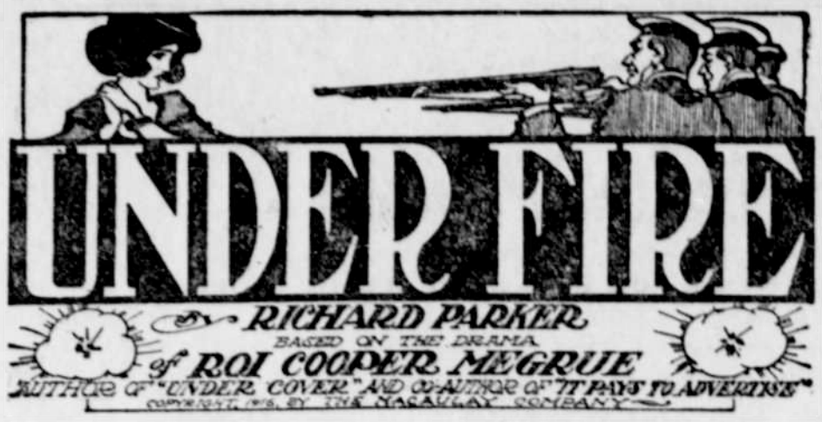

CHAPTER XXI—Continued.

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That was the worst part of it all—the waiting. Heart-rending reports of happenings in many Belgian villages came to the British, for Courvoisier was only one of many hamlets that had tragedies to relate. And the British were powerless to aid those stricken people.

Trench 27—the English trench which Streetman had indicated upon his map as being the keystone to the enemy's defense—lay in the first line of the British. All unconscious of any special designs that the Germans might have against their particular position, the Tommies stationed there proceeded to put things in shape for the general action that was bound to come. After completing their grim arrangements, there was little for them to do for the time being, except rest. And that they were glad enough to do, after their herculean exertions of those first days of the war. That there was worse ahead of them they did not doubt. But in the meantime there was no reason why they should not make themselves at home.

It was night—the second night following that fatal day when the Germans descended upon the Lion d'Or and robbed Jeanne Christophe of her father. In Trench 27 four soldiers were playing poker under the shelter of a bombproof hut that they had constructed by digging into a side of the ditch. Dirty, unshaven, begrimed, they were nevertheless enjoying to the full their well-earned respite. And the flickering light of the candle which stood upon their rude table revealed no fear upon the face of any of them.

At either end of the trench two men stood guard, while close at hand a periscope lay upon a makeshift bench, ready for instant use in case the watchers should detect any unusual and suspicious movements in front of them. Out there beneath the stars the first outpost of the enemy had already dug itself in. And in testimony of their alertness the Germans continually played a searchlight upon the British position. That prying shaft of light was never still. Now it swept the top of Trench 27, now flickered upon a tree close by, and then searched the intervening ground between the two lines in an effort to detect some venturesome observer.

To the four privates in the bombproof shelter there came a momentary interruption, in the shape of a lieutenant, who sauntered into their trench from the left. This youthful officer, whom they had already voted "a bit of all-right," observed them pleasantly.

"Hello, boys!" he said.

They sprang up and saluted, murmuring "Good evening, sir!"

"How's the game?" the lieutenant inquired.

"Henry, there, is winning all our cigarettes," one of the men said.

The young officer smiled. And then, drawing a pencil and a postcard from his pocket, he seated himself and proceeded to write a note to a young woman in London. For Guy Falconer had consistently kept his promise to write Georgy every day.

The privates promptly resumed their poker game.

"I raise it one cigarette," one of them said. And again Guy smiled. He was glad that his boys were enjoying themselves.

So engrossed did Lieutenant Falconer become in his note to his lady love that he did not notice when his captain appeared, in the company of a civilian. Captain Montague paused and turned to his guest.

"Now, Mr. Brown," he said, "you're in the first line of the English trenches—Trench 27—and I may say you're the only American correspondent who has had this experience."

Charlie Brown looked about with undisguised interest.

"And I rather butted in," he remarked.

"Well, as long as you stumbled inside our lines, you might as well see something, if you give me your word not to write anything."

"That's a nice thing to say to a newspaper man," Charlie retorted.

"But I have your word?"

"I s'pose so!" It cost Mr. Brown some effort to promise that. He saw the makings of a bully scoop before him. And he hated to forego such a wonderful opportunity.

"The closer you are to the front, the less you know of what's happening," Captain Montague resumed, "except on your own very small square of a very large checkerboard. . . . But, technically, you are under fire."

"Am I?" Mr. Brown was surprised at that. "Somehow, I don't feel any different," he said.

"You would if you stuck your head over that trench and they happened to see it," the captain told him grimly.

"Well—believe me, I'm not going to," said Charlie. "Aren't they unusually quiet tonight?"

"Yes, rather! But always before the evening's over they give us a bit of fireworks and go for some of our men with a lucky shrapnel or two. You see, they try to get our range in the daytime, and then at night they shoot at the same range."

Charlie Brown and his escort had not talked long before Guy Falconer came out of his abstraction. He raised his head all at once and looked inquiringly at the civilian. Then he jumped up and approached Charlie with outstretched hand.

"I thought I recognized that voice!" he exclaimed. "Do you remember me, Charlie Brown?"

"Hello, Guy!" the delighted American cried. "So you did come over to the front, after all? Didn't I say you would?"

"Yes! I came over with the first batch—bribed the recruiting sergeant! And here I am! . . . But what are you doing at the front?"

Charlie explained how he had fallen into the hands of the Germans, how they had set him free and started him toward Brussels. But his rebellious nature had revolted; and having hidden by day and traveled by night, he had made straight for the place where he understood the British to be intrenched.

Mr. Brown had scarcely finished his brief recital when there followed an ominous whistle, which seemed to come from over his head. Off in the distance there was a flash and an explosion.

"What's that?" the American asked.

"Oh, just one of our shells traveling somewhere to our friends, the enemy," the captain informed him.

"That will probably start their evening song," Guy remarked.

"They needn't hurry on my account," Charlie said.

For a few minutes they stood there, discussing the war.

"What's it for?" the newspaper man asked. "There's no individual hatred—no great, soul-stirring emotional crisis behind it all."

"But England was forced into it," Captain Montague interposed.

"And I dare say France and Russia and Austria all feel they were forced into it, too," Charlie replied. "That's the whole trouble. Each nation believes honestly that it's in the right, and in some way I suppose each of them is. . . . I don't know—I'm not a big enough man to attempt to say. . . . And what good is it all?"

"It is that militarism shall cease—that never again can there be another war like this," the English captain told him.

As they talked, a doctor, accompanied by two stretcher bearers, entered the trench, and, finding that there was no need for their services in that quarter, they passed on.

"That's the Red Cross," Captain Montague explained, noticing the journalist's interest in the trio. Following close upon his words came another of those sinister whistles.

"That's one of their shells!" the captain continued, meaning the Germans.

At the information Mr. Brown promptly ducked and huddled down upon the bench under the overhang of the trench.

"You needn't duck, old man! It wouldn't do you any good," the elder officer remarked. "Anyway, that shell was on its way toward one of our batteries," he added, pointing to their rear.

"Well, now they've started, anyhow," Guy said.

"Sometimes they fire only one or two shots—and then again they go on all night," his senior officer explained.

Stepping to the field telephone, which rang insistently, Captain Montague received a message from the battery posted some distance behind. When Guy Falconer learned that some light bombs were to be let off, he begged the captain to let him climb the tree that rose near one end of the trench, in order that he might try to get the range of the German guns.

The captain did not like the idea. He had been cautioned not to expose his men—and especially his officers—unnecessarily. And he warned Guy that he might get picked off by a German sniper.

"Not a chance!" Guy protested. "Please! It would be ripping really to do something."

The captain perceived that the inaction of waiting for an attack was fast setting Guy's nerves on edge. And at last he gave his consent.

For a little time Guy called out directions to the captain, who stood at the telephone relaying Guy's instructions to the battery. In the light furnished by the British bombs the youthful lieutenant carefully watched the effect of the shells that whistled over their heads and burst increasingly nearer to the Teuton artillery.

"Right on a gun!" Guy shouted at last. "I saw it crumple! That's it! Keep the range at twenty-nine fifty!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth before he came toppling from his perch. The captain and one of the privates caught the limp figure just before it struck the ground, and they laid him tenderly upon the dirt floor of Trench 27.

"They've got him. . . . He's not dead, though." . . . Captain Montague kneeled beside the lad and bent over him. And a corporal with some knowledge of first-aid procedure undertook to stop Guy's bleeding. He was seriously wounded—that much was clear. And he was unconscious.

"Beastly dull"—so Guy had been writing Georgy Wagstaff. "Awfully hot—no excitement. Haven't seen a German or any decent food. But that doesn't matter. Tell mother I'm being careful."

"Poor kid!" Charlie Brown exclaimed. It was a grim business—war!

"Sad—very sad!" the captain agreed. "But perhaps he'll pull through; and if he doesn't—well! forgive me, Mr. Brown, if I seem heartless—but remember! this is new to you and he's only one, and I've seen so many!" Captain Montague noticed that the American correspondent was white and somewhat unsteady.

"I feel a bit shaken. Do you mind if I go back now?" Charlie asked.

"Certainly not!"

"If I come across the surgeon or any of the Red Cross, you don't mind if I send them back, do you?" Charlie wanted to do what he could to help his friend.

The captain readily gave his assent.

"I'm through with war," Charlie Brown said as he shook hands with Montague. "I'm off to London. I'll see his mother there, and that kid girl of his—and then go to New York, where there's no war, thank God! And you know, Cap, when I'm home, sitting at my desk, looking down over Broadway where war only means some more headlines on the front page about some unpronounceable places, and you turn over the paper to see how stocks closed, or who won the game—when I'm back there and the war stuff comes over the wire, I'll be thinking of you fellows over here under fire, and I'll be wishing you luck, old man, the best of luck!"

The captain thanked him; and they said good-by.

Charlie lingered for one last look at the wounded Guy.

"I hope you pull through, old boy!" he said; he knew, though, that Guy could not hear him. "Do what you can for him, won't you?" he asked the captain. "I know his mother. . . . This whole business is hell, isn't it?"

CHAPTER XXII.

A Meeting in the Trenches.

Charlie Brown had gone, and Captain Montague had ordered his men to place Guy upon a heap of straw, where he must lie until the doctor came. In Trench 27 an atmosphere of sadness had succeeded the air of light-hearted carelessness that Charlie Brown had found when he arrived there. The candle still flickered upon the table round which the poker players had lately sat. But all thought of that frivolous game had vanished from their minds. It was not that they had not already seen many of their men shot down. But Guy Falconer had quickly endeared himself to all—officers and enlisted men alike. And now that he had received his billet, in the German bullet, there was not one soul in Trench 27 that was not both sobered and sad.

But they had little time to bestow upon a contemplation of war's horrors. Five minutes had scarcely elapsed after Charlie Brown's departure when a sergeant appeared, holding a prisoner by the arm.

It was Streetman—that prisoner. And he was far from presenting the jaunty figure that usually distinguished him. His clothing—civilian clothing—was badly torn, his face was scratched and dirty, and his right arm was in a sling. The man's hat was gone, too.

The sergeant reported to his captain that while on patrol duty he had caught the fellow skulking around.

"He came from the German lines," he said.

Captain Montague held the candle to Streetman's face.

"And in civilian's clothes! A spy, eh?" he exclaimed.

"No, no, captain! An Englishman—a loyal Englishman!" Streetman protested.

They searched him; but found nothing of importance.

"He's got some kind of cock-and-bull story about being wounded and then—" the sergeant started to say, when Streetman interrupted him.

"Never mind that! I tell you I've information that's vital to England," he insisted.

But the captain was still suspicious of him.

"My name's Lee—Walter Lee," Streetman asserted, "formerly of the British army. I've been in business in Belgium—the automobile business. My papers there will prove what I say. The Germans took my factory—kept me prisoner all night in the cellar. That's when I learned their plans from some major—Major von Brenig and a Captain Karl. I could listen to them talking—there were holes in the floor from that shell fire. I realized what it would mean to England if I could bring word to the British army of this secret plan of the Germans. During the night I managed to escape through the cellar window. They followed me, and I got one of their bayonets in the shoulder. They left me for dead; but it was only a flesh wound. And for the last twenty hours I've been seeking the British position somewhere near Trench 27—for that's the vital spot—when your sergeant caught me."

"Trench 27, eh?" the captain said.

"Yes!" Streetman answered eagerly. "Is it near here?"

"Remember, sir, you are not questioning me," Captain Montague replied.

"So you won't believe me? Yet you've looked at my papers. Don't they convince you?"

"Papers are easily forged," Montague told him. Still, he was somewhat impressed by the other's glib tale, and he allowed the captive to proceed with his story.

"The Germans are to attack tonight in force at your Trench 27, in the hope of cutting through the British lines," Streetman continued. "Your only chance is to bring up every possible man to protect that trench. Otherwise we'll be beaten. You see what it means. . . . Ah! There's your field telephone! Let me communicate with headquarters! They'll understand!" He started for the telephone.

But Captain Montague sprang in front of him.

"Keep away from that instrument!" he commanded. And, turning to the sergeant, he ordered him to take the prisoner to headquarters. "You can explain to them," he informed Streetman.

"By then it may be too late," the fellow replied. "Their attack was to be at midnight."

"Indeed!" the English officer exclaimed dryly. "It's past midnight now." And straightway he became more doubtful than ever of the stranger's story.

"Then they're likely to charge any minute," the spy declared with well-simulated alarm. "I've got to telephone. It's for England! I beg of you to believe me! Let me inform headquarters—let them decide! Do you dare take the responsibility?"

One of the privates on guard suddenly called out.

"Somethin' crawlin' out there, captain! Looks like a man!"

The sergeant faced to the front, with gun ready for action.

"He's comin' this way!" another soldier cried.

Streetman saw another chance for his plan to succeed, and he quickly seized it.

"You see, captain, it's the start of their attack!" he said excitedly. "For God's sake let me telephone!" he begged.

At last Captain Montague was convinced.

"Quickly then—telephone!" he said. And while Streetman sprang to the instrument, the British officer ordered his men to their stations. "Keep your eyes open—and give 'em the best we've got!" he urged them.

Meanwhile, out there in the moonlight between the two lines of trenches, that dark figure crawled nearer. Rifle fire crackled out from the German watchers, and the skulker broke into a stumbling run.

"They're tryin' to pot him from the other side!" one of the Britishers cried.

"Another trick to fool us!" Captain Montague observed.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Sharp and Pointed.

Chairman Herbert S. Houston said at the Associated Advertising Clubs' convention in Philadelphia:

"A good advertisement should be as sharp and pointed as the Irishman's answer.

"The witty Judge Lord Morris was on the Irish circuit, and one evening at dinner he tried to tell a story, but an Irishman kept interrupting him.

"Finally, in despair, Lord Morris seized the interrupter by the sleeve.

"'Surely,' he said, 'surely, man, ye want to hear the story o' the rint breaker o' Bally-Skibereen.'

"'No, no, me lord,' said the interrupter, 'that's the lie I tould ye meself yesterday.'"

Optimistic Thought.

Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle.

A mammoth oil-driven harvester that is being tried on Australian wheat fields strips about 60 acres a day.

He Knew It Was Dangerous.

An Englishman was seeing his first game of baseball, and the "fan" was explaining the different plays as they were being made.

"Don't you think it's great?" enthusiastically asked the "fan."

"Well," replied the Englishman, "I think it's very exciting, but also a very dangerous game."

"Dangerous nothing," replied the "fan."

Just then a runner was put out at second base.

"What has happened now?" asked the Englishman.

"Chick Smith has died at second," laconically replied the fan.

"Died at second?" replied the astonished Briton. "I knew it was dangerous game."—Ladies' Home Journal.

Sounded Like It.

"Gertrude," asked the teacher, "what were the causes of the Revolutionary war?"

"It had something to do with automobiles, but I did not understand just what," replied Gertrude.

"Oh, no," said the teacher; "that was before the day of automobiles."

"Well, it said it was on account of unjust taxis," said Gertrude, firmly.—Exchange.

A Point of Reliability.

"Anyhow," said the weary election forecaster, "I'm thankful for the Panama canal."

"What has that to do with the situation?"

"It's the only great American institution that permits me to predict a landslide with any degree of confidence."—Washington Star.

About the Children.

"Who can name a word with an 'I' in it?" queried the teacher of the juvenile class.

"Needle!" exclaimed a bright little miss.

"Construct a sentence using the word 'grewsome,'" said the teacher.

"When the man stopped shaving his whiskers grewsome more," answered Willie.