



Illustration by H. S. 1916

TRELOAR SLOWLY DESCENDED, SHOUTING ALOUD TO HIMSELF.—Page 137.

# SCRIBNER'S MAGAZINE

VOL. XLIII

FEBRUARY, 1908

NO. 2

## FOR THE HONOR OF THE BALLOON CORPS

By Frederick Palmer

ILLUSTRATIONS BY N. C. WYETH



WAR was declared on June 18th, only six weeks before Treloar's flight. Swiftly the battalions poured out of their barracks and the reservists out of their homes for the first great European conflict with modern arms. The Army of the Blues, resting on their boundary range, had position and the Army of the Reds numbers. By repeated charges the Reds' infantry had taken the lower heights. Now they glared in the hateful familiarity of sniping fire across the intervening space between them and the main trenches of the Blues on the summits.

August 1st was a hazy day, with desultory cannonading—the calm before the grand attack. Over the lines, with a million men on one side and a million and a half on the other, all that might be seen were the puffs of smoke flung out by bursting shells which had come from the smokeless mouths of concealed guns. These clung to the rocks or the trees, dissipating themselves slowly in the still air, or were blown away by a vagrant breeze.

That night the Reds planned to drive a battering-ram of human flesh through one of the passes. Ruthlessly, and over the bodies of the fallen, reserves were to be poured in until there were no more to send or the position was taken. For this sacrifice the nation had steeled itself as an individual will for a necessary surgical operation.

The six weeks' struggle had made the people feel six years older. A war whose

cost in money and lives was out of all keeping with every calculation was to be won or lost by this final tragic effort. In the high hysterical temper of the hour men had ceased to be human. Life was no longer valuable, except as a margin of forfeit for a great stake.

"By which pass?"—for there were three—asked the staff of the Blues. In vain they had sought to ascertain where the Reds were massing in order to mass against them in time. Spies brought only differing tales of ineffectual journeys that spelled confusion. Every civilian was kept out of the lines of either army; no soldier was allowed to send an uncensored letter home, lest he should divulge information.

The few survivors of the balloon corps of the Blues had ceased to be apologetic. They were abject and heart-broken. Their great expectations—based on the application of the wireless to aerial navigation—had been the plaything of the new high-angle guns of the Reds. Eighteen of twenty dirigibles had fallen, without sending in a single valuable message. One only remained to be flown to what seemed a certain fate—"our lost cause" the army called it in sorrow, in pity, in anger, in mockery. That is, one remained, not counting the one with Treloar—Treloar the crank, the rattle-brain, the parachutist monomaniac. He had been gone twenty-four hours, with no word from him.

The Chief-of-Staff, himself, went to the balloon park to see the final flight on the morning of August 1st. Though he was smiling with the confidence in keeping with

his great position, his hand trembled as it gripped those of the operators when they had taken their seats in the car.

"Now for your country's sake!" he said. "Remember, only one word, 'yes,' if they are massing at St. Alonzo; the name only if they are massing elsewhere. But be sure you are right. Don't touch your key until you know. We depend on you—and on you," he added to the man at the wireless station.

As the balloon ascended, the Army of the Blues uttered a prayer for its success; the Army of the Reds, seeing it afar, a prayer for failure. Every man on both sides understood its objective. Two thousand feet it rose, the sun glinting on the big, oblong silken bag and gleaming on the metal work and the steel drag which took the place of the wireless pole. For a few minutes the operator exercised his steed in evolutions. Coming to a standstill, he signalled down that everything was in good working order.

Then, with a flying start from its own lines at forty miles an hour, the hope of the Blues swept across the background of azure sky into the arena of death. Two figures were outlined like flies in the net-work of ropes and aluminum trusses, one at the motor and one at the key of the wireless. Five minutes only the two asked to live; five minutes from the time they crossed the dead line their work would be finished.

The geographers who drew this dead line were the gunners of the Reds. They saw only a target flying through imaginary squares in the air. They counted its speed and the muzzle velocity of their guns to a nicety. The firing-signal's click sent aloft their messages of welcome, breaking in slatey-colored clouds as light as cumuli ahead and behind and over this scout of the air and seeming to nestle caressingly against the envelope, as if they were some benign and festal escort of honor.

In truth, they were the mask for an assassin's dagger. The quick, steel-red, angry flashes—pin-point glimpses of the inferno of which these powder puffs were born—scattered sprays of unseen missiles. Sudden angular splotches of light broke through the gashes and rents of the gas chamber before it exploded and collapsed about the machinery.

Presently the wreck stood still, as if held in poise by the eddying breaths of the

shells. Then the framework half turned over, shaking off, before it fell, two sprawling mannikins under whose hands it had been a thing of life and intricate nerves. Not a word had come to the wireless station of the Blues, and the Chief-of-Staff, as he snapped down the lid of his watch, shook his head.

"There is Treloar yet," some one ventured.

"There *was* Treloar. It is twenty-four hours since he went," said the Chief decisively.

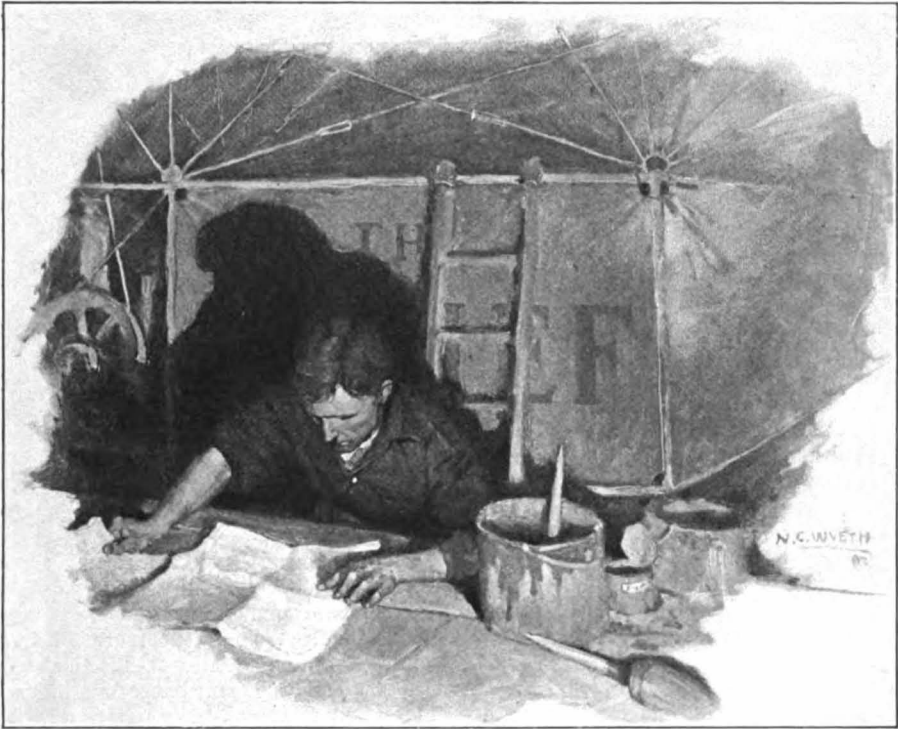
Red-headed little Lieutenant "Jimmy" Treloar, with his wild ideas! Treloar who had a kind of genius and no sense of proportion! When the war began and every officer was needed, he was under a professional cloud because, in undertaking an experiment without the consent of his superiors, he had just broken his leg by coming in contact with a church steeple. He was still limping when he reported to his decimated corps.

Almost tearfully he pleaded that he might have a dirigible to do with as he pleased. As a last desperate chance, one, "The Chief," named after the Chief-of-Staff himself, was given to him. "At all events, he cannot do worse than the others" explained the consent. His gratitude was shown in boundless activity. Day and night he labored joyously, with a plan of one of the enemy's balloons before him, until he had made his own its counterpart in color and pattern. The name was painted out, but it remained "The Chief" to Jimmy Treloar.

"You want a flag of the Reds, too, don't you?" it was suggested on the day of his flight.

"No, sir. That's not playing fair. I'm a strategist, but not a pirate," he answered cheerfully.

With him went his parachute, that inseparable companion of dare-devil escapes. Its stick was a wireless pole. A foot above the handle was a wireless transmitter. He had tried this contrivance many times, but it had never worked very successfully, owing to the weight of the rod and batteries. Failure did not chagrin him. It only inspired him with new ideas and greater optimism and a fresh outburst of technical reports that the staff filed away without reading. He always thought of some change



Day and night he labored joyously with a plan of one of the enemy's balloons before him.—Page 132.

which he was sure would overcome the difficulty on the next occasion. All the time that he was on his back with the broken leg his mind had been on improvements.

"I've got it right this time," he declared. "Besides, I have what I hadn't before—inspiration. This isn't going to be any rehearsal. Anyone does best under realistic conditions. Let the operators keep their ear-caps on and they'll hear from me, don't you worry! We'll do the trick this time! We must—for the honor of the balloon corps!"

These were his last words before he rose. On such partings hitherto the corps had been solemn unless someone broke the gloom with a simulated gayety which was as brittle as spun glass. But Jimmy's joyfulness was genuine, infectious; and they laughed genuinely and gave him a cheer. They could not help liking him; and he was red-headed, anyway, and had risked his life so many times for the pleasure of experiment that once for his country did not seem impressive.

Half amused, half cynical, the Blues

watched the shadow across the sun diminish to a speck in the heavens, going in the direction of their own capital. There was no telling what a man who had fractured most of the bones in his body and still not broken his neck might do. He might tie his balloon in the yard and take his dinner at home, or visit his sweetheart, or he might even succeed in his undertaking. This spark of faith was still alive in a few minds even twenty-four hours after his departure. But—

"There *was* Treloar." So the Chief-of-Staff had said. That ought to settle it.

The Chief's tense was wrong. At the moment he spoke little, red-headed Jimmy Treloar was very much *is*. He was two miles above the earth on the floor of a cloud and as comfortable as a boy in a hay-mow.

If he had dropped his cap it might have fallen on the court-house spire of one of the provincial capitals of the land of the Reds. After leaving his own army he had made a wide *détour* and passed over the enemy's country at a high altitude, where first mug-

gy weather and then a storm had favored his concealment. After the storm broke fortune was still with him the next morning.

The temptation was strong to tell the home station of his position. But that risk he dare not take. Another humiliation of the Blues in this campaign had been the discovery that the Reds were further advanced in the use of the wireless than themselves. The Reds seemed to be able to tell the direction from which a message was sent and even to tell pretty accurately the distance it had travelled. Any word of his their stations might pick up, and over the field wires of their army might be flashed the warning: "Kill any balloon seen this morning!"

With the easy response of her secondary propeller, her aeroplanes extended, "The Chief" was hovering in the gentlest of air currents. Their cheeks aglow with the intense cold of the high altitude, the two operators, nestling in their furs, had just finished their coffee. They welcomed the heat of the morning sun, which shone far above them, but did not penetrate the bank of mist where they floated to the earth below.

"It's been a bully old cloud, most accommodating," Treloar said to Maxon at the motor. "Think how it might have rained itself away when we most needed it. If it would only fall about five thousand yards, so we could drop out of it bang onto our information! Oh, talk about silver linings! We'll take a dip and see—and that's the best we can do for the morning tub to-day!"

The wing-like aeroplanes, which had been fluttering, were folded by touching a button; the propeller whirred, "The Chief" inclined her bow with cloud-like dignity and glided through the mist into the open, with the landscape for a hundred square miles on an overcast day set in a gray Japanese miniature underneath.

Their dip was so brief that any onlooker in the Reds' lines might have taken the speck in the firmament for an illusion and wiped his eyes. But they were down long enough to see that the cloud was rising rather than falling. All hope of a screen was dashed.

"Now we'll go in," Treloar said, when they had risen and were at rest again. "Are we all ready? Can we keep her up to the forty?"

"Yes, sir," Maxon answered. "Fifty! I'll look her over again, though, with your permission, sir."

"Maxon," Treloar resumed thoughtfully, "though I'm captain, I've got to be the first to leave the ship. When I take to my parachute, what are you going to do?"

"Stay in the car, I guess, and blink when she hits," was the answer, as Maxon tightened the one nut that he thought needed any attention. Their eyes met calmly. Neither had any question of his fate.

"For the honor of the balloon corps, sir!" said Maxon stoically, and he saluted.

The shame of previous failures had sunk deep into the pride of this old non-commissioned officer. In his ears now was the banter of the other arms; in his vision the disgust written on the faces of high officers over vast expense and pains come to nothing.

"The honor of the balloon corps!" Treloar repeated. "Think of our chance. Maxon, two common mortals up in the clouds here! We may do more for our country than ten battalions! It's glorious. Oh, I haven't broken my bones for nothing! This is no rehearsal. My parachute will work this time. This is life! I only wish I might live to write it for the technical journals."

His glance fell on the blankets lying on the narrow platform of the car where the two voyagers had alternately snatched catnaps through the night. The buoyant fancy of the red-headed little lieutenant, whom nobody ever took seriously, sprang uppermost.

"We shan't need them any more!" he shouted in fractious glee. "We'll send them as presents to the Reds, who'll think their quartermaster has taken to a balloon supply train."

They threw out the blankets, which were flutteringly submerged in the cold mist of that serenely silent upper world like flapping sails in the fog off the Banks. After the blankets went coats and ropes and all superfluous dunnage. Thus was the ship cleared for action; thus was she to be kept as light as possible to gain any seconds of buoyancy as the shells ripped her envelope to pieces.

After hours of hovering, "The Chief," trimmed for flight, sprang downward with all speed at a definite angle. Out of the



*Drawn by N. C. Wyeth.*

"The Chief," trimmed for flight, sprang downward at all speed.—Page 134



"It didn't work," he managed to say.—Page 137.

mist into streaky sunlight already breaking through the cloud she passed.

"Very simple! Very soon over, now! Keep cool! keep cool!" Treloar whispered.

To go straight on till they were stopped and to send a message—that was all. Treloar had one finger on the wireless of the car. Another was on his parachute, which was attached to the car frame. But he was unconscious where his fingers were or would be until he needed them. At a word from him, Maxon deflected the helm up or down or to right or left. The goal was the break in the mountains, the heart of the position, the Pass of St. Alonzo. People below felt a shadow cross their eyes at the speed of a railroad train and looked up to see a creature with wings folded on an arrow's course.

The armies, meeting new tactics of offense with new tactics of defense, now screened their forces from observation from the sky as well as from the hilltops. Reserves were kept in forests and tents. Canvas-covered pavilions might be a ruse or

might be packed with soldiery. At no more than one thousand yards could the balloonist be sure of his observation and at three thousand the guns could reach him with effect.

The flight from the cloud was a matter of minutes; its charm lulling and inspiring; its swiftness inappreciable except for the rush of air on the faces of Treloar and Maxon and the growth of objects under the eye. The flicker of a window glass set itself in a house; the line of silver became a river; the line of dust a road; a white speck a tent; a blot on a hillside a company of infantry resting. From vagueness into detail they flew. An army's position outlined itself, with the winding flow of supplies to the front, the parks of the ammunition trains and regimental camps set in a pattern of green fields, and the foliage in darker green.

Four thousand, three thousand, two thousand yards! Jimmy Treloar counted not his advance in this way, but by each new piece of testimony rising to his vision among the gorges and roads leading up to

St. Alonzo. With the guns on the heights above the valley—where he must seek his information—in range, he saw that none were turned on “The Chief” and the gunners were looking toward him. The puff-balls of shrapnel smoke of the artillery duel along the ranges were ceasing; columns in khaki half halted and became spotted white with upturned faces as the marching men looked aloft at the marvel of human flight which had not yet lost its fascination.

“If we should get the truth to send, would it be received?” This question put itself in a flash of thought. Interruption by the Reds’ stations did not matter now. Treloar’s finger resting on the key sounded the call for the station of the Blues and only once, for spit-spit came the answering signal.

“They’ll never stop me sending the message if I get low enough to find out!” he said gleefully. “Oh, if they only knew what I was doing wouldn’t they get busy!”

No suspicion at first lurked in the minds of the hosts of the Army of the Reds that this scout come up from their rear was not their own.

They were sky-gazing with speculation and curiosity when Treloar was within two thousand yards and still puzzled as to whether forests and screened gorges were empty or full of soldiers. He prayed for the free hand of a few more seconds, as intently he studied every sign taught him by his long training of peace, and he ticked off to the home station:

“Now — 2,000 — yards — think — St. — Alonzo.”

The home signal was still being repeated in acknowledgment when something cracked in his ear and the smell of powder and of gas from the chamber merged in his nostrils.

In vexation at their stupidity, the Reds, after noting that the balloon flew no flag, had, in the common dawn of intelligence, realized the trick that was being played on them. Every gun within range and many hopelessly out of it broke forth, and officers of infantry called madly to their men to fire. All the power of that army was centred on the two men in the car.

Far and wide the hastily aimed shells exploded, many going true. The smoke of them made a fog, shutting out the earth from Treloar’s view. Their percussion brushed his face with the stunning rush of

air. Their bullets cut the trusses with metallic clicks. A ribbon torn from the bag flicked against his cheek. He felt the sudden sensation of sinking as a dead weight, without the buoying, easy support of the gas chamber.

And all the red-headed little lieutenant was thinking of was the safety of that parachute; that apple of his eye, that joy and pride of his years of experiment. Gripping the handle with his left hand and with his right on the key, he threw himself from the car; and then his mind dwelt only on the fact that he was near enough to tell to a certainty if the attack was to be made by St. Alonzo.

The parachute filled; the strap in which he had slipped his hand squeezed his wrist. Out of the clouds around the wreck, which dipped to one side away from him leaving him free, the Reds saw a new wonder, as Treloar slowly descended, shouting aloud to himself in the joy of his discoveries:

“By—St.—Alonzo—to—night—sure—not—only—through—gorge—direct—but—surprise—turning—movement—over—bluff—right—make—cul-de-sac—good-b——”

He had more than sent the word wanted. He had sent the strategy in that message which was interrupted by centring streams of rifle-fire that tore the key out of his hand. When officers and men, rushing toward their quarry, reached him he still breathed.

“It didn’t work,” he managed to say, with an effort to disguise his real feelings by a show of disgust.

This remark was gravely considered by the staff as a part of the report of the adventure; and the staff concluded that, in his last moments, this madman had spoken the truth.

So the Reds attacked that night. The Blues drew them on into a cross-fire. Those who did not remain to die were driven down the pass in miserable confusion. A week later peace was made on the basis of the old boundary line.

By 1915 statues of a little lieutenant seated in a balloon car at a wireless key—though the Rodin school ran to a figure clinging to a rod in the air—were as common in the public squares of the land of the Blues as those of Joan of Arc are in France. “For the honor of the balloon corps” was always carved on one of the faces of the shaft.