

The Hills of Desire

Ill. by T. V. McCARTHY

Final Instalment of This Serial

By RICHARD AUMERLE MAHER

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CHARLES of Burgundy Comes, Thirteen-Fifty-Eight—

"He's a boob if he comes here!" "That don't mean comes, you nut," some scholar elucidated. "Comes means Duke. Charles, Duke of Burgundy. He built the bridge."

"Wish t'ell he'd built it straight east and west." Don Mallett threw down the thin stone tablet in disgust. It had landed a moment before in the pit of his stomach. A German shell exploding a little distance on the other side of the bridge coping had gently lobbed the stone plate out of the wall where it had rested four and a half centuries and shied it playfully at Mallett where he sat on the ground.

When Charles of Burgundy had his name cut in that stone tablet and had it set in the bridge he did not foresee Mallett, nor the need of a bridge running east and west.

But Mallett was here, and fifteen others, all heartily approving his wish for a slight change in the alignment of the bridge, all except a German machine gunner and an American corporal who lay head to head close under the coping of the wall, with the body of a "pup" tent stretched impartially over their heads, and who did not care.

This party, with a lieutenant in command, had crossed the river to the north side before dawn. Behind them from the hills beyond the river the American artillery, as fast as it could come up to the river brow, was getting to work, firing high above this party and a score of other parties that had crossed the river in the dark under orders to find cover and stay.

In the dark they had stumbled into a machine gun position on this little bridge over the dry bed of a creek. They had gone over the five-foot coping on their bellies, their rifles with bayonets fixed swinging free in their hands.

Of the five Germans who had been on the bridge only the man now lying here unconscious had seen the dawn come down the valley a few minutes later. For, as Patsy Murtha had remarked:

"That 'Kamarad' stuff's all right when you can see what their hands are doin'. But, in the dark—!"

With the coming of the light five of the men had put on the tunics and helmets of those who had lately held the place and had stood about the guns, to show enemy watchers on the slopes and in the gullies to the north that things were quite as they should be, while the remainder of the men hid themselves under the coping of the bridge.

But the ruse did not avail them long. And this was why Don Mallett was dissatisfied with the direction of the bridge. If it had run more nearly east and west they would have been invisible from a certain wooded gully that cut down through the hill beyond the bridge and which, as happened, lay directly in line with the bridge.

The full light had revealed the men in American uniforms strung along under the coping of the bridge. What the German machine gunners in the gully thought is not pertinent. A driving blast of wind swept across the bridge propelled by a rain of machine gun bullets which cleaned the bridge as swiftly as if a giant broom were sweeping ants off it.

The five men on the bridge came tumbling over the coping rolling the machine guns with them and falling in grunting heaps among their friends. It seemed that they were quite miraculously unscathed from the blast which had driven them from the bridge. For when they had gotten to sitting postures, the five, in prompt concert, ripped off the German jackets, wadded them into the helmets and shied the whole over the bank down into the dry bed of the creek below the bridge. That this action was not merely a matter of sentiment was proven by the fact that the five immediately pulled off their own clean American shirts and began to shake and search them severely. These men had not now for weeks lived in an established trench or dugout. From away beyond the Ourcq to here, above the Vesle, they had come by foot, always in the open, drifting and seeping, drifting and seeping, in and out among the rear lines of a foe who always retreated yet who always kicked back murderously. Sometimes they had fought as part of a battalion, creeping in a long Indian file around a nest of machine guns, dragging themselves prone through the grass or the standing

grain, until the line was near enough to spring yelling upon the surrounded foe. They had fought and drifted, singly, in squads, going forward sometimes in dozens, dribbling back through in twos and threes. They had learned to sleep behind a fallen tree trunk with machine gun bullets sifting above their noses. But for three blessed weeks they had lived in the open, crossing running water every day—and they were body clean! The five men were at that moment more afraid of German lice than they were of the wind of death that was driving over their heads. All values are, of course, relative.

Sergeant Jimmie Wardwell, his body well hidden by the deep foliage of the tree in which he had taken his post, poked a long-nosed rifle out across a limb. It was a hunting rifle that he had borrowed one day two years ago from a Canadian named Bray Stewart, a long-limbed fellow with a friendly grin, a gentle gray eye, and an unconquerable obsession that this war was a deer hunt. Stewart was irrevocably convinced that if "they" really wanted to win the war they only had to put enough North Ontario farmer boys up in convenient trees and pot all the Germans on earth, up to five hundred yards. He had a scheme for making salt licks in No Man's Land.

But Stewart, Jock as they called him—all Stewarts are called Jock—had been sent into the mud flats of the upper Lys, where there were no trees, and where the best possible shelter was a ditch two thirds full of water. And Jock, on the very day when in mere discouragement he had lent the long hunting rifle to Wardwell—for what conceivable purpose the rifle had either been borrowed or lent will never be known—Jock that day inhaled some of the first poison gas which the progressive Hun had used,

intended victims as it was to himself. The boys were already swinging their captured machine guns into line.

"Hold your cannon till you need them," said the lieutenant, speaking quietly from where he lay out in the grass half way between the men and Wardwell's tree. "If Heine'll just hold that pose for another couple of seconds, Wardwell will—"

Wardwell did. Jock's long rifle grunted once. The German put his hand up sharply to his throat, turned half around, then gave a funny little attempt at a jump sideways, as though something had suddenly risen in the path before him, and slid bumping down into the grass.

Two German privates came out of the cover and stood over the body of the fallen man. Wardwell held his hand, while his companions below waited, understanding. If these two had come out risking their lives to drag a wounded officer to shelter he would not shoot.

One of the men leaned down examining the prone figure in the grass. He straightened up almost immediately and made a deliberate kick at the body. The officer was dead.

Not one man of those watching by the bridge offered a word of comment. They had been daily, hourly, learning strange things about this enemy as they fought and followed him. But they had come to no conclusions except the one safe one that Wardwell presently punctuated.

The man who had taken a kick at the dead man now stood with his legs straddled wide apart looking down at the bridge. He did not seem to expect any danger, and since Wardwell was using smokeless powder and there was plainly no firing from the men

who could be seen, it is quite possible that the German thought the officer had been killed by a stray bullet from his own side. When Wardwell fired again, it seemed to the boys in their eagerness that they could almost follow the bullet in its course.

They could, in fact, only see that the man dropped vertically like a stone dropping, but some one said excitedly:

"Eight hundred feet and over, and a clean drill between the eyes! that ain't luck, that's hate."

"You've got good eyes if you can see all that," drawled a Yankee boy from Northern New York. "But he does seem to have a kind of a prejudice against the Beer-heads, at that."

"He ain't like us here," explained a philosopher from Glens Falls. "We come here to fight 'cause the fightin's good here. But this Wardwell gent, he's seen too much. He aint fightin' Germans now. He's executin' them. He uses a rifle 'cause he can't get to 'em with a rope."

The remaining German had started running for the shelter of the ravine, but Wardwell's chance shot at the moving target caught him in the hip and he tumbled headlong down out of sight.

Wardwell had come far since a day long ago upon the hills above the lake when he had drawn what he thought was a perfect sight on a chipmunk's eyes at fifty feet and had ruined a perfectly good sap bucket which hung forgotten a good six feet below where the chipmunk had been.

Developments soon showed what the officer had had in mind when he came out on the slope of the hill. Sand bags and stones began flying up out of the ravine until they formed a respectable pile on the edge of the hill. Behind these came loose dirt hastily shovelled over and beginning to mark the line of a trench. The Germans were burrowing into the side of the hill. They would quickly run a shallow trench along the slope of the hill to a point fifty feet or so in the open, from which point, when they had dragged a heavy machine gun to it, they could sweep the Americans from where they lay under the wall of the little bridge.

The boys quickly trained the captured guns upon the moving line of dirt where it seemed as though a big mole was nosing his way along the face of the hill. But the elevation was sharply against them, and the lieutenant saw that they were hitting nothing for there was no mark above the dirt.

"Save your ammunition," he commanded, "and cover up the guns. They might be handy if we had to come back this way in a hurry."

"Put the two wounded men under the bridge and take cover in the creek bed."

The two men were quickly eased down into the dry water course under the

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"How is it, Dear," he asked, plainly knowing that Augusto was there with him. "Are we going on, or do we stay? Whichever it is, you know, I'm for you."

and Jock had lain face down in his ditch and drowned.

WARDWELL had taken this as a personal and gratuitous injury. He had not known Jock very much, for Wardwell had just come over from a training camp in England and had been filtered into Jock's Company, while Stewart had come over with the Canadian regiment almost in the beginning. Jock was a veteran soldier of nineteen, while Jimmie was green and a Yank to boot. But Wardwell had listened respectfully to Jock's lies about the hunting in the hills far up on the road to Cobalt, where they saw snow ten months of every year. And Jimmie had lied moderately and with good judgment about the hunting in his own hills. They had respected each other.

Since then Wardwell had kept the rifle by him, in violation of the Articles of War, in more or less secret defiance of barrack sergeants, against the expressed wishes of high and low command, and to the death of many individual Germans who never saw him.

A tall German under officer strutted out from the woody shelter of the gully between the hills and stood boldly out on the slope. Evidently he thought that he was out of effective range and he saw that his own guns were not reaching the men strung under the coping of the bridge. He must get a gun out on the slope here where it could sweep the Americans where they lay. His problem was as plain to his