

## Vengeance Is Mine

BY VIRGIL JORDAN

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A psychologist has said that most dreams indicate some deep fear or some deep wish that lies dormant in the dreamer. One curious thing about this is that the psychologist was a German. Another is that none of my companions in the dugout at Le Pretre seemed to find in my experience anything entirely new to them. I leave you to judge which it was--fear or desire--that came to light in me in the trenches of Pont-a-Mousson.

Foot by foot we had driven the Germans out of the forest of Le Pretre; and when the winter came down on us we had brought up behind the ridge overlooking the Moselle, with the enemy on the other side, fifteen miles away from Metz.

They managed to keep the river open, but otherwise let us alone. There was nothing to do for weeks but to sit tight. With cement, moss, burlap, and a few rugs and a boiler and some steam-pipe we stole at Pont-a-Mousson, we made our dugouts pretty comfortable.

Excepting myself and the rest of the aeroplane corps, our work had been each day to do so and so much digging, hauling, figuring, firing into the air, mechanically protecting ourselves from shells that we took as a matter of course, like wind and rain. We did not even know when we had won a point against the unseen enemy. We did not feel their resistance as one feels a push. Some one who had charge of those matters figured it out on paper, and we moved forward or back as their

calculations said. Outside our company we knew nothing of the general state of affairs.

Once in a while, especially about Christmas, one of us would get a bundle of books, papers and magazines from a friend. Then we talked-talked; we discussed again and again the reasons for the war, the object of it, what we were going to do to Germany when it was over. Every evening we tried Germany over again, put her culture, commerce, social system on the rack, found her guilty and had her hanged, drawn, and quartered.

Christmas Eve, 1914, I had turned in warm and excited and confused with the whirl of ideas we had been discussing, gathered around our steam-pipe. I had a restless night in the stuffy dugout. About midnight the German firing commenced in the direction of Metz. Toward morning, Christmas Day, they stopped, and I fell into a long, dreamy sleep.

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It was Christmas Eve, 1916. Two long, haggard years of the war had dragged by, to a wailing crescendo of misery, famine, disease, and madness. We had been hurled up and down an invisible line of death, bending and pressing it back and forth like a horde of ants at a thread.

Every human thought and fact had by now changed in us. As we formerly recognized our friends, we seemed to know each other now as the citizens of a new state on earth, in which the people did not live by productive labor, nor in houses, nor in families, but like strange bees in an unknown place, sexless, unconscious of our activity, destroying instead of building. It was as if we had been born that way. All memory of another life was sunk deep into the subconscious. We had become highly specialized things, yet knew not in what or for what. Birth and death had lost their meaning.

Tens of thousands of us had disappeared. Thousands took their places nonchalantly. As the opening of the third year approached, there was in the air the wild and brooding sense of the millions of German and Austrian lives and as many of the Allies that had gone out before their time.

Earth seemed to stir into consciousness of it.

The carnival of Chaos had spread like a wanton dementia. Italy had long since flung aside her sane reserve and plunged into the carnage for the shreds of Austria she desired--Tyrol, Dalmatia, Istria, and Albania. Rumania and Greece had joined with Servia and bound the Balkans into a temporary brotherhood. Together with Russia and Italy at Haskoi they had scattered the crazy Turkish army like chaff and swarmed on to the Bosphorus. The allied fleet drove a withering wedge of steel and fire through the Dardanelles. Constantinople fell.

As to a Bacchanal of Blood, the colonies tore out of the map every shred of German colonial territory there was, and poured into Europe their flood of black, white, and yellow men. Little Denmark, catching the festive spirit, reached out for Schleswig-Holstein; and the rest, coveting the Kiel Canal, lent a willing hand to the useful tool. Holland, sore from being the frail buffer between the struggling combatants, placed her interests in the British hands, and opened another gate to the heart of Germany.

Russia debouched her million after million upon the East, and though they died dumbly like flies before the German walls of steel at Thorn and Bromberg, they swept the Germans back over the Vistula and out of East Prussia down to the line of the Warthe and Oder. Austria, torn by internal dissension, was ringed in the upper basin of the Danube, where the Tyrol, the Carpathians, and the Germans protected the few shattered loyal ones.

There was not a German vessel left on the Seven Seas. Her fleet had been put to sleep in the Frisian marshes, outnumbered by the British on the outside, and cut off from supplies by troops landed through Denmark and Holland.

On the West they stood behind the Rhine. The drive had been rapid and relentless from all sides. They left their villages empty except for the dead as they went before the closing ring of steel. They took everything with them that might be used as fuel, as material for ammunition, and left their cities razed more completely than the invader could have done it.

Christmas night found us where Ludwigshafen had been. For two months we had stood, unable to move an inch farther. The thick deluge of fire the Germans rolled upon us at every advance amazed us. There could not long be a bit of iron or copper or saltpeter or food left inside the ring.

We had no knowledge of the source of this indomitable resistance. For months not a living soul had been able to pass across the lines, nor had a single message of any kind or a reply to any, by any means, come out of Germany. For three to five miles about the lines there was a devastated ring, bare of everything, swept by fire and death. Beyond that was grim and gruesome silence. The airmen could see little. Houses were apparently deserted and the people lived in the woods or in the ground. Every particle of earth that could be spared was used to grow something to eat. In the large cities buildings and bridges were torn down. Their cut stone and iron went to the making of fort and cannon.

This Christmas Eve, as we sat in our cement dugout, the silence outside was brooding and heavy. Snow had fallen for a week and there had been no fighting. In the intervals of our talk there was only the sound of a famished cat's wailing outside. We talked of the war, and of what we were going to do with Germany when the end came.

The talk of the world had been done. The nations at home sat like the knitting ring about the guillotine, waiting for the final scene to be staged. Germany was no more in the world's mind. They had tried to think about her. Their thought had been brought to folly and confusion. Already she was forgotten. She had become a piece of territory that shortly their armies would occupy. Condemnations of her culture, of her aspirations, of her part in the greatest of the world's wars, had come to nothing, and were abandoned. Pompous plans for her reorganization, superior homilies to the German people on peace and freedom from their wicked masters, good advice on the improvement of their culture--all these had been written to a shred. To preserve its dignity the world wished to forget them. Its dull, avid gaze saw not beyond the moment toward which it had strained, leaving its mind and simple sincerity of soul behind.

This was the night of the final assault. In a circle of three hundred miles, the word was written, on land and sea, in seven tongues and among a score of races--"AT MIDNIGHT." We were then to draw tight the halter upon the throat of Germany. Der Tag had become The Hour--Ours. The mailed fist was to have its gauntlet stripped from it and a naked hand should pay us tribute.

Steadily we had battered down the stone and steel chain about her. We stood before the Rhine in dead of winter. At one sweep we were to stretch our arm across it and with the other crush the mighty militant menace that lay at bay between.

The slopes that were old in story, that had sustained the surge of unnumbered hordes from East and West and South and North; in whose grapes were the bloods of Roman, Teuton, Slav, Mongol, and Frank; that had been the source and shelter of a race's song, science, and story--lay in silent slumber, muffled in midwinter's snows.

That race stood at bay before its fellow's vengeance. By this time all those of alien blood had dropped away from its single body like engrafted limbs. Its trunk stood bare and barkless before the blast, we to wring from its bloody, unbowed head, obeisance to our will--a will that had begun in covetousness of commerce, in rancor of humiliating reminiscence, in rage of race rivalry, a will that had grown beyond our grasp, beyond our consciousness. We lusted for the day that should press from Germany's lips, "Your will be done."

Unthinking were we that then would come the days of dull and devious diplomacy, of division of domain, of dragging indemnity from a people dumb and disheartened by devastation and death. At all costs to beat the breath from her body! The hour had come when this resistant something should be ours, ours, the Briton's, the Frenchman's, the Russian's, the Italian's, the Serb's, the Rumanian's, the Montenegrin's, the Dane's, the Mongol's!

At midnight we moved, in silence. It seemed as if we heard from the Carpathians to the Rhine, from the sea to the Alps, the anthem of arms, the stir of destruction go up as we moved. We wrangled for the outpost places, that when the closing of the steel ring was flashed across the circle we might be first to see the white flag at our point.

I was fortunate--one of the three sent to see how clear the road from Ludwigshafen to Mannheim, and to cover the river crossing.

I was off and my aeroplane rose quickly. There were no lights beyond the Rhine. Where Mannheim used to be was darkness. The three miles between us and the river lay motionless in the moonlight. The Rhine was tight in ice. The batteries at the angle of the Neckar were invisible. In wonder I came down to three hundred feet and circled, watching our men creep tentatively up to the sharp-cut bank, hesitate, clamber down, and start across the ice recklessly. They were not spiked, never dreaming of getting to the ice at all.

The dark figures slipped and slid and fell. It was so still and the moon so bright I could hear the cracks shoot across the untried sheet and see the men's faces twisted in apprehension. They were the only moving things. It was clear the Germans had fallen back. They had abandoned Malstatt by night--but Mannheim--and the Rhine! It was unbelievable. I rose and coasted down to above the Mannheim parade-ground. There was nothing to be heard but the distant stir of our line.

I touched. My machine ran along, bumping over hundreds of bodies lightly covered by the new snow. I got out, stumbled over them at my feet, felt them. They were not long dead. I looked about me at the dark, silent city of Mannheim. A panic took me. I ran to my machine, tried to get it off, but failed and sat numb and transfixed, vainly groping in the darkness of my mind for the thought that would not form, till my comrades came to me with blanched faces and bit by bit in swift succession pieced for me the words that could not find utterance, having never been uttered in the world's life before.

The rest--a flowing phantasmagoria that tore me too far out of human experience, even of dream--to tell again. The thousands crumpled up in full-dress uniform, stained and tattered, beneath the new snow of the parade-ground, fallen at a moment, at a word, hands here and there stiffened in salute to the flag slow moving in the graying winter's dawn. Death we had seen,--but here in the streets and in the houses, in all corners and in all byways, the vivid faces of those who had sought death freely, each face telling with ghastly eloquence a tale that had never been told in the life of man, of a race self-destroyed at a moment, at a word, for a vision which it alone had understood, leaving its epitaph in the words on the poison vials which a government machine efficient to the last had supplied--"*Der Tag ist zu uns*"--"The Day is Ours."

Then through the blenching words that flashed along the closed circle of steel in all the tongues of Europe, the shrinking thought leaped to our dumb, numb mind and throbbed upon them like the insistent

resounding clangor of a titanic brazen shield, as if beaten by a  
grimacing god:

Germany is yours, O sons of men! What now?

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I woke at dawn to the boisterous, bold boom of the batteries of Metz.  
They seemed to speak in glorious wide-mouthed joy of Til  
Eulenspiegel and the young Siegfried.

I thanked God for the Germans.