FRONT-LINE NURSE

BY WILLIAM STARRET

CHAPTER IX

(Continued from last week)

"For how long a time must you have this fire?" he asked.

"For the time when I am operating," Doctor Overton replied. "Until I see the wounded men, I cannot tell how many operations will be necessary. I will do them at once—one after the other—just as quickly as everything is ready."

"We shall build the fire," the leader said. "Today there are low-hanging clouds. It will be unseen by any Boche airplane today. On another day when it might clear—well, we shall see."

"We may not need it on another day," the doctor said. "And now—Nurse Blake, will youco me with me? I will look at the wounded men."

The giant Frenchman then led Doctor Overton and Laura into the cave.

Several hours later, after Doctor Overton had completed his operations and the camp had somewhat quieted down, Jerry sat leaning against the rocks near the cave entrance. He munched hard brown bread and huge hunks of cheese which the Frenchmen had distributed; he did not feel hungry but he ate because he felt that he should.

He was tired, and he shivered slightly as a cold evening breeze swept up and around the crest of the hill. He wondered how Laura was standing all this.

In the last few hours, Jerry had gained a new admiration for her. Working steadily, without a moment's rest, she had aided Doctor Overton in the operating tent under the glare of the gasoline lantern. The amputation of Major Compton's leg, dressing of wounds, probing for shell fragments, giving blood plasma—one treatment and one operation had followed another.

Through it all, Laura had remained calm, efficient, anticipating Doctor Overton's every move without getting in his way — and still she never forgot to smile and say just the right word to the wounded men.

Doctor Overton appeared from the cave.

"How are they, Doctor?" Laura asked.

"All right," he said, but his voice did not sound too confident. "Can't tell a thing about Major Compton yet, of course. And I keep wondering if I shouldn't have gone ahead and amputated that Britisher's arm."

"Lieutenant Smythe?" Laura said. "But maybe it can be saved."

"I doubt it," Doctor Overton told her, accepting some bread and cheese from the French leader who came up to him. "Thanks."

"When can we leave, Doctor?" Jerry asked. "In the morning?"

"Oh, no!" Doctor Overton said emphatically. "Not a chance! Why, Major Compton can't be moved for several days. It would be absolutely fatal!"

"Several days!" Jerry exclaimed. "We can't wait that long."

"We must wait that long," Doctor Overton said. "After all, what did we come here for? To save these men if we could. Then and only then, to try to get out with them."

"But every day we're here," Jerry protested, "increases our chances of being detected. The Germans have planes over here all the time. It looks as if it will be clear tomorrow, for instance. And every day the Germans are working away at that road block where the French blasted the rocks in the defile. They'll be getting through before long and—"

"I realize all of that," Doctor Overton said calmly. "But our first duty is to the wounded men. We must do what we can to effect their recovery. Then we must try to get out with them. If we can't—well, maybe we can get over the border to Switzerland. But there's no point in coming in here to operate, to treat these men, and then in being so eager to get them out that we kill them doing it."

The next morning they awoke with the first light of dawn. Anxiously Jerry peered out and saw a clear blue sky. He swore softly, and the Frenchman at his side grinned.

"I know," he said. "We do not like good weather, either."

They washed in the cold waters of a nearby mountain brook, and then Jerry took a pan of the water back to the plane. There he found a small tin of canned heat, which he lit and placed under the pan. When the water was hot, he dumped into it two packets of prepared coffee.

He and the guerrilla leader had their breakfast togther. The Frenchman smiled delightedly over the coffee.

"We have had nothing like this for many, many months," he said.

"They're probably having it up at the cave, too," Jerry said. "We brought in a couple of cases of army rations of various kinds."

Later they left the plane and Jerry gave the signals all the way back up the Roc d'Enfer. Along the way, the Frenchman pointed out two or three small paths that branched off from the main way, telling Jerry where they led.

At the cave, he found Laura and Doctor Overton making the rounds of their patients inside. When they had finished, Jerry asked Laura about Major Compton.

"Coming along well," Laura smiled. "Better than the doctor had hoped. But Smythe—the Englishman—his arm is worse. Afraid it will have to come off. Doctor hasn't decided yet."

"How about the others?" Jerry asked.

"All okay," Laura replied. "The blood plasma, right kind of food and treatment have worked wonders."

"Let's take a little walk," Jerry suggested. "I know my way around here a bit now."

They strolled down the main path hand in hand. When they were out of sight of the cave, they felt close, relaxed—together again as man and woman, not as pilot and nurse.

"What are you smiling about, Jerry?" Laura asked.

"Because I'm with you for a few minutes," he answered.

He stopped and put his arms around her. He kissed her and then simply held her close again, without speaking.

There was no need to speak. They both felt the same things. They knew that underneath their outward calm, they were tense with the danger of this mission. They were inwardly keyed up by the dramatic situation in which they found themselves. And for a few minutes it was important for them to feel a unity, from which each gained comfort and strength.

They walked on again, slowly.

Jerry stopped. "Five hundred paces," he muttered. "Now you will have your proof that there is war in these hills — even though you can't see it right now."

He whistled the signal he had learned from the guerrilla leader, and from up ahead and a little to the right, the answering whistle came back to them.

"If I didn't know that whistle," he said, "we might well have a few pieces of lead in us as we went on. Even in these nice peaceful mountains."

They walked on again. Then Laura touched Jerry's arm.

"What was that?"

They listened intently. From far away they heard a low rumble—like thunder.

"Oh—I know," Jerry said. "I heard it this morning and asked. It's the Germans down at the defile, where the French closed the road with the dynamite blast. The Germans are using dynamite to clear it again. They think they've get the guerrillas trapped here and they're working furiously to get through and kill them off."

"And they will get through!" Laura said. "What then?"

When they reached the cave Laura went inside. Jerry joined a group of the French guerrillas.

They asked him about his trip from North Africa and Italy and about the difficulty of landing on their pasture. They wondered if he would be able to take off with a heavy load.

"I don't know," Jerry told them. "I'm afraid that, even with a good stiff wind against me to increase the lift, I 'll nick those trees at the end of the field. If I just had about fifteen feet more, I think we'd make it."

"Ah—we can give you that," one of them cried. "We cannot do it now. The German observation planes would see our work and become suspicious. But if you tell us two or three hours before you will take off, then we can chop down many trees at the end of the field."

"In just a couple of hours?" Jerry asked. "Can you cut enough in that time?"

"Twenty of us with sharp axes," the Frenchman replied, "we can cut down a great many trees in two hours. Let me be certain I understand. You do not need the ground clear and smooth there?"

"No," Jerry said. "I'm sure my wheels will be off the ground by the time I reach the end of the pasture. But I'm likely to be only six or seven feet in the air at that point, with the heavy load I'll have I need that additional space up in the air."

"That is what I thought," the guerrilla replied, as his friends nodded in understanding. "So we need only to cut the trees a few feet from the ground, let them fall there. We do not need to remove the stumps, to drag away trunks and branches?"

"No, of course not," Jerry said, feeling encouragement in this plan "And the path doesn't have to be as wide as the whole pasture, either. Only about thirty feet wide—I can hit that slot easily."

"Ah—then we can do that!" the Frenchman replied. "In two hours we can chop a path thirty feet wide and almost as long."

"That will give me thirty feet more before I come to the tall trees!" Jerry exclaimed. "I think I can make it, then."

The Frenchman got up to speak to his leader about this new idea, and Jerry heard the voice of an Englishman at his side.

"Jolly good notion, that," the man said with a smile. "Wondered about getting off with a load."

"Another thirty feet will do it," Jerry agreed. "Are you a flier?"

"Yes," the man answered with a smile. "Flight Commander Blaiston, R.A.F. Happy to help as your co-pilot on the way out. I've handled those transports of yours before."

"Good!" Jerry exclaimed. "I'll be needing plenty of help at that particular moment. It will be a tough one. We may need a little handling of guns on the trip, too. The Nazis aren't likely to miss us completely on our return journey as they did on our way in. Handle a gun all right?"

"Of course," the Englishman said. "We can all handle the machine guns. But here's our specialist in that field — Lieutenant Chance."

Jerry greeted the lieutenant, who strolled up to join in the conversation. Jerry saw that his head was covered with bandages but that otherwise he seemed in good condition.

"Yes, I'm the gun man," he said. "You see, they sent in experts in various fields. Blaiston here for aircraft, airfields and such, in case we found some way to use planes more. I'm the gun man—and they really needed one. These guerrillas have every kind of gun in the world—old French military rifles, some from the Franco-Prussian war, too, and captured German rifles and pistols, modern British and American rifles we've dropped to them, and some of our machine guns and sub-machine guns. Even a good number of hunting rifles and shotguns in the crowd."

"Major Compton is the demolition expert," Blaiston took up the story. "Smythe the specialist in jungle fighting, and so on."

Jerry, in his talks with the Englishmen and others among the wounded who were able to be up and about, got to know them well and liked them. But he admired even more the French guerrillas.

Jerry, after lunch, went with a group of them around the network of trails over the top of the Roc d'Enfer. They showed him their pride—a path from the top of the hill that no one would ever suspect.

(To be continued)

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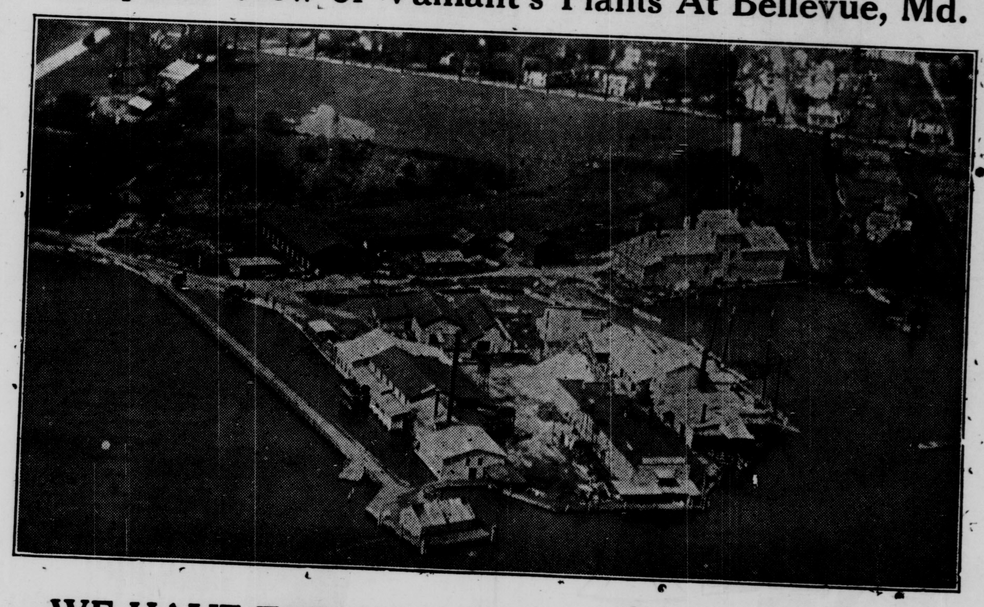
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