

BRIDE of BATTLE

A Romance of the American Army Fighting on the Battlefields of France

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

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CHAPTER VII.

On the way to the war department the following morning he was puzzling over the affair, Kellerman's presence in Mrs. Kenson's house, and Kellerman's possible connection with Hartley, who watched Eleanor.

He could not arrive at any but the most fantastic solutions.

Kellerman welcomed him with his usual suavity. They carried up the papers from the safe; then Kellerman called Mark into his own office.

"About last night, Wallace—" he began. "Of course you acted all right, as you understood the situation, but there was a good deal that you did not understand. That man you took home to your rooms is a sort of international stool pigeon, if I can coin the phrase. Quite despicable—the one-time gentleman who has lost his honor; and dangerous, because he knows things that nobody would credit him with knowing. I suppose you wonder what I was doing in Mrs. Kenson's place?"

"Not at all, Major Kellerman." "My dear Wallace," said Kellerman, laying a hand on Mark's shoulder. "I want to give you a piece of advice. This is quite apart from our work here. I don't think your qualities are adapted to headquarters work. Go back to your battalion—or, rather, take advantage of your friends in Washington to secure a good post—he emphasized the adjective—"in regimental work."

And as Mark looked at him in stupefaction, Kellerman added coolly: "I am not speaking officially, my dear Wallace. Take the suggestion as a friendly one. If I can make it a little clearer to you, your presence in Washington is inconvenient to me for personal reasons. I think you will appreciate the reasons—the reason, rather."

The man's insolence was maddening. Mark's impulse was to dash his fists into his face. But discipline told.

Mark saluted stiffly and went away. He sat down at his desk, fuming. Of course Kellerman had referred to Eleanor; and it suddenly occurred to Mark that Kellerman might have made a good deal of headway during his absence.

Mark and Colonel Howard occupied a small room at the end of the corridor; the clerks' room was without; between the two, accessible from each, was Kellerman's office, which communicated, in turn, with the Brigadier's.

Colonel Howard came in after a while, and they went over their plans together. They were engaged on a complicated piece of work, involving tonnage and computations of cubic feet of space for cargoes. There had been an error somewhere, and Mark was trying hard to discover it when the Brigadier came in in his usual irascible manner.

"How long will that job take, Howard?" he asked.

"Wallace will have it finished by noon, sir," answered the Colonel.

The Brigadier waved Mark to his seat impatiently. "Bring it right in to me as soon as you have the figures, please," he said. "I'll wait for it. Sure you can be through by noon?"

"I'm sure, sir," answered Mark, who was hot on the trail of the error.

The Brigadier withdrew, taking the Colonel with him for a conference. Mark worked steadily. The omission was found, the computations were balancing. A clerk knocked at the door.

"What is it?" asked Mark impatiently.

"A man to see you, sir. He says his name's Hartley. Shall I show him in?"

"Good Lord, no! I'll see him in the waiting room," answered Mark.

He locked the office door, went through the clerks' room and into the anteroom. Hartley was standing beside the window. He looked up sheepishly as Mark entered.

"Well?" asked Mark crisply.

Hartley grinned. "I didn't take the cups or the picture, Captain Wallace," he said.

"Well, what about it? What can I do for you?"

"Why, I—I wanted to tell you as much, Captain Wallace. I've sunk low, but not to theft. Only I didn't feel I could stay."

"Good Lord, man, is that all you have come to tell me?"

"Well, you see—there was something else, but—" stammered Hartley.

"Out with it, then?"

"I wanted to thank you for what you did for me, and—"

The man seemed to be trying to spin out the interview for some indefinite purpose. Mark turned on his heel. His temper was not of the best just then, and Hartley was the last man in the world whom he wanted to see.

clear of that woman—of Mrs. Kenson, Hartley. It's evident that she doesn't reciprocate your feelings, or whatever they are, and she seems to have some dangerous friends about her."

He relented suddenly, and, going forward, clapped the man on the shoulder.

"I guess you've had your troubles, Hartley," he said. "But pull yourself together, man."

The sheepish, unmanly mask dropped from Hartley's face. He caught Mark's hand impulsively.

"I'm a cur, Captain Wallace!" he cried. "I—I—"

"That's all right, Hartley. But, by the way, who told you my name?"

"Captain Wallace, don't ask me that! Go back! Never mind me! Go back into your office at once!" cried Hartley.

He broke past Mark with a sudden, spasmodic movement, gained the door, and ran down the corridor. Mark looked after him in stupefaction. Hartley had not been drunk, and his presence there had seemed purposeless. Suddenly, with an intuition of danger, he hurried through the clerks' office, unlocked his door, and entered.

The room was filled with a furious gust of wind. The mobilization papers were whirling on his desk in front of the open window.

The circular fan, which had been distributing a gentle breeze impartially from side to side, now poured its current of air immediately upon Mark's desk. The rotary movement had been stopped, and it had been set to maximum speed.

And this was not the small fan customarily in use in the little office, but a large one from the clerks' room.

When Mark had left to interview Hartley, he had seen Kellerman at work through the glass door that connected their two offices. Now Kellerman's desk was vacant.

Mark slammed down the window; there were two locks, and Mark and Kellerman had each a key. Nobody could have entered.

But Mark was positive that Kellerman had set the fan. It stood on a shelf against the partition. Looking up, Mark saw that there was a tiny hole immediately behind it, large enough to permit an inserted wire to push back the lever that controlled the rotary apparatus. Yet this might have been nothing but a wormhole in the wood framework of the door.

With a gasp of rage Mark hastily stopped the fan and ran back to his desk. He began collecting the papers. They had blown hither and thither, some had fallen behind the desk, some on the radiator. The floor was littered with them.

Had any gone out of the window? There should have been two hundred and nine. There was nothing to do but count them. Mark began, but his fingers trembled so that he could hardly turn the pages.

In the very middle of this task the door clicked; the Brigadier and Colonel Howard entered.

"Well, Wallace, finished, I hope?" asked the Brigadier with the cordiality of one who has been refreshed by a good dinner. "Let me see!"

Mark turned the leaves nervously, while the Brigadier and Howard stood silently beside him.

He reached the end. He had counted exactly two hundred. That might have been an error. But the paper was not there.

He looked up to see the Brigadier peering into his face with an extraordinary expression. He heard himself stammering, fumbling for words; he stopped.

Colonel Howard sprang forward and caught him by the shoulder. "Wallace, my dear fellow, pull yourself together!" he was pleading. "What's that you're saying? Blown out of the window? It's the heat, sir. He's been overdoing it."

"Very possibly," said the Brigadier caustically. "Pray have a look, then, Howard. Take your time."

Mark was searching again. He stopped as they came to the last paper, which was now the two hundred and third.

"It's no use, Colonel Howard," he cried. "It has gone out of the window. I was called out. When I came back the fan was turned on my desk and the papers were blowing about the room. Somebody—perhaps the mechanism slipped. I don't know. I'm tired—my God, how tired I am!"

The Colonel was pushing him into a chair. He heard the storming voice of the Brigadier a long distance away. Howard was expostulating. They were going through the papers again. A clerk had been called in. Mark heard something about searching the streets. Somebody was telephoning. And, above all, he was conscious of Kellerman in the next room, long before he opened the glass door and entered.

He was alone, and struggling back into the realization of his situation. Kellerman's threat and his refusal to consider it, the visit of Hartley, began to link themselves into the chain of the devilish conspiracy. He rose unsteadily to his feet, wiping the sweat from his forehead. Colonel Howard was coming through the open doorway from Kellerman's room.

"Sit down, Wallace," he said gravely. "I've been talking to the Brigadier, or, rather, he's been talking to me. You must consider yourself under arrest in your quarters. Now, how did this damned thing happen?"

Mark explained as lamely as one who had heard excuses of all kinds from soldiers brought before him for various offenses during his term of service, and waved them aside.

"You know what this means, Wallace?" asked the Colonel in a kindly,

serious tone.

"New plans."

"Yes, but to you?"

"I guess so, Colonel Howard. And I'd like to hurry it through. Of course I shall want it over. I'll go home now, and—"

"Stop!" Colonel Howard's challenge had a triumphant ring to it. He placed his hands on Mark's shoulders and swung him round, looking straight into his eyes. "Thank God for that, Mark!" he cried. "I fought the Brigadier over you, and I'll fight him to the end of time. I told him it was a damned lie. I'll swear to it."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"That you are a frequenter of gambling houses, Wallace. That's the story that they have been putting over on him. You know whom I mean by 'they.' Washington's swimming with that crooked gang, and that story—well, they managed to start that in circulation and saw that it reached the Brigadier's ears. He heard that you were in a fight outside Mrs. Kenson's place in the small hours this morning. Mark, I'll see you through this."

Impulsively the kindly old man started toward the door. He had almost reached it when Wallace found his tongue.

"Stop!"

The Colonel halted, one hand still outstretched toward the door. "Eh, my boy?" he asked.

"One moment, sir! I cannot let you go to the Brigadier. I have never been inside a gambling house in my life, but I was outside Mrs. Kenson's place last night."

A sudden feebleness seemed to come over the Colonel.

"Tell me about it, Wallace. Tell me why you went there. You know her, then? Don't you know that she's—"

"I know nothing about her, sir. I merely ask you not to go to the Brigadier. I shall proceed to my quarters."

"You understand there will be a court-martial?"

"Naturally, sir."

"The war department hasn't much superfluous time on its hands to wash its dirty linen. We want to get ahead. We want to forget this. I think if you will send in your resignation—"

"You shall have it tonight, sir."

CHAPTER VIII.

Mark rushed to the street and found himself face to face with Eleanor.

She was coming out of a store, and going, evidently, toward the cab which was waiting against the street curb. They almost ran into each other.

Mark lifted his hat mechanically, and thought she was about to pass, but suddenly she took him by the arm, and looked at him earnestly, extreme concern upon her face.

"What's the matter, Uncle Mark?" she asked. "You're ill—you're looking frightfully ill."

"Well, it's a pretty hot day," said Mark.

"Yes, but you can stand heat, Uncle Mark. You don't look fit to be around. How long have you been ill, and have you been working all the time, and why didn't you send for me?"

"I'm not ill, Eleanor," said Mark, trying to smile.

"Then why haven't you been to see us? Have you forgotten our talk that night? What's the reason? Tell me!"

"Your father keeps our noses to the grindstone, Eleanor."

"That isn't true, and please don't play with me as if I were a child, Captain Wallace. Come, get into this cab at once! I am going to take you home and have Mrs. Howard look after you at once. Oh, you are laughing!"

It was rather a grim jest to Mark, but it occurred to him that it would help to allay Eleanor. She drew away from him and looked at him with those keen, scrutinizing eyes that had in some measure discomfited him at the Misses Harpers' school.

"Uncle Mark," she pleaded, "do tell me why you are acting so horribly when I am only thinking of you. It's just the way you acted that other night until we got to understand each other. And tell me why you haven't come to us."

"Well, Eleanor, the truth is," said Mark, "the work at the office has just about taken it all out of me. And then, in my position, of course there are visits that I must pay."

"Of course," said Eleanor ironically. "Go on, Uncle Mark. I shall see through you presently."

"But I have been meaning to visit you soon. Only, you know, I am not in any sense your guardian now, and so, Eleanor, if you want me to be frank, it is a little unreasonable of you to put forward my duties in that respect when I have no compensations."

She started. "You mean that you didn't want to come?" she asked.

"I did want to. But I have so many duties—"

"Thank you. That's quite enough, Captain Wallace. My conduct in intruding on such a busy man has been quite inexcusable. Good day, Captain Wallace!"

She made a mocking little bow and went toward her cab. She stopped and looked back. The brief anger was ended. But Mark was already free from that intolerable interview and stumbling homeward.

He let himself in, wrote out his resignation, and mailed it.

As he paced his room, pondering over the situation, it seemed to him that the key to the mystery lay with Hartley. Even yet he had not allowed himself to believe Kellerman a traitor. But it was essential that he should find Hartley, and insist upon a confession, both of his motives in watching the Colonel's house, and of those that had brought him to the war department.

Suddenly the telephone interrupted his meditations. A woman's voice at the other end was asking for him.

"Are you quite sure you are Captain Mark Wallace?" it inquired, when he had stated his identity.

"I am as sure as I have ever been," answered Mark.

"Ah, now I recognize you," said the strange voice in a merry ripple of laughter. "And you don't know who I am?"

"If you will state your name—" began Mark patiently.

"Someone who knows that you are in trouble and wants to help you. I'm afraid you won't let me. You seemed to be prejudiced against me when we met before. Well, I am Ada Kenson."

Mark uttered an angry exclamation, which he instantly checked. This might prove the key that he was seeking.

"Come to my house at nine o'clock tonight, unless you are afraid. You will meet nobody but me."

It had been in Mark's mind to look for Hartley in that neighborhood.

"What do you say, Captain Wallace? I can help you very much indeed, and perhaps put things right for you. I am in a position to know a good deal of what is happening behind the scenes."

Mark felt his brain grow as cool as ice. "I'll come, Mrs. Kenson," he answered crisply, and hung up the receiver.

He consoled himself with the reflection that he had, at least, nothing to lose. He waited calmly for the appointment, and arrived outside the house promptly. There was no sign of Hartley in the neighborhood.

At his ring Mrs. Kenson herself opened the door, smiled, and showed him into a well-furnished little parlor.

"Sit down, Captain Wallace," she said, indicating a chair.

"You'll wonder who I am and why I asked you to come here," said Mrs. Kenson. "Well, I happen to know quite a good deal about you, Captain Wallace. All your history, in fact, from the time you entered West Point. It is part of my business to know these things."

Mark bowed and waited, expecting something sensational. He was astonished beyond his expectation, however, by Mrs. Kenson's next words.

"Your long and distasteful stay in the West, Captain Wallace, was not wholly the fortune of the military service," she said. "It was expedient that you should stay there, on account of your unfortunate mistake in adopting the late Charles Hampton's child."

Mark rose in protest, collected himself, and sat down again.

"In fact, dear Captain Wallace, you have been the victim of circumstances," went on Mrs. Kenson. "I suppose you know that the world has changed a good deal during your fifteen years of exile? Well, this war, for example, it's a shocking reversal at each other's throats, when their difficulties could have been adjusted by a little frank diplomacy. It was a great blow to the financial interests that are working to reconcile the nations and to develop the world's resources. They would do all possible to end it. I am working for them here. I am not telling you any secret, Captain Wallace, because everybody in Washington knows it. I represent the international peace committee, and I have quite a good deal of influence among the senators and representatives—principally the Western ones, Captain."

The frankness and audacity of the disclosure astounded Mark. So this was one center of "they," as Colonel Howard had called the nucleus of Tenthon spies and agents in America.

"We are trying our hardest to prevent America from being dragged into this maelstrom," continued Mrs. Kenson. "You, Captain Wallace, were unfortunate enough to be working on the other side. And—I'm sorry, but a little trap was laid for you and Kellerman. You walked right into it. Major Kellerman, who is a very good friend of mine, acted in complete good faith. Don't blame him. Don't blame yourself. Don't blame that wretched fellow who came here the other night to blackmail me. It was inevitable. You see, when you adopted Hampton's daughter you unconsciously put a sort of noose about your neck. There was the possibility of your coming into contact with Hampton's friends. The system is widespread, you know, and quite twenty years old. So—you had to go west."

"Now, Captain Wallace, I'm a frank woman, and I'll put my proposition to you. You don't want to see Major Kellerman walk off with that pretty ward of yours, do you? And you can't marry her without a little money. Well, you could be very useful to us in many ways. Would you, without sacrificing your patriotism or revealing any secrets, become a salaried worker of our organization?"

Mark stood up, trembling. "I—don't quite understand," he said huskily; and the picture of Eleanor in Kellerman's arms at the dance swam before his eyes. "What is it you want me to do?"

"Use your influence and army knowledge in our behalf. That little affair of today will soon be forgotten. And we'll help you to put Kellerman out of business."

"You ask me to become a German spy?"

"Don't be absurd, my dear captain. Who ever suggested such a thing?"

"That's what it amounts to."

"A little influence on behalf of humanity?"

"No!" shouted Mark, quite beside himself. "You're infamous. You ought to be put out of the country!"

He strode indignantly toward the

door.

The electric light in the passage had gone out. The room grew dark behind him. He groped his way toward the door.

Suddenly a vivid light flashed before his eyes. He heard, though he felt no pain, the impact of a hard weapon upon the back of his head. He flung out his hands and grappled with a man. In the uplifted hand he felt a heavy stick with a knobbed handle.

He believed his assailant to be Kellerman, and, half unconsciously as he was, he fought madly. But the man, Kellerman or not, was more than a match for him. For a few moments they wrestled furiously; then the other got his arm free and brought down the stick upon Mark's head again. And this time the light faded into blackness.

(Continued next week.)

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