

IF you pass through the Menin Gate at Ypres, and walk up the slight rise that lies on the other side of the moat, you will come to the parting of the ways. You will at the same time come to a spot of unprepossessing aspect, whose chief claim to notoriety lies in its shell-holes and broken-down houses. If you keep straight on you will in time come to the little village of Potige ; if you turn to the right you will eventually arrive at Hooge. In either case you will wish you hadn't.

Before the war these two roads—which join about two hundred yards east of the rampart walls of Ypres—were adorned with a fair number of houses. They were of that stucco type which one frequently sees in England spreading out along the roads that lead to a largish town. Generally there is one of unusually revolting aspect that stands proudly by itself a hundred yards or so from

the common herd and enclosed in a stuccoesque wall. And there my knowledge of the type in England ends.

In Belgium, however, my acquaintance with this sort of abode is extensive. In taking over a house in Flanders that stands unpleasantly near the Hun, the advertisement that there are three sitting, two bed, h. and c. laid on, with excellent onion patch, near railway and good golf-links, leaves one cold. The end-all and be-all of a house is its cellar. The more gloomy, and dark, and generally horrible the cellar, the higher that house ranks socially, and the more likely are you to find in it a general consuming his last hamper from Fortnum & Mason by the light of a tallow dip. And this applies more especially to the Hooze road.

Arrived at the fork, let us turn right-handed and proceed along the deserted road. A motor-car is not to be advised, as at this stage of the promenade one is in full sight of the German trenches. For about two or three hundred yards no houses screen you, and then comes a row of the stucco residences

I have mentioned. Also at this point the road bends to the left. Here, out of sight, occasional men sun themselves in the heavily-scented air, what time they exchange a little playful badinage in a way common to Thomas Atkins. At least, that is what happened some time ago ; now, of course, things may have changed in the garden city.

And at this point really our journey is ended, though for interest we might continue for another quarter of a mile. The row of houses stops abruptly, and away in front stretches a long straight road. A few detached mansions of sorts, in their own grounds, flank it on each side. At length they cease and in front lies the open country. The poplar-lined road disappears out of sight a mile ahead, where it tops a gentle slope. And half on this side of the rise, and half on the other, there are the remnants of the tib-bit of the whole bloody charnel-house of the Ypres salient—the remnants of the village of Hooge. A closer examination is not to be recommended. The place where you stand is known in the vernacular as Hell

Fire Corner, and the Hun—who knows the range of that corner to the fraction of an inch—will quite possibly resent your presence even there. And shrapnel gives a nasty wound.

Let us return and seek safety in a cellar. It is not what one would call a good-looking cellar; no priceless prints adorn the walls, no Turkey carpet receives your jaded feet. In one corner a portable gramophone with several records much the worse for wear reposes on an upturned biscuit-box, and lying on the floor, with due regard to space economy, are three or four of those excellent box-mattresses which form the all-in-all of the average small Belgian house. On top of them are laid some valises and blankets, and from the one in the corner the sweet music of the sleeper strikes softly on the ear. It is the senior subaltern, who has been rambling all the preceding night in Sanctuary Wood—the proud authors of our nomenclature in Flanders quite rightly possess the humour necessary for the production of official *communiqués*.

In two chairs, smoking, are a couple of officers. One is a major of the Royal Engineers, and another, also a sapper, belongs to the gilded staff. The cellar is the temporary headquarters of a field company—office, mess, and bedroom rolled into one.

“ I’m devilish short-handed for the moment, Bill.” The Major thoughtfully filled his pipe. “ That last boy I got a week ago—a nice boy he was, too—was killed in Zouave Wood the day before yesterday, poor devil. Seymour was wounded three days ago, and there’s only Brent, Johnson, and him ”—he indicated the sleeper. “ Johnson is useless, and Brent——” He paused, and looked full at the Staff-captain. “ Do you know Brent well, by any chance ? ”

“ I should jolly well think I did. Jim Brent is one of my greatest pals, Major.”

“ Then perhaps you can tell me something I very much want to know. I have knocked about the place for a good many years, and I have rubbed shoulders, officially and unofficially, with more men than I care to

remember. As a result, I think I may claim a fair knowledge of my fellow-beings. And Brent—well, he rather beats me.”

He paused as if at a loss for words, and looked in the direction of the sleeping subaltern. Reassured by the alarming noise proceeding from the corner, he seemed to make up his mind.

“Has Brent had some very nasty knock lately—money, or a woman, or something?”

The Staff-captain took his pipe from his mouth, and for some seconds stared at the floor. Then he asked quietly, “Why? What are you getting at?”

“This is why, Bill. Brent is one of the most capable officers I have ever had. He’s a man whose judgment, tact, and driving power are perfectly invaluable in a show of this sort—so invaluable, in fact”—he looked straight at his listener—“that his death would be a very real loss to the corps and the Service. He’s one of those we can’t replace, and—he’s going all out to make us have to.”

“What do you mean?” The question expressed no surprise; the speaker seemed

merely to be demanding confirmation of what he already knew.

“ Brent is deliberately trying to get killed. There is not a shadow of doubt about it in my mind. Do you know why ? ”

The Staff-officer got up and strolled to a table on which were lying some illustrated weekly papers. “ Have you last week’s *Tatler* ? ” He turned over the leaves. “ Yes—here it is.” He handed the newspaper to the Major. “ That is why.”

“ A charming portrait of Lady Kathleen Goring, who was last week married to that well-known sportsman and soldier Sir Richard Goring. She was, it will be remembered, very popular in London society as the beautiful Miss Kathleen Tubbs—the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Silas P. Tubbs, of Pittsburg, Pa.”

The Major put down the paper and looked at the Staff-captain ; then suddenly he rose and hurled it into the corner. “ Oh, damn these women,” he exploded.

"Amen," murmured the other, as, with a loud snort, the sleeper awoke.

"Is anything th' matter?" he murmured, drowsily, only to relapse at once into unconsciousness.

"Jim was practically engaged to her; and then, three months ago, without a word of explanation, she gave him the order of the boot, and got engaged to Goring." The Staff-captain spoke savagely. "A damn rotten woman, Major, and Jim's well out of it, if he only knew. Goring's a Baronet, which is, of course, the reason why this excrescence of the house of Tubbs chucked Jim. As a matter of fact, Dick Goring's not a bad fellow—he deserves a better fate. But it fairly broke Jim up. He's not the sort of fellow who falls in love easily; this was his one and only real affair, and he took it bad. He told me at the time that he never intended to come back alive."

"Damn it all!" The Major's voice was irritable. "Why, his knowledge of the lingo alone makes him invaluable."

"Frankly, I've been expecting to hear of

his death every day. He's not the type that says a thing of that sort without meaning it."

A step sounded on the floor above. "Look out, here he is. You'll stop and have a bit of lunch, Bill?"

As he spoke the light in the doorway was blocked out, and a man came uncertainly down the stairs.

"Confound these cellars. One can't see a thing, coming in out of the daylight. Who's that? Halloa, Bill, old cock, 'ows yourself?"

"Just tottering, Jim. Where've you been?"

"Wandered down to Vlamertinghe this morning early to see about some sandbags, and while I was there I met that flying wallah Petersen in the R.N.A.S. Do you remember him, Major? He was up here with an armoured car in May. He told me rather an interesting thing."

"What's that, Jim?" The Major was attacking a brawn with gusto. "Sit down, Bill. Whisky and Perrier in that box over there."

"He tells me the Puns have got six guns

whose size he puts at about 9-inch ; guns, mark you, not howitzers—mounted on railway trucks at Tournai. From there they can be rushed by either branch of the line—the junction is just west—to wherever they are required.”

“My dear old boy,” laughed Bill, as he sat down. “I don’t know your friend Petersen, and I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that he is in all probability quite right. But the information seems to be about as much use as the fact that it is cold in Labrador.”

“I wonder,” answered Brent, thoughtfully—“I wonder.” He was rummaging through a pile of papers in the stationery box.

The other two men looked at one another significantly. “What hare-brained scheme have you got in your mind now, Brent?” asked the Major.

Brent came slowly across the cellar, and sat down with a sheet of paper spread out on his knee. For a while he examined it in silence, comparing it with an ordnance map, and then he spoke. “It’s brick, and the

drop is sixty feet, according to this—with the depth of the water fifteen.”

“And the answer is a lemon. What on earth are you talking about, Jim?”

“The railway bridge over the river before the line forks.”

“Good Lord! My good fellow,” cried the Major irritably, “don’t be absurd. Are you proposing to blow it up?” His tone was ponderously sarcastic.

“Not exactly,” answered the unperturbed Brent, “but something of the sort—if I can get permission.”

The two men laid down their knives and stared at him solemnly.

“You are, I believe, a sapper officer,” commenced the Major. “May I ask first how much gun-cotton you think will be necessary to blow up a railway bridge which gives a sixty-foot drop into water; second, how you propose to get it there; third, how you propose to get yourself there; and fourth, why do you talk such rot?”

Jim Brent laughed and helped himself to whisky. “The answer to the first question

is unknown at present, but inquiries of my secretary will be welcomed—probably about a thousand pounds. The answer to the second question is that I don't. The answer to the third is—somehow; and for the fourth question I must ask for notice."

"What the devil are you driving at, Jim?" said the Staff-captain, puzzled. "If you don't get the stuff there, how the deuce are you going to blow up the bridge?"

"You may take it from me, Bill, that I may be mad, but I never anticipated marching through German Belgium with a party of sappers and a G.S. wagon full of gun-cotton. Oh, no—it's a one-man show."

"But," ejaculated the Major; "how the——"

"Have you ever thought, sir," interrupted Brent, "what would be the result if, as a heavy train was passing over a bridge, you cut one rail just in front of the engine?"

"But——" the Major again started to speak, and was again cut short.

"The outside rail," continued Brent, "so that the tendency would be for the engine

to go towards the parapet wall. And no iron girder to hold it up—merely a little brick wall”—he again referred to the paper on his knee—“three feet high and three bricks thick. No nasty parties of men carrying slabs of gun-cotton; just yourself—with one slag of gun-cotton in your pocket and one primer and one detonator—that and the psychological moment. Luck, of course, but when we dispense with the working party we lift it from the utterly impossible into the realm of the remotely possible. The odds are against success, I know; but——” He shrugged his shoulders.

“But how do you propose to get there, my dear chap?” asked the Major peevishly. “The Germans have a rooted objection to English officers walking about behind their lines.”

“Yes, but they don’t mind a Belgian peasant, do they? Dash it, they’ve played the game on us scores of times, Major—not perhaps the bridge idea, but espionage by men disguised behind our lines. I only propose doing the same, and perhaps going one better.”

"You haven't one chance in a hundred of getting through alive." The Major viciously stabbed a tongue.

"That is—er—beside the point," answered Brent shortly.

"But how could you get through their lines to start with?" queried Bill.

"There are ways, dearie, there are ways. Petersen is a man of much resource."

"Of course, the whole idea is absolutely ridiculous." The Major snorted. "Once and for all, Brent, I won't hear of it. We're far too short of fellows as it is."

And for a space the subject languished, though there was a look on Jim Brent's face which showed it was only for a space.

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Now when a man of the type of Brent takes it badly over a woman, there is a strong probability of very considerable trouble at any time. When, in addition to that, it occurs in the middle of the bloodiest war of history, the probability becomes a certainty. That he should quite fail to see just what manner of woman the present Lady Goring

was, was merely in the nature of the animal. He was—as far as women were concerned—of the genus fool. To him “the rag, and the bone, and the hank of hair” could never be anything but perfect. It is as well that there are men like that.

All of which his major—who was a man of no little understanding—knew quite well. And the knowledge increased his irritation, for he realised the futility of trying to adjust things. That adjusting business is ticklish work even between two close pals; but when the would-be adjuster is very little more than a mere acquaintance, the chances of success might be put in a small-sized pill-box. To feel morally certain that your best officer is trying his hardest to get himself killed, and to be unable to prevent it, is an annoying state of affairs. Small wonder, then, that at intervals throughout the days that followed did the Major reiterate with solemnity and emphasis his remark to the Staff-captain anent women. It eased his feelings, if it did nothing else.

The wild scheme Brent had half suggested

did not trouble him greatly. He regarded it merely as a temporary aberration of the brain. In the South African war small parties of mounted sappers and cavalry had undoubtedly ridden far into hostile country, and, getting behind the enemy, had blown up bridges, and generally damaged their lines of communication. But in the South African war a line of trenches did not stretch from sea to sea.

And so, seated one evening at the door of his commodious residence talking things over with his colonel, he did not lay any great stress on the bridge idea. Brent had not referred to it again ; and in the cold light of reason it seemed too foolish to mention.

“ Of course,” remarked the C.R.E., “ he’s bound to take it soon. No man can go on running the fool risks you say he does without stopping one. It’s a pity ; but, if he won’t see by himself that he’s a fool, I don’t see what we can do to make it clear. If only that confounded girl——” He grunted and got up to go. “ Halloa ! What the devil is this fellow doing ? ”

Shambling down the road towards them was a particularly decrepit and filthy specimen of the Belgian labourer. In normal circumstances, and in any other place, his appearance would have called for no special comment; the brand is not a rare one. But for many months the salient of Ypres had been cleared of its civilian population and this sudden appearance was not likely to pass unnoticed.

“Venez ici, monsieur, tout de suite.” At the Major’s words the old man stopped, and paused in hesitation; then he shuffled towards the two men.

“Will you talk to him, Colonel?” The Major glanced at his senior officer.

“Er—I think not; my—er—French, don’t you know—er—not what it was.” The worthy officer retired in good order, only to be overwhelmed by a perfect deluge of words from the Belgian.

“What’s he say?” he queried peevishly. “That damn Flemish sounds like a dog fight.”

“Parlez-vous Français, monsieur?” The Major attempted to stem the tide of the old

man's verbosity, but he evidently had a grievance, and a Belgian with a grievance is not a thing to be regarded with a light heart.

"Thank heavens, here's the interpreter!" The Colonel heaved a sigh of relief. "Ask this man what he's doing here, please."

For a space the distant rattle of a machine-gun was drowned, and then the interpreter turned to the officers.

"'E say, sare, that 'e has ten thousand franc behind the German line, buried in a 'ole, and 'e wants to know vat 'e shall do."

"Do," laughed the Major. "What does he imagine he's likely to do? Go and dig it up? Tell him that he's got no business here at all."

Again the interpreter spoke.

"Shall I take 'im to Yper and 'and 'im to the gendarmes, sare?"

"Not a bad idea," said the Colonel, "and have him——"

What further order he was going to give is immaterial, for at that moment he looked at the Belgian, and from that villainous old

ruffian he received the most obvious and unmistakable wink.

“Er—thank you, interpreter; I will send him later under a guard.”

The interpreter saluted and retired, the Major looked surprised, the Colonel regarded the Belgian with an amazed frown.

Then suddenly the old villain spoke.

“Thank you, Colonel. Those Ypres gendarmes would have been a nuisance.”

“Great Scott!” gasped the Major. “What the——”

“What the devil is the meaning of this masquerade, sir?” The Colonel was distinctly angry.

“I wanted to see if I’d pass muster as a Belgian, sir. The interpreter was an invaluable proof.”

“You run a deuced good chance of being shot, Brent, in that rig. Anyway, I wish for an explanation as to why you’re walking about in that get-up. Haven’t you enough work to do?”

“Shall we go inside, sir? I’ve got a favour to ask you.”

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We are not very much concerned with the conversation that took place downstairs in that same cellar, when two senior officers of the corps of Royal Engineers listened for nearly an hour to an apparently disreputable old farmer. It might have been interesting to note how the sceptical grunts of those two officers gradually gave place to silence, and at length to a profound, breathless interest, as they pored over maps and plans. And the maps were all of that country which lies behind the German trenches.

But at the end the old farmer straightened himself smartly.

“That is the rough outline of my plan, sir. I think I can claim that I have reduced the risk of not getting to my objective to a minimum. When I get there I am sure that my knowledge of the patois renders the chance of detection small. As for the actual demolition itself, an enormous amount will depend on luck; but I can afford to wait. I shall have to be guided by local conditions. And so I ask you to let me go. It's a long-odds chance, but if it comes off it's worth it.”

“ And if it does, what then ? What about you ? ” The Colonel’s eyes and Jim Brent’s met.

“ I shall have paid for my keep, Colonel, at any rate.”

Everything was very silent in the cellar ; outside on the road a man was singing.

“ In other words, Jim, you’re asking me to allow you to commit suicide.”

He cleared his throat ; his voice seemed a little husky.

“ Good Lord ! sir—it’s not as bad as that. Call it a forlorn hope, if you like, but . . . ” The eyes of the two men met, and Brent fell silent.

“ Gad, my lad, you’re a fool, but you’re a brave fool ! For Heaven’s sake, give me a drink.”

“ I may go, Colonel ? ”

“ Yes, you may go—as far, that is, as I am concerned. There is the General Staff to get round first.”

But though the Colonel’s voice was gruff, he seemed to have some difficulty in finding his glass.

As far as is possible in human nature, Jim Brent, at the period when he gained his V.C. in a manner which made him the hero of the hour—one might almost say of the war—was, I believe, without fear. The blow he had received at the hands of the girl who meant all the world to him had rendered him utter'y callous of his life. And it was no transitory feeling: the mood of an hour or a week. It was deeper than the ordinary misery of a man who has taken the knock from a woman, deeper and much less ostentatious. He seemed to view life with a contemptuous toleration that in any other man would have been the merest affectation. But it was not evinced by his words; it was shown, as his Major had said, by his deeds—deeds that could not be called bravado because he never advertised them. He was simply gambling with death, with a cool hand and a steady eye, and sublimely indifferent to whether he won or lost. Up to the time when he played his last great game he had borne a charmed life. According to the book of the words, he should have been killed a score

of times, and he told me himself only last week that he went into this final gamble with a taunt on his lips and contempt in his heart. Knowing him as I do, I believe it. I can almost hear him saying to his grim opponent, "Dash it all! I've won every time; for Heaven's sake do something to justify your reputation."

But—he didn't; Jim won again. And when he landed in England from a Dutch tramp, having carried out the maddest and most hazardous exploit of the war unscathed, he slipped upon a piece of orange-peel and broke his right leg in two places, which made him laugh so immoderately when the contrast struck him that it cured him—not his leg, but his mind. However, all in due course.

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The first part of the story I heard from Petersen, of the Naval Air Service. I ran into him by accident in a grocer's shop in Hazebrouck—buying stuff for the mess.

"What news of Jim?" he cried, the instant he saw me.

"Very sketchy," I answered. "He's the

worst letter-writer in the world. You know he trod on a bit of orange-peel and broke his leg when he got back to England."

"He would." Petersen smiled. "That's just the sort of thing Jim would do. Men like him usually die of mumps, or the effects of a bad oyster."

"Quite so," I murmured, catching him gently by the arm. "And now come to the pub. over the way and tell me all about it. The beer there is of a less vile brand than usual."

"But I can't tell you anything, my dear chap, that you don't know already!" he expostulated. "I am quite prepared to gargle with you, but——"

"Deux bières, ma'm'selle, s'il vous plaît." I piloted Petersen firmly to a little table. "Tell me all, my son!" I cried. "For the purpose of this meeting I know nix, and you as part hero in the affair have got to get it off your chest."

He laughed, and lit a cigarette. "Not much of the heroic in my part of the stunt, I assure you. As you know, the show

started from Dunkirk, where in due course Jim arrived, armed with credentials extracted only after great persuasion from sceptical officers of high rank. How he ever got there at all has always been a wonder to me: his Colonel was the least of his difficulties in that line. But Jim takes a bit of stopping.

“ My part of the show was to transport that scatter-brained idiot over the trenches and drop him behind the German lines. His idea was novel, I must admit, though at the time I thought he was mad, and for that matter I still think he’s mad. Only a madman could have thought of it, only Jim Brent could have done it and not been killed.

“ From a height of three thousand feet, in the middle of the night, he proposed to bid me and the plane a tender farewell and descend to terra firma by means of a parachute.”

“ Great Scott,” I murmured. “ Some idea.”

“ As you say—some idea.’ The thing was to choose a suitable night. As Jim said, ‘ the slow descent of a disreputable Belgian peasant* like an angel out of the skies will

cause a flutter of excitement in the tender heart of the Hun if it is perceived. Therefore, it must be a dark and overcast night.'

"At last, after a week, we got an ideal one. Jim arrayed himself in his togs, took his basket on his arm—you know he'd hidden the gun-cotton in a cheese—and we went round to the machine. By Jove! that chap's a marvel. Think of it, man." Petersen's face was full of enthusiastic admiration. "He'd never even been up in an aeroplane before, and yet the first time he does, it is with the full intention of trusting himself to an infernal parachute, a thing the thought of which gives me cold feet; moreover, of doing it in the dark from a height of three thousand odd feet behind the German lines with his pockets full of detonators and other abominations, and his cheese full of gun-cotton. Lord! he's a marvel. And I give you my word that of the two of us—though I've flown for over two years—I was the shaky one. He was absolutely cool; not the coolness of a man who is keeping himself under control, but just the normal coolness

of a man who is doing his everyday job."

Petersen finished his beer at a gulp, and we encored the dose.

"Well, we got off about two. We were not aiming at any specific spot, but I was going to do due east for three-quarters of an hour, which I estimated should bring us somewhere over Courtrai. Then he was going to drop off, and I was coming back. The time was chosen so that I should be able to land again at Dunkirk about dawn.

"I can't tell you much more. We escaped detection going over the lines, and about ten minutes to three, at a height of three thousand five hundred, old Jim tapped me on the shoulder. He understood exactly what to do—as far as we could tell him: for the parachute is still almost in its infancy.

"As he had remarked to our wing commander before we started: 'A most valuable experiment, sir; I will report on how it works in due course.'

"We shook hands. I could see him smiling through the darkness; and then, with his

basket under his arm, that filthy old Belgian farmer launched himself into space.

"I saw him for a second falling like a stone, and then the parachute seemed to open out all right. But of course I couldn't tell in the dark; and just afterwards I struck an air-pocket, and had a bit of trouble with the bus. After that I turned round and went home again. I'm looking forward to seeing the old boy and hearing what occurred."

And that is the unvarnished account of the first part of Jim's last game with fate. Incidentally, it's the sort of thing that hardly requires any varnishing.

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The rest of the yarn I heard later from Brent himself, when I went round to see him in hospital, while I was back on leave.

"For Heaven's sake, lady, dear," he said to the sister as I arrived, "don't let anyone else in. Say I've had a relapse and am biting the bed-clothes. This unpleasant-looking man is a great pal of mine, and I would commune with him awhile."

"It's appalling, old boy," he said to me

as she went out of the room, "how they cluster. Men of dreadful visage; women who gave me my first bath; unprincipled journalists—all of them come and talk hot air until I get rid of them by swooning. My young sister brought thirty-four school friends round last Tuesday! Of course, my swoon is entirely artificial; but the sister is an understanding soul, and shoos them away." He lit a cigarette.

"I saw Petersen the other day in Haze-brouck," I told him as I sat down by the bed. "He wants to come round and see you as soon as he can get home."

"Good old Petersen. I'd never have brought it off without him."

"What happened, Jim?" I asked. "I've got up to the moment when you left his bus, with your old parachute, and disappeared into space. And of course I've seen the official announcement of the guns being seen in the river, as reported by that R.F.C. man. But there is a gap of about three weeks; and I notice you have not been over-communicative to the halfpenny press."

“ My dear old man,” he answered seriously, “ there was nothing to be communicative about. Thinking it over now, I am astounded how simple the whole thing was. It was as easy as falling off a log. I fell like a stone for two or three seconds, because the blessed umbrella wouldn't open. Then I slowed up and floated gently downwards. It was a most fascinating sensation. I heard old Petersen crashing about just above me ; and in the distance a searchlight was moving backwards and forwards across the sky, evidently looking for him. I should say it took me about five minutes to come down ; and of course all the way down I was wondering where the devil I was going to land. The country below me was black as pitch : not a light to be seen—not a camp-fire—nothing. As the two things I wanted most to avoid were church steeples and the temporary abode of any large number of Huns, everything looked very favourable. To be suspended by one's trousers from a weather-cock in the cold, grey light of dawn seemed a sorry ending to the show ; and to land from

the skies on a general's stomach requires explanation."

He smiled reminiscently. "I'm not likely to forget that descent, Petersen's engine getting fainter and fainter in the distance, the first pale streaks of light beginning to show in the east, and away on a road to the south the headlamps of a car moving swiftly along. Then the humour of the show struck me. Me, in my most picturesque disguise, odoriferous as a family of ferrets in my borrowed garments, descending gently on to the Hun like the fairy godmother in a pantomime. So I laughed, and—wished I hadn't. My knees hit my jaw with a crack, and I very nearly bit my tongue in two. Cheeses all over the place, and there I was enveloped in the folds of the collapsing parachute. Funny, but for a moment I couldn't think what had happened. I suppose I was a bit dizzy from the shock, and it never occurred to me that I'd reached the ground, which, not being able to see in the dark, I hadn't known was so close. Otherwise I could have landed much lighter. Yes, it's a great

machine, that parachute." He paused to reach for his pipe.

"Where did you land?" I asked.

"In the middle of a ploughed field. Couldn't have been a better place if I'd chosen it. A wood or a river would have been deuced awkward. Yes, there's no doubt about it, old man, my luck was in from the very start. I removed myself from the folds, picked up my cheeses, found a convenient ditch alongside to hide the umbrella in, and then sat tight waiting for dawn.

"I happen to know that part of Belgium pretty well, and when it got light I took my bearings. Petersen had borne a little south of what we intended, which was all to the good—it gave me less walking; but it was just as well I found a signpost almost at once, as I had no map, of course—far too dangerous; and I wasn't very clear on names of villages, though I'd memorised the map before leaving. I found I had landed somewhere south of Courtrai, and was about twelve kilometres due north of Tournai.

"And it was just as I'd decided that little

fact that I met a horrible Hun, a large and forbidding-looking man. Now, the one thing on which I'd been chancing my arm was the freedom allowed to the Belgians behind the German lines, and luck again stepped in.

"Beyond grunting 'Guten Morgen' he betrayed no interest in me whatever. It was the same all along. I shambled past Uhlans, and officers and generals in motor-cars—Huns of all breeds and all varieties, and no one even noticed me. And after all, why on earth should they ?

"About midday I came to Tournai ; and here again I was trusting to luck. I'd stopped there three years ago at a small estaminet near the station kept by the widow Demassiet. Now this old lady was, I knew, thoroughly French in sympathies ; and I hoped that, in case of necessity, she would pass me off as her brother from Ghent, who was staying with her for a while. Some retreat of this sort was, of course, essential. A homeless vagabond would be bound to excite suspicion.

"Dear old woman—she was splendid. After the war I shall search her out, and

present her with an annuity, or a belle vache, or something dear to the Belgian heart. She never even hesitated. From that night I was her brother, though she knew it meant her death as well as mine if I was discovered.

“ ‘ Ah, monsieur,’ she said, when I pointed this out to her, ‘ it is in the hands of le bon Dieu. At the most I have another five years, and these Allemands—pah ! ’ She spat with great accuracy.

“ She was good, was the old veuve Demassiet.”

Jim puffed steadily at his pipe in silence for a few moments.

“ I soon found out that the Germans frequented the estaminet ; and, what was more to the point—luck again, mark you—that the gunners who ran the battery I was out after almost lived there. When the battery was at Tournai they had mighty little to do, and they did it, with some skill, round the beer in her big room.

“ I suppose you know what my plan was. The next time that battery left Tournai I proposed to cut one of the metals on the

bridge over the River Scheldt, just in front of the engine, so close that the driver couldn't stop, and so derail the locomotive. I calculated that if I cut the outside rail—the one nearest the parapet wall—the flange on the inner wheel would prevent the engine turning inwards. That would merely cause delay, but very possibly no more. I hoped, on the contrary, to turn it outwards towards the wall, through which it would crash, dragging after it with any luck the whole train of guns.

“ That being the general idea, so to speak, I wandered off one day to see the bridge. As I expected, it was guarded, but by somewhat indifferent-looking Huns—evidently only lines of communication troops. For all that, I hadn't an idea how I was going to do it. Still, luck, always luck ; the more you buffet her the better she treats you.

“ One week after I got there I heard the battery was going out : and they were going out that night. As a matter of fact, that hadn't occurred to me before—the fact of them moving by night, but it suited me

down to the ground. It appeared they were timed to leave at midnight, which meant they'd cross the bridge about a quarter or half past. And so at nine that evening I pushed gently off and wandered bridge-wards.

"Then the fun began. I was challenged, and, having answered thickly, I pretended to be drunk. The sentry, poor devil, wasn't a bad fellow, and I had some cold sausage and beer. And very soon a gurgling noise pronounced the fact that he found my beer good.

"It was then I hit him on the base of his skull with a bit of gas-pipe. That sentry will never drink beer again." Brent frowned. "A nasty blow, a dirty blow, but a necessary blow." He shrugged his shoulders and then went on.

"I took off his top-coat and put it on. I put on his hat and took his rifle and rolled him down the embankment into a bush. Then I resumed his beat. Discipline was a bit lax on that bridge, I'm glad to say ; unless you pulled your relief out of bed no one else

was likely to do it for you. As you may guess, I did not do much pulling.

“I was using two slabs of gun-cotton to make sure—firing them electrically. I had two dry-cells and two coils of fine wire for the leads. The cells would fire a No. 13 detonator through thirty yards of those leads—and that thirty yards just enabled me to stand clear of the bridge. It took me twenty minutes to fix it up, and then I had to wait.

“By gad, old boy, you’ve called me a cool bird; you should have seen me during that wait. I was trembling like a child with excitement: everything had gone so marvelously. And for the first time in the whole show it dawned on me that not only was there a chance of getting away afterwards, but that I actually wanted to. Before that moment I’d assumed on the certainty of being killed.”

For a moment he looked curiously in front of him, and a slight smile lurked round the corners of his mouth. Then suddenly, and apropos of nothing, he remarked, “Kathleen

Goring tea'd with me yesterday. Of course, it was largely due to that damned orange-skin, but I—er—did not pass a sleepless night."

Which I took to be indicative of a state of mind induced by the kind of that nutritious fruit, rather than any reference to his broken leg. For when a man has passed unscathed through parachute descents and little things like that, only to lose badly on points to a piece of peel, his sense of humour gets a jog in a crucial place. And a sense of humour is fatal to the hopeless, undying passion. It is almost as fatal, in fact, as a hiccough at the wrong moment.

"It was just about half-past twelve that the train came along. I was standing by the end of the bridge, with my overcoat and rifle showing in the faint light of the moon. The engine-driver waved his arm and shouted something in greeting and I waved back. Then I took the one free lead and waited until the engine was past me. I could see the first of the guns, just coming abreast, and at that moment I connected up with the battery

in my pocket. Two slabs of gun-cotton make a noise, as you know, and just as the engine reached the charge, a sheet of flame seemed to leap from underneath the front wheels. The driver hadn't time to do a thing—the engine had left the rails before he knew what had happened. And then things moved. In my wildest moments I had never expected such a success. The engine crashed through the parapet wall and hung for a moment in space. Then it fell downward into the water, and by the mercy of Allah the couplings held. The first two guns followed it, through the gap it had made, and then the others overturned with the pull before they got there, smashing down the wall the whole way along. Every single gun went wallop into the Scheldt—to say nothing of two passenger carriages containing the gunners and their officers. The whole thing was over in five seconds; and you can put your shirt on it that before the last gun hit the water yours truly had cast away his regalia of office and was legging it like a two-year-old back to the *veuve Demassiet and Tournai*. It struck

me that bridge might shortly become an unhealthy spot."

Jim Brent laughed. "It did. I had to stop on with the old lady for two or three days in case she might be suspected owing to my sudden departure—and things hummed. They shot the feldwebel in charge of the guard; they shot every sentry; they shot everybody they could think of; but—they never even suspected me. I went out and had a look next day, the day I think that R.F.C. man spotted and reported the damage. Two of the guns were only fit for turning into hairpins, and the other four looked very like the morning after.

"Then, after I'd waited a couple of days, I said good-bye to the old dear and trekked on towards the Dutch frontier, gaining immense popularity, old son, by describing the accident to all the soldiers I met.

"That's all, I think. I had words with a sentry at the frontier, but I put it across him with his own bundook. Then I wandered to our Ambassador, and sailed for England in due course. And—er—that's that."

Such is the tale of Jim Brent's V.C. There only remains for me to give the wording of his official report on the matter. •

“I have the honour to report,” it ran, “that at midnight on the 25th ult., I successfully derailed the train conveying six guns of calibre estimated at about 9-inch, each mounted on a railway truck. The engine, followed by the guns, departed from sight in about five seconds, and fell through a drop of some sixty feet into the River Scheldt from the bridge just west of Tournai. The gunners and officers—who were in two coaches in rear—were also killed. Only one seemed aware that there was danger, and he, owing to his bulk, was unable to get out of the door of his carriage. He was, I think, in command. I investigated the damage next day when the military authorities were a little calmer, and beg to state that I do not consider the guns have been improved by their immersion. One, at least, has disappeared in the mud. A large number of Germans who had no connection with this affair have, I am glad to report, since been shot for it.

“ I regret that I am unable to report in person, but I am at present in hospital with a broken leg, sustained by my inadvertently stepping on a piece of orange-peel, which escaped my notice owing to its remarkable similarity to the surrounding terrain. This similarity was doubtless due to the dirt on the orange-peel.”

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Which, I may say, should not be taken as a model for official reports by the uninitiated.