

THE NEUTRAL, By JOHN HOLDEN

A Story in Which the Element of Surprise Works Both Ways

Illustrated by A. M. Wickson

"Of course you've got my best wishes and all that, but to tell you the truth, fellows, I think you Canadians are foolish to get mixed up in this war."

Tommy Day drew his well-pressed trousers up from his violet-socked ankles, seated himself on his typewriter stand, and lighted an after-luncheon cigarette. The rest of the Alberta Packing Company's office staff glanced first at Bob McFall, the big, hot-tempered Scotch shipping clerk, then exchanged significant glances.

The fresh young man from Chicago, not realizing that he was agitating a sizeable portion of trouble, continued with all the smug assurance of his inexperienced years:

"Really, you Canadians should worry if Germany does win. Our Monroe Doctrine amply protects you. You should follow our example. Americans know enough to keep out of European squabbles. We—"

"Americans!" Bob McFall's rising wrath had boiled over sooner even than was expected. "You Americans," he sneered, "are a pretty poor lot. D'ye ken the German atrocities? The devilish treatment of helpless women and bairns?" Bob's Scotch accent broadened as his wrath rose. "The shellin' of peaceful towns? The violation of The Hague agreement that your country signed? The sinking of American ships? Americans! Bah! Ye've no got the spirit of rabbits."

Tommy Day's pink and white countenance flushed to all pink. For a tense moment he calmly puffed at his cigarette, while his fellow clerks looked at one another and wondered what he would do. As a fighting man, Tommy, to all appearances, was a joke. Bob McFall looked big and strong enough to pick him up and crack him over his knee. But there are fighting qualities quite as valuable as muscle.

Tommy took a final puff at his cigarette, tossed it into a cuspidor and stood up, facing the flushed and excited Scotchman.

"Mac," he said, very slowly and deliberately. "I regret to have to inform you that you're a damned liar!"

A vicious smack cracked on the surcharged atmosphere like the sound of a lath broken in two, and Tommy staggered back against George Martin, the ledger-keeper. The slap seemed to relieve McFall, for as Tommy came back, brimful of fight, he grinned.

"Now, me laddie, if you're such a brave American, let's see what you'll do."

It was obvious that Tommy could do very little. McFall's extended palm, broad as a platter, blocked his onslaught as effectually as a telegraph pole. For a tense moment Tommy glared, probably as David glared at Goliath before executing his justly celebrated sling feat.

"Well, if a fellow is a rabbit because he can't do anything but his fists, then I guess I'm one," he said.

Contempt and good-nature mingled together in McFall's laugh. George Martin, an American also, but wiser than Tommy, flushed and started to say something—but Tommy had only commenced.

"Remember, though, it's easy to be brave when you've got all the weapons and the other fellow has none. You've won out now, McFall, because you've got them. All right; but just to show you whether we Americans have the spirit of rabbits or not, I'm going to fight you again; in such a way that I've got an equal chance. That's fair, eh, fellows?" turning to his fellow clerks.

"Sure is," agreed someone and there was no dissenting voice.

"All right, then. Next Saturday afternoon"—Tommy spoke slowly and deliberately—"we'll fight this thing to a finish in the grove below the plant—with revolvers."

Billy Mullen broke the silence.

"Forget it, Tommy. This is 1915, not 1815."

"I don't care if it's 2015," shot back Tommy. "That big dub will fight a real fight, with an equal chance for both of us, or admit before the whole plant that he hasn't got the spirit of a rabbit."

IN the excitement the half dozen clerks had disregarded the one o'clock whistle. They were brought back to earth by the scowling entrance of the chief clerk and immediately scuttled to their desks.

On leaving the office that evening, Billy Mullen joined George Martin.

"Oh, you fighting Americans!" he joked. "Look here, George, what about this duel, anyhow? D'ye suppose that kid knows what he's talking about?"

"Why not? Mac handed him a pretty hot one,

didn't he? You don't expect any good American to stand for an insult like that. It's a cinch Tommy has no chance with his dukes; so why shouldn't he fight him some other way?"

"But a duel with revolvers! Do you know what you're talking about? Why one of them might—probably will—murder the other."

George laughed.

"No chance, old scout. One or the other will back down—the big Scotchman, I'll bet. Here he comes behind us; let's see what he's got to say."

"Hello, Mac," he laughingly addressed McFall, after slowing down his pace to allow the latter to catch up. "How do you like the idea of facing a bullet?"

McFall's rough-hewn countenance was as mirthless



"Tommy looked suspiciously at his, broke it open, examined the cartridges, and handed it back with a sneer."

as granite.

"I guess I'm no afraid of lead when there's any sense in facing it," he said. "I'm going to join the army if any more men are called for."

George Martin winked at his companion.

"So you're not going to face Tommy? Well, well! Honest, Mac, I thought you were made of better stuff than that. Going to let the kid make you back up, eh?"

McFall flushed.

"Who says I won't face him?" he demanded, hotly. "So you want that cursed nonsense to go on, do you? I thought you'd have sense enough to stop it. Well, it'll be a long day, George Martin, before any bragging American will make McFall back up."

He turned abruptly into a side street, leaving a rather startled pair of office employees staring after him.

"There—what did I tell you?" croaked Billy Mullen. "First thing you know there'll be something started we can't stop. Joke, eh? You forget that Scotchmen are not so keen on jokes as you Americans. How d'ye figure on stopping this duel, eh?"

George refused to be serious.

"Don't need to stop it," he laughed. "You'd never get Mac to fight a real duel—big bluffer."

"I guess he'd fight as willingly as any American," returned Billy, with some asperity.

"Bet you five," George challenged.

"You're on—no, you're not, either. Good heavens! Revolvers—think of it!"

"Rats! If neither backs down we can put blanks in the pistols, can't we?"

Billy was thoughtful for a moment. "All right," he agreed. "The bet stands."

Friday afternoon Billy Mullen took advantage of

the chief clerk's absence to saunter across to Tommy's desk.

"What are you looking so glum about, Tommy? Haven't seen you smile since you had that run-in with Mac. Not getting cold feet over your duel tomorrow, are you? Hello, what's this?" He picked up a blue, paper-bound book that Tommy had been reading during the after-luncheon interval. "German Atrocities; Compiled by the British Government."

"What's this mean, Tommy?"

"That I'm learning something about this war." Tommy's voice was sober and thoughtful. "This affair with McFall has set me thinking, Billy. I wish now I'd kept my fool mouth shut."

Billy laid his hand on Tommy's shoulder. "That's all right, old man. None of us had any idea of letting you fight a real duel—"

Tommy pushed his chair back indignantly.

"Oh, do you think I want to get out of it?" he demanded. "Not on your life. That fellow insulted my country. Rabbits, eh? I'll show him!"

"But he didn't mean—"

"Didn't he, though! I've heard no apology."

Billy sauntered over to George Martin's desk, shaking his head.

"Look here, George, we'd better go to Mac and tell him we won't think any the less of him if he apologizes to Tommy. I'm sure he'd like to."

But George still considered the affair a huge joke.

"Rats!" he negated. "They can't hurt each other with blanks. What's wrong, Billy? Getting afraid you'll lose your bet?"

"All right, joke about it if you want to—but if anything happens it's your fault, remember." Billy resumed totting up columns in his ledger with an uneasy conscience.

SATURDAY morning Tommy Day did not appear at the office, whereat Billy Mullen indulged in a sigh of relief and greeted George Martin gleefully:

"Oh, you fighting Americans! So your man has backed down, eh? I'd just as soon have my five-spot now."

"Wait a minute. Has McFall shown up?"

McFall had not!

"Now, what d'ye know about that?" observed Billy, disgustedly. "Both backing down. Good Lord!"

"The duel is set for this afternoon," George reminded him. "Perhaps they'll both show up after a while."

Both did show up.

"You're sure you've got the pistols fixed?" whispered Billy, as the two principals, followed by a small retinue of clerks, all of whom were in the secret, made their way to the grove below the plant early in the afternoon.

George winked and tapped a cigar box significantly.

"You bet."

The duellists marched very solemnly to the grove. To them it was no laughing matter. The spectators pretended a vast solemnity also.

"Both you fellows should join the army and shoot Germans if you're so bloodthirsty," remarked someone.

McFall glared at the speaker and seemed on the point of saying something. But he curled his lip in a sneer and remained silent.

Tommy said nothing, either. Indeed, the past few days had wrought strange alterations in the boy's demeanour. The blatant, egotistical youth had metamorphosed into a very thoughtful and preoccupied young man.

The little party arrived at the grove.

"COME here, both of you." George Martin handed each a very business-like revolver. "They're loaded and ready. Take ten steps in opposite directions, stand with your backs to each other and cock your revolvers; then I will count, one, two, three. When I say 'three' you are to turn and fire—see?"

McFall took his pistol without a word and walked off.

Tommy looked suspiciously at his, broke it open, examined the cartridges, and handed it back with a sneer.

"Did the gallant Scotchman insist on blanks?" he observed, with biting sarcasm.

Perhaps McFall also had suspected that the cartridges were harmless. At any rate, he flushed like a bank president caught stealing pennies from a blind beggar.

"That's showing him up, Tommy," applauded someone.

(Concluded on page 16.)