fragrance.

Only Jeannine would send lilacs. In a little while she would come to him. She might be waiting now. They had made her remain somewhere until his awakening. Jeannine, on this of all days. He reached out for the little buzzer that would summon a nurse. She came in hurriedly, wondering how 313 had rung with his trussed up hands.

"Tell her to come now—please." Philip's face was flushed and his eyes gleamed as though with fever.

The nurse was astonished.

“Who are you talking about? And what have you been doing with that bandage?”

She was over him quickly, straightening the pillow, adjusting the loosened coils that hung from his arm.

“Oh, damn that bandage.” Philip laughed hoarsely. “A girl is down in the waiting room. She sent these flowers. Bring her here. Run along now and be a good fellow.”

“But Captain, I’m on this floor. There’s been no girl to see you. I didn’t see anyone come in. Where did you get these flowers?”

“She sent them, of course.” He spoke impatiently. “Go down. You’ll find her, child. Her name is Jeannine—Jeannine Berthelot.”

“I’ll have to fix your bandage first.”

“Not by a damn sight,” he protested quickly. “That arm is all right. I’m going to need it. You can hang it up again later—after I’ve seen her.”

His grin was infectious. The nurse smiled and paused at the door.

“If you’ll lie perfectly quiet till I get back——?”

“Hit the gun. I will.”

When she went out he forced himself to lie at ease. His heart hammered with the staccato rhythm of a flying motor, driving the blood through his veins in pulsing surges. At the faint sound of a hand on the door knob Philip grew rigid, no longer able to keep his body relaxed. He half turned his head as the nurse entered.

“There’s nobody here,” she said. “I went clear down to the office. They said nobody had been here, except your father and—Lady Rankin.”

“They lie.”

Philip tried to sit up and fell back heavily.

“They lie,” he repeated. “Jeannine—she has been here. They sent her away. Well, by God, they can’t keep me here then. I’m going—after her.”

The nurse opened the door swiftly and signalled. An orderly followed her back into the room.

“We’ll have to fix that arm, sir.” The man was respectfully firm.

Philip lay back quietly. “All right. Go ahead.”

He did not move or speak while they bound the arm, but each time they turned their eyes away, or when they were not holding him in such a way as to feel his action, he tensed his muscles and relaxed. When at length they finished, the bandage was secure enough and neat, but actually less binding than the first one.

"Will you put those flowers in a vase, please?" He addressed the nurse in a schooled voice.

"Certainly, Captain."

She watched him while she worked and on a pretense of other duties, the orderly too, hovered in the room. Philip closed his eyes, pretending to have mastered his emotion. Between nearly closed lids he saw the meaning glances that passed between his guards. So they thought he was feverish, even delirious. Presently, he feigned sleep.

When they went out together, Philip continued to lie at ease. As he had anticipated, the nurse partly opened the door in a few moments, studied his face and nodded her satisfaction. As she closed the door he began over again the struggle to loosen the bandage.

It was easier this time. Still cautious, aware that the nurse might return at any moment, he lay for a time waiting. Then, inch by inch, he drew his long, muscular legs from beneath the sheets. With his free hand he gripped the edge of the bed. Surprising how weak he was. It made him dizzy to look at the floor. But somewhere out yonder was Jeannine.

He rested briefly. When he felt that he dared the attempt, he slowly raised himself to his feet, still leaning against the bed. There was an expanse of five feet to the nearest chair. He made the distance without lifting his bare feet from the floor. The chair was an oasis where he paused again for rest.

Seven feet more he judged the window to be. He stumbled only once and went to his knees. He flung the good hand out to brace his fall and to prevent any sound. Primarily, to avoid any noise. Ah, he could see out across the sweeping hospital garden, down to the street and on to the park.

Soldiers moved about, some on crutches, others in wheel chairs and not infrequently there was one in a basket lugged by attendants. Poor devils, without legs, hopelessly maimed, doomed to lives of torture. Somewhere, out in the movement yonder, Jeannine would be. She would not have gone away after leaving the flowers. Her message to him was as clear as though she had spoken.

Jeannine. His lips moved as he breathed the name. She had kept the faith. At Berle Le Bois she had been waiting. And now at Dijon, she was waiting still. His eyes roved over the scene from figure to figure. He would search for her with system—start on the left as far as his vision carried—then travel along to the right—miss no one.

In the next moment he saw her. She was walking alone, slowly. Her head was bowed.

CHAPTER XX

TOGETHER

PHILIP braced himself in the window. His shoulder was against the frame so that his hand was free. He was unconscious of the dryness in his throat, nor did he know that his lips moved. He was likewise unaware of the smile that came to his face, as though Jeannine would see it when she looked up.

She would look up. He was sure of that. He had felt her looking into the sky when earth was far below his range of vision. Through space and into infinity, they had reached one to the other, so that he was confident now. No such narrow expanse as this could separate them. He made no effort to wave when he saw her head lift slowly as she reached the path that wound on into the park.

It did not matter that there were dozens of windows across the front of the building. There might be white clad figures leaning framed in many of them, but that too, would be nothing. Jeannine would see his window. He would draw her gaze with his own.

Philip's body was quivering, yet still he did not wave. He saw her halt suddenly as she looked up. Something fell from her hand. It was a small shapeless bundle. She stooped to retrieve it and staggered. Then, straightening, she came on toward the grounds. It was not until he could see her eyes, wide with doubt, that he raised his hand.

As Jeannine ran up the wide stone stairs that led to the hospital entrance, Philip moved slowly back toward his bed. He sat down dizzily, conscious of a whirling sensation in his brain, too dazed to dwell on any thought but one. Jeannine was coming to him now. This moment she was in the great hall below. She would run swiftly up the stairs, turn down the corridor and reached the door marked 313.

The handle on the door turned. Philip faced it quickly, breathlessly. His nurse entered the room, closing the door behind her. She was in a state of nervous excitement, obviously frightened.

“You must get back into bed,” she spoke hurriedly. “If you don’t, I’ll call the doctor.”

“Directly,” Philip told her steadily.

“No, right now.”

The door opened again and Sir Allerton strode in, followed by Lady Iris.

“What the devil?” He looked at Philip strangely, then at the nurse.

“Father, will you tell this girl to let me alone for a minute? And will you send Jeannine up here—right now? She’s waiting down stairs.”

“Oh, sir, please—” the nurse cringed, “we tried to keep her out. She got flowers in somehow——”

Lady Iris stepped in between them. She spoke to Philip.

“You say Jeannine is waiting?” she asked, coolly.

“Yes, Iris. I’ve seen her—from the window.”

She turned to the nurse imperially. “You’ll find Miss Berthelot below. Bring her here immediately.”

Sir Allerton, red faced, breathing heavily, sank into a chair.

“Damn it, Phil, what are you doing out of bed, sir?”

Philip looked at him for a long, intense moment and his voice, when he answered, was full of fiery scorn.

“In bed, I’m helpless against the sort of tactics you employ, sir. I’m surprised, rather, that you speak of the Blythe honor. You seem to have lost it yourself.”

The old soldier lowered his gaze to the floor and the anger in him was withered in the heat of Philip’s words.

“Phil, my boy—I—I thought I was doing the right thing. It was, I considered, for your own best interests. Iris has straightened me—I see now, what I didn’t understand before. I’m sorry, Phil. Will you forgive me?”

There was an instant’s hesitation. Philip looked first to Lady Iris with his gratitude in his eyes.

“It isn’t a matter of forgiveness now, father. It was misunderstanding. I’m glad—Iris, my dear—you’re awfully fine.”

The door swung out on silent hinges. Jeannine stood for a moment, silhouetted against the white of the walls behind her. The nurse waited for a brief instant and disappeared. Jeannine's eyes were on Philip. She seemed to have observed neither of the others. Yet still, she did not move.

"Jeannine."

"Philip."

She came forward and fell to her knees, burying her head in her hands. Her sobbing was the only sound in the room. From the streets of Dijon came the rumble of trucks, with now and then the sound of voices.

Philip's hand went out to rest upon her dark, gleaming hair.

"Jeannine, darling—aren't you going to—to kiss me?"

She rose and flung her arms about him, kissing his lips, his eyes, still crying brokenly, murmuring in French.

"Philip—my own—they tol' me—they said you were—dead."

The word left her lips haltingly, as though it were a forbidden thing. Philip looked at his father whose eyes were dimmed by tears of shame that had come to him suddenly.

"God, how rotten!"

His hand caressed her moist cheek and he smiled.

"Well, I'm not dead, dear one. I wanted to be—when it seemed that you were gone. God knows I wanted to be."

She looked about her now and her gaze went to Lady Iris. A cloud of bewilderment encircled her and wrote itself in her expression. She turned questioning eyes to Philip.

"You see, Jeannine, Lady Iris understood from the beginning. She's been the finest friend ever, darling. In fact, it was she who brought us together just now."

General Blythe straightened in his chair and rose stiffly. He seemed to have aged, and in the process had become humble.

"Jeannine, my child, I owe you more than apology," he said, his voice vibrant with emotion. "I made a horrible mistake—I have asked Philip to forgive me. Now I ask you?"

Jeannine smiled through her tears. “Ah, Monsieur, there is now no need. All is well. You see, Philip an’ I—we are together.”

Lady Iris walked to the window to look out across the hospital grounds. Her back was to the room so that it was impossible for them to see the fleeting movement of her tiny handkerchief as it touched her eyes. When she again faced them she was smiling.

“And now, if I’m not mistaken, it’s time for the blessings upon you, children.”

“Yes, yes.” General Blythe was eager to sound his approval. “That is,” he looked at Philip and Jeannine swiftly, “if you’ll accept them. I—I give them freely.”

“Thanks, father. It’s good to have you like yourself again.” Philip held Jeannine in his good arm, stroking her hand ceaselessly.

There was a hesitant knock at the door.

“Come,” Philip called.

As the door swung open, General Blythe was first to speak.

“Ah, come on, Lieutenant. I knew damned well you’d not obey my orders.”

Rogers, the Infant, saluted stiffly and stood fixed in the doorway. His eyes were riveted on the General, yet he was seeing the others in a blur. Sir Allerton laughed gruffly.

“Come in, Rogers, come in. The jig’s up. Look at them.”

The Infant turned to Philip and Jeannine.

“Gad, Phil. Then she—she found you.” He looked around at the General to find him smiling. “I’ve been—chasing all around Dijon looking for you, Jeannine. You see, I wanted to——”

He caught himself, hesitating to explain before Sir Allerton.

“Go on, Rogers. Tell them. More of my villainy, Phil. This young devil was hunting Jeannine to tell her you were here and kicking. You see, I couldn’t have kept you apart anyway—not even with a court martial.”

Philip grinned.

“Good boy, Rogers. The Thirteenth never did bother much about discipline, did we?”

“Not—not in an emergency, anyway.” The Infant still was uncertain of himself.

Lady Iris moved toward the door. “I’m going to do you another favor, Phil.” She laughed lightly. “Come on, Sir Allerton—and you, Lieutenant. It seems to me that Phil and Jeannine should be together—alone.”

They laughed in accord and followed her. The door closed after them. Philip cupped Jeannine’s chin in his hand, raising her face so that he might look into her eyes.

“Together,” he said softly. “Together—alone.”

“Philip—my dear, I am so ver’ happy.”

“And I too, dear one. It’s been a long road to travel—from Berle Le Bois to—this.”

Her head lay against his shoulder and he drew her close. The sounds of Dijon came in faintly. The room was scented with the lilacs that lifted their lavender blossoms from the slim vase on the table. Somewhere far off in the distant sky, a lone plane droned out toward the lines, where the rumble of war yet sounded. In the hospital room there was peace.

ADDENDUM

From The London Times, June —, 1917.

Captain Philip Blythe, R.F.C., one of two survivors of the heroic Thirteenth Flight, returned to London today with his bride, who was Mlle. Jeannine Berthelot, of Berle Le Bois, France.

Their marriage culminated a war time romance which began when Captain Blythe reported for duty with the famous Thirteenth Flight, of which Mlle. Berthelot was "the guardian angel."

General Sir Allerton Blythe, commanding the ——th. Division, B.E.F., attended the wedding ceremony in the Base Hospital at Dijon, where his son was recovering from wounds received in action.

It is a coincidence that at the Battle of Waterloo a Berthelot commanded a French regiment for Napoleon, while a Blythe led a brigade of the victorious British.

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[The end of *Lilac Time* by Guy Fowler]