

## CHAPTER XVI

### PLAY OUT THE GAME

KENTUCKY thought often over the Battle Hymn in the long waking hours of pain and the listless time of convalescence, and since his thoughts came in time to crystallise into words, and words are easier to set down than thoughts, here is a talk that he had, many weeks after, when he was almost well again—or rather as well as he would ever be.

The talk was with Larry, with the broken wreck of a Larry who would never, as the doctors told him, walk or stand upright again. Kentucky had finished his convalescing at Larry's home, and the talk came one night when they were alone together in the big dining-room, Larry, thin-faced and claw-handed, on a couch before the fire, Kentucky in a deep armchair. They had chatted idly and in broken snatches of old days, and of those last desperate days in 'the Push,' and on a chance mention of Pug both had fallen silent for a space.

'Poor Pug,' said Larry at last. 'Did it ever strike you, Kentuck, what a queer quartette of chums we were, Billy Simson and Pug and you and me?'

'Yes, mighty queer, come to think of it,' agreed Kentucky. 'And the game handed it out pretty rough for the lot of us—Billy and Pug lamed, you like this, and me . . .' and he half lifted the stump of a hand bound about with black silk bandages and showing nothing but a thumb and the stump of a finger. 'And I figure that out of the lot yours is maybe the worst.'

'I don't know,' said Larry slowly. 'I'm well enough off, after all, with a good home and my people asking nothing better than to have the looking after of me. I always think Billy had the hardest luck to be hit again just as he was coming out of it all with a safe and cushy one.'

'Anyway,' said Kentucky; 'it's a sure thing I came out best. I'm crippled, of course, but I'm not right out of action, and can still play a little hand in the game.'

'That's right,' said Larry heartily. 'You're fit enough to tackle the job in his office in my place that the Pater's so keen to have you take—and as I am, selfishly, because the offer carries the con-

dition that you live with us. I hope you've decided to sign on with the firm ?'

'I'm going to tell your father to-night,' said Kentucky very slowly. 'But I'm glad to have the chance to tell you first. I asked him to give me a day to think it over because I wanted to know first if I'd a good-enough reason for refusing——'

'Refusing,' Larry said, and almost cried the word.

'When I went out this morning,' said Kentucky quietly, 'I went to the Red Cross people and had a talk with Kendrick. I showed him I was fit enough for the job, and he asked me if I'd take an ambulance car to drive up front.'

Larry stared at him. 'Up front again,' he gasped. 'Haven't you had enough of the front ?'

'More than enough,' said Kentucky gravely. 'I'm not going because I like it, any more than I did in the first place. It's just because I think I ought to play out the game.'

'God,' said Larry. 'As if you hadn't done enough. You've got your discharge as unfit. Who would ever blame you for not going back, or dream you ought to go ?'

'Only one man,' said Kentucky, with the glimmer of a smile, 'but one that counts a smart lot with me; and he's—myself.'

But it's nonsense,' said Larry desperately. Why, it's not even as if you were one of us. After all, you're American, and this country has no claim, never had a claim, on you. You've done more than your share already. There isn't an earthly reason why you should go again.'

Not even one of us,' repeated Kentucky softly.

Well, now, haven't I earned the right to call myself one of you? No, never mind; course I know you didn't mean it that way. But you're wrong otherwise, boy. I'm not an American now. If you folks went to war with America to-morrow, and I was fit to fight, I'd have to fight on your side. There was an oath I took to serve your King, when I enlisted, you'll remember.'

'No one would expect an oath like that to bind you to fight against your own people,' said Larry quickly.

'In Kentucky, boy,' said Kentucky gently, his speech running, as it always did when he was stirred, into the slurred, soft 'r'-less drawl of his own South, 'an oath is an oath, and a promise is little sho't of it. I fought for yoh country because

I thought yoh country was right. But I come at last to fight foh her, because I've got to be proud of her and o'f belonging to her. And I want to pay the best bit of respect I can think of to those men I fought along with. It just pleases me some to think poor old Pug and Billy and a right smart mo' we knew would like it—I'm going to take out naturalisation papers just as soon as I can do it

'Like it,' said Larry, with his eyes glistening 'why, yes, I think they'd like it.'

Kentucky hesitated a little, then went on slowly: 'And theh's some verses I know that have so't of come to map out a route fo' me to follow. Oveh theh those verses stood right up an' spoke to me. I've thought it oveh quite a lot since, an' it's sure plain to me that I was made to see how close they fitted to what I could see, an' heah, an' undehstand, just so I could use the otheh verses to show me otheh things I could not undehstand. I'd like to tell yo' some of those verses an' how they come in.'

He told first the piccurc he had seen of the German prisoners searching amongst their own heaped dead, while the British guard stood watching them, and the sky flickered with 'the fateful lightning' and the guns growled their triumph

song; and then went on and repeated the verse of the Battle Hymn, 'Mine eyes have seen—'

'You see; just how exact it fitted,' he said.

But it wasn't only in that. There were other lines'; and he went on to tell of the journey back from the advanced dressing-station, the camp fires dotting the hills, the mists crawling in the valley, the lanterns moving to and fro where the bearers still searched for the wounded. 'Just see how it came in again,' he said, and repeated another verse:

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling  
camps;

They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and  
damps;

I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring  
lamps:

His day is marching on.

That wasn't all,' he went on. 'The words fitted most everywhere they touched. All along I've never quite managed to get so soaked in confidence that we must win as every man I've met in the British Army has been. I've had some doubts at times; but that night I lost them all. It wasn't only seeing the men pouring up into the firing-line, and the sureness of not being driven back that I could figure out was in the minds of the higher

Commands when they set to building roads an' rails right up into the captured ground; it wasn't only the endless stacks of shells and stuff piled right there on the back doorstep of the battle, and the swarms of guns we came back through. It was something that just spoke plain and clear in my ear, "He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat," an' I've had no shadow of doubt since but that Germany will go undeh, that theh is nothing left for her but defeat, that she is to be made to pay to the last bitter squeezing of the grapes of wrath for the blood and misery she plunged Europe into. Theh will be no mercy fo' heh. That was told me plain too—"I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel; 'As ye deal with My contemnners, so with ye My grace shall deal;'" . . . Bernhardi an' all his lot writ a fiery enough gospel, but it's cold print beside that other one. that strips the last hope of mercy from His contemnners with their gospel of blood and iron and terror and frightfulness.' He paused and was silent a little, and then glanced half-shamefacedly from the flickering fire-shadows at Larry.

'Anyone else might think I was talkin' like a rantin', crazy, fanatic preacher,' he said. 'But

you an' I, boy, an' most that's been oveh theh, will undehstand, because we've learned a lot mo' than we can eveh teil or speak out loud. . . . So I've come to believe that all these things fetched home a plain message to me, an' I'd do right to follow the rest of the verses as best I could. 'As' "He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free" is straight enough, an' I've got to go on offering my life as long as He sees fit to let me, or until He sees fit to take it.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call  
retreat ;

He is sifting out the hearts of men before His Judgment  
seat ;

Oh ! be swift, my soul, to answer Him ! be jubilant, my feet !  
Our God is marching on !

He was speaking now slowly and low and musingly, almost as if he spoke to himself. 'My heart has had some sifting too. It was so easy to take this offeh of yo' father's, and live pleasant an' smooth ; an' it was nasty to think about that otheh life, an' the muck and misery of it all. But altho' I could be no ways swift or jubilant about it, I came to allow I'd just go again, an' do what I could.'

In the silence that followed they heard the quick slam of an outer door, and a minute later



their room door swung open and someone entered briskly, stopped in the half-dark and cried out in a girl's laughing voice, 'Why—whatever are you two boys doing in the dark?'

Kentucky had jumped to his feet and was moving round the couch, but Larry's sister spoke imperiously. "*Will* you sit down, Kentuck? How often have I to tell you that you haven't quite escaped being an invalid yet?'

'Why, now, I thought I'd been discharged fit,' said Kentucky, and Larry called, 'Come here Rose, and see if you can persuade this crazy fellow.'

Rose came forward into the firelight and made Kentucky sit again, and dropped to a seat on the floor in front of Larry's couch. Kentucky sat back in the shadow looking at her and thinking what a picture she made with her pretty English face framed in a dark close-fitting hat and a heavy fur round her throat with the outside damp clinging and sparkling on it.

'Persuade him,' she said, 'what to? Wouldn't it be easier for me just to order him?'

'He talks about going back,' said Larry. 'Out there—to the front again.'

The girl sat up wide-eyed. The front, she

repeated. 'But how—I don't understand—your hand. . . .'

'Not in the firing-line,' said Kentucky quickly, 'I'm not fit for that. But I am fit for Red Cross work.'

'It's as bad,' said Larry, 'if you're working close up, as I know you'd be if you had a chance.'

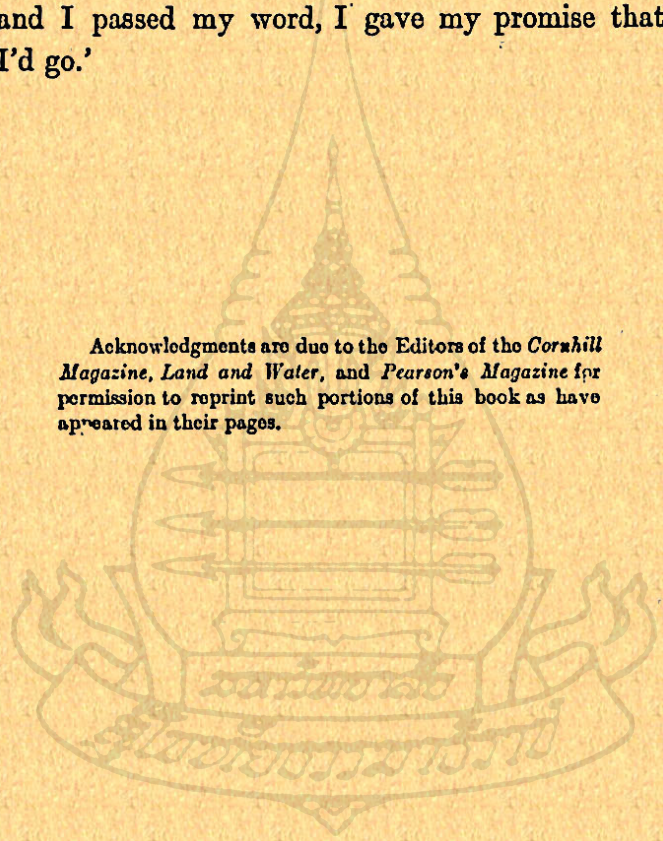
The girl was staring into the flickering fire with set lips. She looked round suddenly and leaned forward and slipped a hand on to Kentucky's knee. 'Oh, Ken . . . don't, don't go. Stay here with us.'

Kentucky's thought flashed out to 'over there,' where he would move in mud and filth, would be cold and wet and hungry. He saw himself crawling a car along the shell-holed muddy track, his hands stiff with cold, the rain beating and driving in his face, the groans of his load of wounded behind him, the stench of decay and battle in his nostrils, the fear of God and the whistling bullets and roaring shells cold in his heart. And against that was this snug, cosy room and all the life that it stood for . . . and the warm touch of the girl's hand on his knee. He wavered a moment while a line hammered swiftly through his mind, ' . . . sifting out the hearts of men. . . .'

Then he spoke quietly, almost casually; but

knowing him as they did, both knew that his words were completely final.

'Why, now,' he said slowly, Kendrick, my friend Kendrick of the Red Cross, asked me; and I passed my word, I gave my promise that I'd go.'



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