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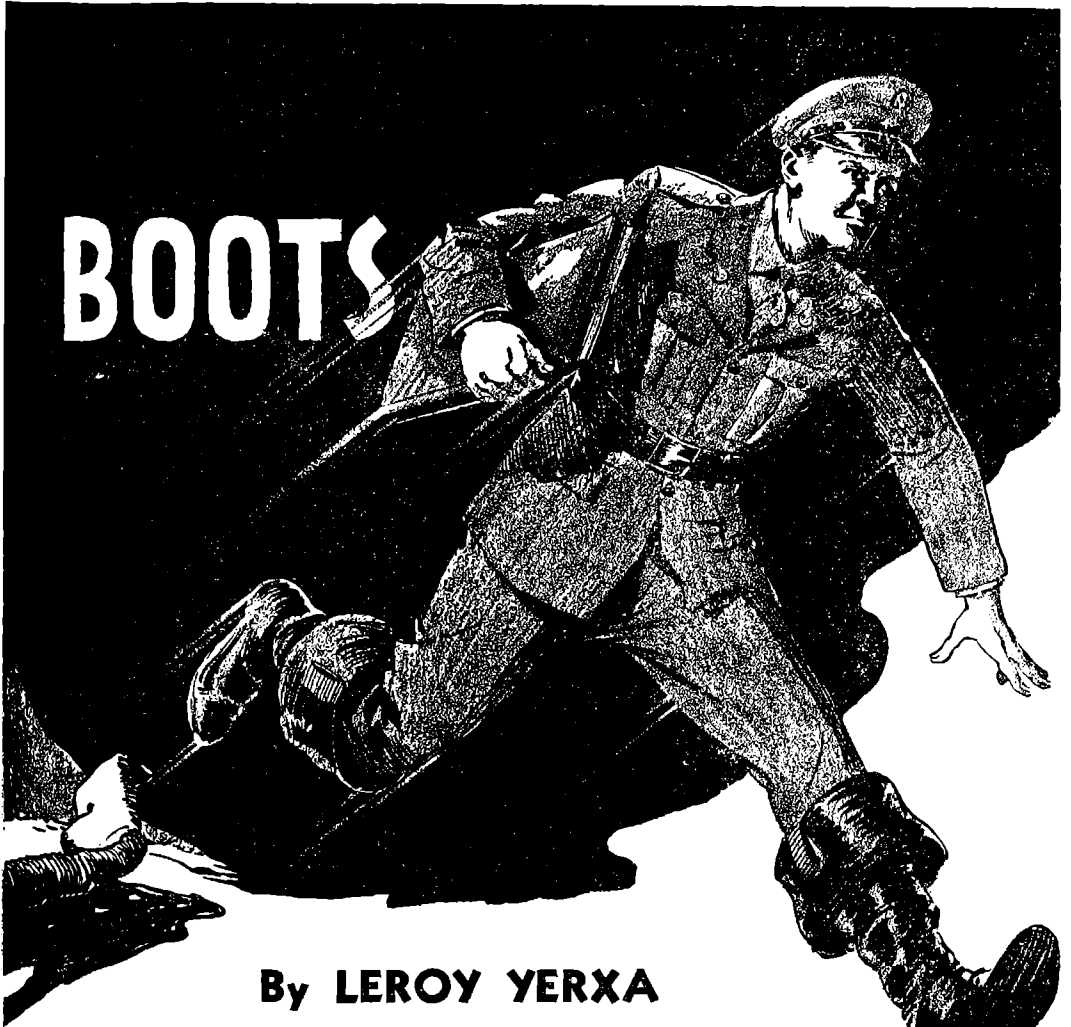
Freddie Funk's SEVEN LEAGUE



Julian Kemp

As Freddie started for camp, a shot rang out from behind a rock

BOOTS



By LEROY YERXA

"You're in the Army now!" they told Freddie. So he showed them how to hike!

BUT hiking boots you asked for!" The little man with the huge paunch hunched his shoulders and threw his hands wide. "You're expecting patent-leather dancing shoes, maybe?"

Freddie Funk considered that. True enough, he had asked the shoe salesman for hiking boots, but such boots as these he had never seen before. To begin with, the shop itself was built along Vic-

torian lines. The room was tiny, wedged between two modern stores. The boxes were piled to the ceiling, and looked as though they hadn't been opened for at least a hundred years. The owner, even now growing more impatient, wore a leather apron and had a thick growth of beard on his heavy chin.

"But aren't these a little frayed?" Freddie surveyed the cuban-heeled,

black-leather objects that the salesman had wedged his feet into.

"They look like something Captain Kidd had worn through several battles and discarded after all hope for them was gone."

"Frayed?" The shoe man glared at him. "Frayed, is it? Them boots got years of wear in 'em yet. Don't make 'em like that today. Notice the fine leather—the hand workmanship."

"Uhuh," Freddie said doubtfully. "Well, if you think . . ."

"Think? Say, I can promise you there isn't another pair like 'em in town. Take my word for it."

Freddie Funk smiled wanly.

"I—I guess you're right," he agreed. "How much?"

How much? What more pleasant words could be spoken? The shoe man assumed the attitude of a person about to give something away.

"Ten bucks."

"Oh, no!" Freddie started to pull the right boot off. "I really couldn't."

"Wait a minute."

"But really."

Freddie, still struggling with the tight boot, stopped to catch his breath.

"Five bucks."

Freddie went to work again, but the heel had caught solidly, and if the boot came, half of his heel threatened to come with it.

"I got three dollars," he said. "That's all I planned . . ."

The shoe man groaned. He seemed troubled by many pains. He moaned, rolled his fat head dolefully from side to side, moaned again and gave up.

"Three bucks—cash. I'm giving . . ."

"I know," Freddie agreed. "You're giving them away."

He found three badly crumpled bills in his pocket, handed them over, and picked up his old shoes.

"You're going to wear the boots?"

Freddie grinned.

"I haven't any choice," he said. "I can't get them off."

He remained seated until his old shoes were returned wrapped in an old newspaper. Then he stood up. The shoe man walked quickly to the door and held it open, wide. Freddie turned, took a last, doubtful look at his purchase and stepped toward the door.

SWOOSH!

Freddie had taken that first step with the beginning of a tune on his lips. The song was wrenched rudely away. He felt a horrible blurring of everything in sight. The shoe store was gone. The sidewalk was gone. With one step he whirled through space, his breath lost, his clothing almost torn from his back.

The city was gone also.

One step from the chair in the old shoe shop had whipped Freddie Funk away from the city, away from every familiar spot, and dropped him in the center of a pasture.

He stood very still, trying to adjust himself to these new surroundings. It was the country all right. Fifty feet away from him, a large cow looked up with puzzled brown eyes, switched her tail and resumed her task of consuming grass. Across the field a farmer worked industriously, driving a tractor up and down a plowed field. Two crows wheeled over head and left for points west. Stark terror resounded in their raucous calls. They had suddenly been thrown into flight by a scarecrow who had popped up on them from nowhere.

Freddie Funk's breath finally slowed to normal. Damned if he'd let this sudden change lick him. Too many such things had already happened to Freddie. He'd have to take it calmly—figure it out.

Stand still and figure it out.

That was advice easily given, but, like a large pill, hard to take. Freddie knew two things. A moment ago he was in the shoe shop. Now he was in the country, miles from home.

But how?

Freddie started to whistle softly. He looked down at the boots. The high tops flopped lazily about his legs. He whistled louder, but the cow wouldn't look up again. No one seemed interested.

"This is silly," he said aloud.

Then, hoping his own speed would outwit any strange power that hung over him, Freddie started to walk rapidly toward the farmer on the tractor.

That is, he thought he was walking.

Five steps—that was all.

S-w-o-o-o-s-h!

Freddie felt the wind go out of him as though someone had hit him below the ribs. His clothing whipped against his body and he was aware of the feeling a dive-bomber must have when it goes in for the kill. The scenery flashed past him as though the world had suddenly increased its speed and was rolling around under triple power.

Freddie hit the ground and sat down—hard.

He caught his breath, felt of his arms and legs and decided that none of them was broken.

He looked bewildered.

"But, I'm *not* drunk," he said. "I'll *swear* I'm not drunk."

"You may not be drunk, boy," a voice behind him said. "But, by tunket, you're the fastest thing I ever seen on two legs—or four, for that matter."

Freddie climbed uncertainly to his feet and looked around. An old man, well-hidden by chin shrubbery and made conspicuous by a bulbous, red nose, was staring at him from over a white picket fence.

"Never seen nothing like it." The old boy shook his head from side to side. "One minute you wuzn't, then you wuz."

FREDDIE stared beyond the old man, saw a little white cottage with green shutters. Near him was another house, and across the street a whole row of modest, shingled cottages. He had evidently landed in the center of someone's victory garden. He had plowed a furrow into a row of newly arisen radish tops. His feet—in fact, his legs—were covered with rich loam and bits of radish tops.

"Jerusalem!" The old man was still ogling him. "Me staring at Bill's radish strip, then like a whirlwind, you landing right in the middle of it."

Freddie stood very still. He didn't dare take another step. It was beginning to dawn on him. Whatever power he had—and he didn't understand it clearly—made every step he took stretch itself into unbelievably long proportions. In five steps he had come miles.

"I'm—I'm practicing for the broad jump," he said lamely. "I cleared that fence nicely, didn't I?"

He brushed curly, very damp hair out of his eyes and waited. The old man chuckled and inserted an old pipe between his teeth.

"Son, you oughta take up flying. I don't know where you started that jump from, but you better get out of Bill's radishes and over to my side of the fence. I'm afraid he wouldn't understand."

Freddie didn't dare take another step. He sat down abruptly, grasped his right boot with both hands and started to tug. The boot came off and two or three inches of skin came with it. Trying to act as though going barefooted was old stuff with him, he re-

moved the other boot, climbed the fence and sat down in the grass under a tree. The old man walked over and sat down beside him.

"Darned hot day, ain't it?"

Freddie nodded. He wanted to ask where he was. Wanted to tell some one what had happened, but he didn't dare. The twinkle in his bewhiskered friend's eyes told him that the old gent didn't believe his story. He couldn't very well improve on it.

"Supposing I get a gallon of cider and we'll freshen up," the old gent suggested. "My name's Walker—Hi Walker."

"Freddie Funk," Freddie said. "Pleased to meet you."

Walker chuckled.

"Glad you dropped in," he said. "And believe me, you sure did."

"Huh?" Freddie was alarmed.

"Forget it," Walker said. "Guess you boys got a lot of secret weapons figured out to win this war. An old geezer like me ain't got any right asking . . ."

"Oh. But it's not a secret. . . ."

"Forget it," Walker said gruffly. "Now, about that cider . . ."

FREDDIE watched Hi Walker as he went into the cottage and came out with a jug of cider and a pan of doughnuts. He accepted a glass of the cold liquid, ate half a dozen doughnuts, and leaned back against the tree. The boots were on the turf beside him. He watched them with narrowed, suspicious eyes.

Walker finally broke the silence.

"Course, I suppose you army fellows got secrets," he said plaintively. "Just the same, I'm an old man and I'm a good American. If you told me how you managed to fly like that, without wings or nothing, I could keep a secret."

Freddie sat up.

"Fly?"

Walker grinned and the pipe wobbled in his mouth.

"I wasn't born yesterday, son," he said. "Nor the day before, for that matter. When I see a man comin' through the air like you did, it don't take me long to figure you're one of them inventor fellers. Secret traps to lick the Japs, so to speak."

Freddie gulped. "Coming through the air?"

Walker's eyes started to kindle angrily.

"If you don't want to tell, ain't no way I can make you."

Freddie Funk never wanted to tell anything so badly in his life.

"I'm—I'm not an inventor," he said. "I'll try to explain . . ."

He did. He told his whole story, from the time he went in to purchase the boots.

"And," he finished, "it must be the boots. There's no other explanation."

Hi Walker gulped the last of the cider, studied Freddie's face for some time, then looked very solemn.

"I guess you ain't crazy," he said.

"I wasn't an hour ago," Freddie admitted uncertainly. "Now, I'm not exactly sure."

Walker picked up the boots, held them well away from him and studied the cut of the leather carefully. The pipe dropped from his teeth and his lips tightened into a narrow line.

"You ever hear of the seven league boots?" he asked finally.

"Seven league boots? But surely, you can't mean . . ."

Walker nodded quickly.

"Exactly what I'm meaning," he admitted. "Durned if I know where they come from, but seven league boots ain't no dream. If they was written about a few hundred years ago, why didn't they exist? What's to prevent these from being the original pair?"

"Seven league boots," Freddie said again, thoughtfully. "Say, how far am I from the city?"

"About one hundred and twenty-five miles," Hi Walker said slowly. "As the crow flies."

Freddie did a little rapid calculation, and a whistle escaped his pursed lips.

"And a league is about three miles," he said. "I took six steps."

"Six steps, at seven leagues a step, makes exactly one hundred and twenty-six—say . . ."

"By golly, old timer!" Freddie jumped to his feet. "I think you're right."

THEN his smile vanished. Over a hundred miles from home—broke—and he didn't dare put the boots back on. One hundred and twenty-six miles, barefooted.

"What you gonna do with these things?" Hi Walker's smile had suddenly become cunning. "They ain't no good to you."

Freddie hesitated, and Walker went on, talking rapidly.

"I always wanted to own something special like this. Tell you what, I'll give you ten dollars . . ."

Freddie Funk felt a strange stubbornness within him. He didn't know what he wanted the boots for, but he *didn't* want to sell them.

"No," he said.

"But they ain't any good." Walker stood up, still holding onto the boots. "Fifteen bucks."

"No," Freddie said. "Maybe you could lend me bus fare."

Hi Walker grinned triumphantly.

"Sure," he reached into his pocket and drew out a five-dollar bill. "And you leave the boots with me."

Freddie had lost all gratitude for Hi Walker's hospitality. He wanted more than ever to keep the magic boots. They

were his. He had bought them and had a receipt for them.

"I'll—I'll take a chance on getting home without the bus," he said. "Give them to me."

Walker backed away from him slowly, the grin gone, his whiskered face almost hiding narrowed cunning eyes.

"I got 'em," he said. "You start a fight and I'll tell Bill you wrecked his garden."

Freddie was mad now. Plenty mad.

He swooped forward suddenly, grabbed the boots and sent Walker spinning to the grass.

"You go to hell," Freddie said angrily. "And tell Bill his radishes can go there too."

He started walking toward the front gate.

Over a hundred miles from home, he kept thinking, and he was barefooted.

THE sign on the glass paneled door said:

SELECTIVE SERVICE—LOCAL BOARD NUMBER 26

Freddie Funk sighed, looked down at the envelope in his hand and opened the door. There were half a dozen desks inside and as many clerks. The clerks stared at Freddie. One man, with a green eye-shade over dark, penetrating eyes, motioned a finger toward Freddie.

"This way, little man," he said. "We've been waiting for you."

"Waiting?" Freddie walked toward the green eye-shade.

"Your name's Funk, ain't it?" was the retort.

Freddie nodded.

"But I was out of town," he pleaded. "I couldn't . . ."

Six pairs of accusing eyes turned upon him. The green eye-shade slipped

back, revealing an angry face.

"You were out of town," the clerk said sarcastically. "Out of a hundred men called from this section, ninety-nine appeared. *You were out of town.*"

Freddie handed the letter over carefully. He remembered the contents word for word. Remembered finding the letter after he had completed the barefooted trek across the State of Illinois.

"I'm—I'm sorry," he gulped.

The man with the green eye-shade grasped the letter and ripped the contents from the envelope.

"Mr. Funk is sorry he didn't appear," he snarled. "Are you sorry you didn't notify us that you planned to be out of town?"

Freddie started to murmur something about the trip being unexpected. He didn't have time to finish it.

"We've saved a very nice spot for you, Mr. Funk," the clerk said soothingly. "Uncle Sam felt you were worth waiting for. You will report at Camp Blitz induction center tomorrow at ten for your physical. Don't bring along any more alibis, either, Funk. You're practically in the army, now."

"Yes, sir," Freddie said humbly. "I'm . . ."

The green eye-shade waggled up and down impatiently.

"Yes, we know. You're sorry. We heard that before. You're going to like the branch of the army we think you're going into, Funk. You'll be taking lots of trips."

"I'll—I'll do my best," Freddie said.

The green eye-shade rocked up and down gently.

"Sure you will, Funk. You'll have a splendid opportunity to travel from now on, on both feet. We understand you're going into the government's best-loved division. Hiker's paradise—the infantry!"

Freddie stared down at the new shoes that covered two blistered, peeling feet. A groan of reproach escaped his lips. He turned and without further words, staggered toward the door.

"TENSHUN!"

Freddie Funk stiffened, stared down at the fresh khaki shirt, the well-pressed army pants and the heavy brown G. I. shoes. It had been like this for some hours now. The marching wasn't so bad. It was the distance they marched.

"Forward march!"

Freddie took three steps forward and fell flat on his face.

"Halt!"

The column stopped, and a big, muscle-clad sergeant came toward Freddie. Funk got to his feet quickly, stiffened and waited for the blow.

The sergeant halted at Freddie Funk's side.

"Well, well," he said in a low-throated purr, "if it ain't 'I'm sorry' Funk again. What's the trouble *this* time, Private Funk?"

Freddie was silent. He had no words to match his mood.

"Private Funk," Sergeant Waldron started gently, "this is the third time this week you have taken it upon yourself to initiate new drills. When I say 'forward march,' I do *not* mean to lie down for a rest."

"Yes, sir," Freddie managed.

"For once, Funk," the sergeant roared, "I'm tired of you and your sore feet. I can't run a drill on sore feet. Fall out and see the medico."

"Yes, sir." Freddie fell out literally. He meant to turn stiffly and march away. His left foot got in the way of his right and he went down again, full length. Sergeant Waldron backed away, waited for Funk to rise, and sent a parting retort after him.

"Don't trip over the doctor, Funk. He's not as patient as I am."

"Yes, sir," Freddie said over his shoulder. "That is—I mean, no, sir."

"CORNS," the doctor said. "Such corns I've never seen."

He raised his head from a scrutiny of Freddie Funk's feet, and stared balefully into Freddie's eyes.

"How the hell did you *get* such corns?"

Freddie sighed.

"I walked a hundred miles barefoot," he said, then held his breath.

The doctor seemed about to explode.

"If you think that's funny . . . !

"No, sir," Freddie mumbled. "Honest I did."

The doctor shook his head again, started putting little gadgets back into his bag and stood up.

"You stay in bed today," he said with a suspicious look in his eye. "I'm afraid this case goes beyond me."

"Yes, sir," Freddie said. "I—I wonder if I could see the general?"

The doctor, about to walk away, turned and placed both hands carefully on his hips.

"But certainly, Private Funk," he said. "General Lipstead sees all privates between the hours of three and five in the afternoon. He likes to talk over their little problems. Just call him for an appointment."

Freddie stared at him.

"I'm not being funny," he pleaded. "The general might understand."

The doctor groaned, his arms falling to his side.

"I'm sure he would," he said softly, as though not quite trusting himself to say more. "Yes, I'm sure he would."

FOR a long time after the doctor had gone, Freddie Funk lay on his cot staring at the ceiling. It wasn't that

he minded being in the army. Private Funk had a nice sound to it. At least he was trying to do his part.

If it hadn't been for those damned boots. It had taken him days to walk home after being stranded in Bill's radish patch. A barefooted man carrying boots in his hands had little chance of hitching a ride. The longer he walked the worse he looked. The worse he looked, the faster people passed him on the highway.

That had been the start of it all. Now, in the army and drilling every day, the crop of corns he had harvested on that long trek was playing hob with him.

Bitterly, Freddie remembered each time his tired, almost useless feet had betrayed him.

He leaned over the edge of the cot, opened his locker and drew out the seven league boots. They looked innocent, dusty and very commonplace. He put them on the cot and stared at them. Gradually an overpowering curiosity awakened within Freddie Funk. Perhaps something else had been the source of his strange trip. Yet, if the boots *were* powerful enough to take him twenty-one miles at a hop, why wasn't this the time to take advantage of it? Why, in the army, wasn't he in a perfect position to use them?

Freddie sat up. A smile lighted his face. He started to whistle softly. Tomorrow the whole camp was going to start a long march to Tennessee. A hundred and fifty miles, marching through rain or shine, to the border and back again.

Freddie Funk thought of Sergeant Waldron's quick tongue and grinned. When the remainder of the boys came in after long hours of drilling, Freddie Funk was propped up in bed, whistling. His feet felt a lot better. Better than they had felt in months.

"THE men who have to fall out will be picked up by the trucks," Sergeant Waldron was explaining to the long line of men. "However, any man who gets a ride will have to show me that his feet are worn down to the knees. There ain't gonna be no slackers, understand?"

He stared deliberately at Private Funk and Funk smiled back. The smile was very disarming. Freddie was thinking of the pair of seven league boots that were now packed snugly in the top of his knapsack.

The long line of men, trucks and equipment pulled out of Camp Blitz on schedule. It wound down the highway, across the big bridge and straggled out across farm country. Sergeant Waldron marched at the head of his squad, head up. *His feet weren't hurting him!*

Then it started to rain. The road changed to mud. The trucks snarled and tore their way through the ever-thickening ooze. The men bogged down behind the trucks, slogging along with heads down against the rain.

FREDDIE FUNK waited until each man's problem of locomotion became his own. Then Private Funk dropped out of line and slipped behind a tree at the edge of the road. Somewhat frightened by the thing he was about to do, he slipped out of the mud-crusted G.I. shoes. He dug hurriedly into the pack and found his seven league boots. The marchers were beyond him now. Trucks were coming up. Rear-guard men were combing the edge of the road, picking up stragglers.

Freddie slipped into the boots hurriedly and stood up. He took a firm grip on his army shoes, made sure the pack was safe on his back, and faced the Tennessee line.

He took a step

Rain lashed against his face powerfully and a few branches slapped him as he moved. The landscape whipped past, changed abruptly and he was standing in the middle of a rain-swept, empty road.

There was a gasoline station beside the road, but the rain had driven everyone indoors. No one had seen Freddie drop in. He went across the road, slipped a nickel into a coke machine and drew out a bottle. Then he dropped behind a nearby tree, changed his shoes, took a sip of the soft drink and fell into a dreamless sleep.

When he awakened, he was aware of marching feet. The rain had stopped; sun bathed the road. Dust flew up about everything and his first glimpse of the marching troop reminded him of doughnuts that had been dusted in powdered sugar.

He found his own squad, waited until most of them had passed, then fell in. They marched for another twenty minutes, then the command was given to fall out.

Sergeant Waldron came upon Private Funk as Funk settled himself comfortably with his back to an elm tree. The sergeant's eyes popped out.

"Private Funk!" he said in amazement. "I thought we lost you back at the camp. You didn't actually *march* all this distance?"

Freddie looked hurt.

"I'm doing my best," he said.

Several of the men turned toward the sergeant. They admired Funk for sticking it out. They didn't like Waldron too well, anyhow. Waldron tensed.

"Good work, Funk," he said abruptly. "Keep 'em marching."

He turned stiffly and wolked away.

AND so to Tennessee—and—back went Freddie and his seven league

boots. If anyone noticed that he was missing during the day, his freshness and good spirits each night made up for mild suspicions.

If you didn't see a man during the day, that was no sign he didn't get out of line a little. The fact that he made the grade—marched every inch of those dirty, wearying miles, made Freddie Funk and his corns something of a noble figure.

It was the last leg of the march. Forty miles ahead was Camp Blitz and a bunk to sleep in. The troops were lined up for the morning march. Instructions came down the line.

"The first ten men to reach the camp will receive awards for their stamina," Sergeant Waldron read from the notice. "From here on, it's every man for himself. You know the cross-country route. No holds barred. Get going when they blow the whistle, and I hope at least one man in my outfit can take one of them awards."

Unfortunately, Freddie did not hear these instructions. He had already retreated behind a nearby tree and was donning his seven league boots. When the whistle blew and hundreds of uniformed men suddenly started to run, Freddie wondered what had happened.

He knew they couldn't possibly run all the way to Camp Blitz. Perhaps it was a new kind of cross-country race.

Freddie donned the boots and took his step. Twenty-one miles ahead of the troops and nothing to do through the long, sunlit hours. He started to think of the cot at the empty barracks. Surely he could sneak in and hide in a comfortable place. He'd have a fine chance to make up his sleep.

Without hesitation, Freddie Funk took another twenty-one mile stride and landed at the edge of the camp. He entered his own barracks and in half

an hour was tucked in for a long rest.

THAT was where they found him. That is, Sergeant Waldron found him.

Waldron had run his head off for the first hour, settled down to a dog-trot and camped that night about half way to Blitz. Now he was entering Blitz on the second day, not a winner, but at least among the first hundred soldiers to return.

He came into the barracks, planning on stealing forty winks before he was needed, and saw Freddie Funk snoozing comfortably on his cot.

"Funk?"

Freddie opened his eyes and stared up at the Sergeant. He sat up hurriedly.

"Yes, sir."

Waldron's face was wreathed in smiles.

"Private Funk, am I to understand that you've been here for some time?"

Freddie managed to get into his pants.

"Yes, sir, I think I was the first one, sir."

"*The first?*" An incredulous look fanned over Waldron's face. "You've reported to the headquarters?"

Funk's face was a blank.

"No, sir, was I supposed . . . ?"

Waldron grasped him firmly by the wrist and dragged him off the cot.

"Man, you're the fastest soldier in this camp. You win first place in a cross-country race, and then go to sleep and forget about it. Such modesty."

"Yes, sir," Freddie mumbled. He wished the Sergeant would let go of him so he could go back and put his shirt on. "I didn't know . . ."

Waldron kept right on dragging him outside—then across the camp toward headquarters.

"I know," he said. "Say no more."

Modesty is fine stuff, but not when you've accomplished a feat like this. Modesty, hell. We're taking you in for that award."

"Yes, sir." Freddie wondered who was getting the award, he or Sergeant Waldron.

"PRIVATE FUNK! Private Funk!"

Freddie was conscious of a hand shaking his shoulder. He turned over, groaned and saw the tense features of Sergeant Waldron staring down at him in the semi-darkness of the barracks. The sergeant was fully dressed and seemed excited.

"Funk—turn out and get dressed on the double. Special job came up for you. Chance for a promotion."

Freddie didn't care much for promotions or anything else at that moment. It couldn't be much past two in the morning, and he had just turned in a few hours back. He wanted sleep.

"Uhuh," he said, and explored the cold floor with one toe. It wasn't bad, so he stood up slowly, yawning and stretching both arms above his tousled head. He tried to smooth the curly hair but it persisted in sticking straight out.

"Meet me outside," the sergeant ordered. "Dress quickly and don't disturb the men."

Funk was dressing as the sergeant moved silently toward the door. Freddie wondered if Waldron had another gag for him, maybe shoveling out the stables, or something just as pleasant.

Dressed, or at least partially so, he stumbled toward the door. The sharp night air hit him in the face, awakening him fully. The sergeant was pacing up and down, a cigarette clenched tightly in his lips.

"That you, Funk?" He strained his eyes in the uncertain light.

"Yes, sir," Freddie said. "I'm ready, sir."

"Good; follow me."

Sergeant Waldron struck off across the parade ground in the direction of headquarters. For the first time, Freddie noticed lights burning in the big hall that housed the offices. Cars were moving swiftly in and out of the drive. Men were standing in groups, talking excitedly.

Sergeant Waldron ignored them and led the way directly into the building. He spoke to an orderly at the door.

"Sergeant Waldron and Private Funk. Tell the general we are here."

There was a hurried, masterful touch in Waldron's voice that started Freddie wondering. Then they were to see General Lipstead himself?

The orderly left them, but returned almost at once.

"The general is waiting, sir," he said. "Follow me, please."

They went down a long hall, stopped before a door. The orderly knocked and went in.

"Sergeant Waldron and Private Funk," he said and held the door open. Waldron practically pushed Freddie through the door. Funk's eyes widened. There were at least a dozen privates lined up before the general's desk. Lipstead nodded to Waldron.

"Thank you, Sergeant. You may go now."

Waldron was disappointed. He hesitated, then stammered a hurried, "Yes, sir."

He went out.

The general, heavy set, keen-eyed with bushy eyebrows, stared at the row of privates before him.

"Men," he said, "no one outside this room knows why you are here. I have an important mission for you all. Perhaps you remember that a few days ago we held a cross-country-race to determine which men were best fitted to take care of themselves while traveling

alone and on foot across country.

"Now, quite unexpectedly, a terrible thing has happened. A problem that can only be solved by men such as the first ten or twelve winners of that cross-country race."

Freddie chanced a quick look up the line of men. Sure enough, they were the same ones who had received awards for the race. He, Freddie, had been the first-place winner.

Lipstead went on quietly:

"Last night, on the slopes of Mount Arnet, an army bomber got lost in the fog and crashed."

Low exclamations came from the men.

"On board that plane were complete plans for an invasion of enemy territory. They were being flown to Washington by General Walsher of San Francisco. I don't have to tell you that it would take months of work to duplicate those plans. We are sure that Axis agents are already on their way up Mount Arnet after those plans. Our only chance is to beat them to the wreck."

He paused to let his words sink in, then continued.

"We cannot come within fifty miles of the plane by car. We can drop men by parachute, but even then, they will be several miles from the scene of the crash. It calls for men fast on their feet and ready to face death for their country. It's a real wartime service. Who will volunteer?"

Every man in the line took one step forward.

"Good." Lipstead stood up. "Prepare with light pack, take emergency rations and be ready in front of the office in ten minutes. Dismissed."

PRIVATE FREDDIE FUNK took one look at the parachute as they strapped it on his back, then looked

away and tried to forget it.

There were eleven privates in the transport beside himself. They had been in the air for an hour. Mt. Arnet was but a few miles ahead. High in the air, it was icy cold. Freddie felt in his pack to make sure the seven league boots were there. He had packed them carefully just before he left.

"When you are pushed from the plane, count three and pull the ring. Then hold on. It won't hurt much if you flex your knees and roll when you land." The tough sergeant was standing near the door of the plane. "I know you guys never made a jump, and don't think I ain't giving you credit for guts. This is a tough assignment, and I hope one of you gets the General's handshake for it. Now! Are you ready?"

Freddie saw the rest of the group stand up, and followed their example.

"Remember, you're landing in a valley just south of the place where the bomber went down. Head due north and keep climbing. Good luck! You'll need it!"

Private Funk didn't remember much after that. He was sixth in line. His precious boots were wedged between the chute and his back. He felt the sergeant's hand on his shoulder, fell into space, waited an instant and then pulled the ring. For a while he seemed to topple through space—black space—then something jerked him upward and the chute was open in a white umbrella over his head.

It wasn't half bad. The long drift down—vague shapes below that grew into trees and hills and ravines—the sudden hard jolt of landing and being thrown forward on his face.

Freddie managed to release himself from the chute. He sat down and put his boots on hurriedly. Then, facing north, he took a single step.

W-o-o-s-h!

The ground had changed under him. He had been standing in an open spot, covered with pine needles. Now, his legs were buried to the knees in deep snow. He had come half-way up the side of Mount Arnet in a single step. The wind whipped around him, cutting to his shoulder blades. He stood, back to the wind, studying the sloping hillside. About a mile above him he could make out a blackened, hulking wreck against the gray cliff.

Would it be possible for him to take a step less than seven leagues in length? He had never tried.

He pushed one foot ahead of the other slightly, just a small movement. At once he saw that he had advanced perhaps a hundred yards from his last position. He tried again, lifting his right foot slowly and bringing it down a scant inch ahead of the other.

Crack!

"Ouch!"

Freddie fell forward on his face, turned and started to rub his foot. He had gone forward again, perhaps half a mile, and his foot had caught on a boulder, sending him down in the snow. He struggled to his feet. The plane was close.

He removed the boots and put his shoes on hurriedly.

With the boots slung over his shoulder, he went forward toward the plane.

NO ONE had reached it ahead of him. The bomber was crumpled up, props bent and twisted. The body of the plane looked as though it had been folded up by a giant.

Freddie tried not to notice the three burned, crushed objects that lay on the snow near the plane. He found the door to the cabin, wrenched it loose and entered the plane.

He must look for a heavy bag. A bag with the initials H.W.—General

Herbert Walsher.

Freddie struggled over the mess inside, reached the front end of the bomber and found a small, blackened briefcase. He turned it over eagerly. Under the blackened surface he could make out the silver initials, H.W.

Private Freddie Funk was very excited. He tumbled hurriedly out into the snow. Sitting down quickly, he donned the seven league boots. Not a moment too soon. As he arose, bag in hand, the head of a man came over a nearby rock.

"Hey, you! Wait a minute! I want . . ."

Freddie heard the voice, a very determined voice. He saw the stranger lift an object that looked like a revolver.

Freddie muttered a quick prayer, faced the general direction of Camp Blitz and took off.

He took off literally.

This time he was in a hurry and he took an extra long jump. The boots took the hint and sent him flying across the valley as though he were a human cannon ball. Freddie's breath was gone and his small pack was ripped from his back. He sat down by a small stream and regained his calm. Then, sure of his direction, he set off for Camp Blitz.

PRIVATE FREDDIE FUNK'S success story was short-lived. He was greeted by General Lipstead personally, though the general showed grave doubts over the length of time Funk had been away from camp. He placed the brief case on his desk, wiped away some of the charred leather and produced a key that unlocked the case. Holding it upside down, the General waited. Out popped a tooth-brush, towel, shaving kit and an electric razor.

Lipstead, alone with Private Funk, raised his head slowly. His eyes were

red and they flashed with unholy fury.

"You!" He struggled to catch his breath. "You doddering nincompoop! You're the fastest man in the camp, all right. The fastest and the dumbest. Up the side of Mount Arnet you flash like a super-man, and you bring back General Walsher's personal toilet kit. By the gods, man, you'll get the guard-house for this!"

Freddie, sure that there had been only one bag, had brought the first one he had seen. The man in the fur cap would have long since found the other bag. The bag with the invasion plans.

"Maybe—could I please have another chance," he stammered. "I'm pretty sure I can find the right one."

Lipstead was growing more irate with the passing minutes.

"Chance?" he howled. "Thirty days chance to cool your heels and think this over! If the others can't reach that wreck in time, we've lost our chance. Why should *you* have another?" . . .

Freddie couldn't think of a good answer to that, and anyhow it was too late. The door was already open. The orderly stood just outside.

Before he could make another plea, Private Funk was marching swiftly toward the guard house. He had a husky escort for a safe and speedy trip.

THE walls aren't really very thick, Freddie thought. He'd never get through the bars, or through the door. He still had the seven league boots, however, and if he stepped forward toward the wall, he was sure to go through. Twenty-one miles through.

He wondered vaguely if the shock of hitting that wall would kill him. Better off dead, he thought, than to be the laughing stock of the entire camp. Perhaps it would be worse than that. The general was pretty sore. Maybe he'd get court-martialed.

Freddie put the boots on. He stood close to the broad wall, picked up a heavy bench and held it firmly against him so that it covered him from head to foot. He took a long breath and a long step.

C-R-A-C-K.

Freddie saw stars by the dozen. He saw more stars than a movie fan in Hollywood. He felt the bench crush against his ribs, then something gave, and he was flying through space. He still held the bench in his hands when he stopped moving. He felt as though he had been taken apart like a Model T Ford and scattered out on the grass in small pieces. Sitting up carefully, he pushed the bench aside and examined himself. Outside of his general complexion, black and blue, he felt normal.

Private Funk wondered what they would think at Camp Blitz when they found the hole in the guard house wall.

Now he was the usual twenty-one mile step from the camp. The pasture around him was deserted and the night was cool. In the distance Mount Arnet stuck out of the general landscape like a sugar-coated cake.

Freddie, knowing that he must lose no time, planted one foot firmly ahead of the other and hurried toward the mountain. A half dozen steps brought him to the foothills of Mount Arnet.

He was in the middle of a heavy, pine-clad valley.

General Lipstead said the Nazi agents would probably drive to the foothills and hike to the wreck. If he knew the man in the fur cap, the Nazi would probably be in possession of invasion plans and half way down the mountains by now.

Freddie set out in the general direction of the wreck. His next move brought him whizzing in for a snowy landing at the same spot he had reached on his first journey.

He looked around carefully for some trace of the man with the fur cap. No one was in sight. The wreck, however, was in flames. The agents had found the plans and set the remainder of the plane on fire. It burned merrily, destroying every last trace of the enemy visit.

He must find a road below where the car was parked, then hurry down and wait.

He made out a small, winding strip of gravel, almost hidden among the pines. With a bound, Freddie was standing on its smooth surface.

Standing very still, he listened with every nerve in his body. The longer he waited the surer he was that a car was coming down the winding road above him. The road followed a deep canyon. Freddie waited. Sure enough, a closed motor car hurtled toward him. Funk, too angry now to be cautious, moved into the path of the oncoming automobile. He had forgotten that a step would carry him so far. Fortunately he shuffled forward, rather than jumped. The movement took him to a spot hardly twenty yards from the car. The driver lost his head, tried to avert the collision and twisted the wheel sharply to the right. Funk watched the car as it left the road and leaped over the edge of the cliff into the canyon below. It bounced once or twice, hit the valley floor and burst into flame.

He had to get that bag!

Freddie stepped gingerly after the car, felt the boots carry him downward swiftly and land him close to the burning wreck. He jerked off the boots, ran toward it and threw open the back door. There were two men in the front seat. They weren't a very pretty sight. Against the back window he could see a dark, scarred overnight bag. Breathlessly he lifted it out. Flames licked up and the boots, held

under one arm, caught fire.

Freddie fell back, flames narrowly missing his face. Frantically, he beat out most of the flames blazing along the boot tops, then slipped into them.

Freddie took a half dozen long, running strides. The remaining leather in the seven league boots had not lost its power. He felt himself lifted aloft; then pain, as the wind whipped into life the smouldering blaze around his legs, caused him to lose consciousness as he crashed to earth.

"LEAVE the kid alone." It was Sergeant Waldron's voice. "He'll be okay."

Freddie could hear a lot of other voices also, some of them far away, then close again, wavering with his own strength. He tried to move, groaned and fell back. The feel of fresh sheets. The warmth of a pillow. The last he remembered was his hurried exit from the canyon on Mount Arnet.

He opened his eyes, waited for the film to clear away, and saw that the doctor, Sergeant Waldron, General Lipstead and several officers were leaning over him. Lipstead's hand was on Freddie's arm.

"I hope you're feeling better, Corporal Funk?"

Freddie stared.

"Corporal?"

Lipstead smiled.

"After what you've done, I believe you're entitled to at least that much of a reward."

SERGEANT WALDRON chuckled.

"Well, Funk, think you'll make a good non-com?"

Freddie nodded, too choked to speak aloud.

"What we can't figure out, Funk, is how you got burned so bad. One of the men found you lying out on the parade

ground. Your shoes were burned off and you were in awful shape. Guess you just couldn't make it any further, huh?"

Freddie nodded again.

"But the bag was safe," General Lipstead said in an awed voice. "Though how you ever got back to Mount Arnet so quickly, I'm damned if I know."

"Yeah," Waldron said thoughtfully. "Them other privates are still up there on the mountain trying to reach the wreck. Guess you're a fast worker."

"Leave the lad alone, now," the doctor said softly. "He needs rest. I never saw a man's feet in such condition. I'd swear he hit the ground and skidded twenty feet when he landed."

"**Y**EAH, corns," Sergeant Waldron said, a week later, when Corporal Fred Funk was called before General Lipstead for an honorable discharge, "You'd never believe it, but this Funk

guy makes a hero outa hisself, gets the Congressional Medal of Honor, and then is discharged from this man's army *because he's got corns.*"

His companion, a new man with the company, shook his head and scratched one ear thoughtfully.

"I heard of this Funk guy," he said. "When the President pinned that medal on him, he said 'Corporal Funk, I understand you are the fastest man in the United States Army.' You know what Funk said?"

Waldron shook his head.

"Funk just grinned and said he was also the only soldier who ever bought a pair of seven league boots. Wasn't that a screwy thing to say to the President?"

"Yeah," Waldron agreed. "Sure was screwy. I'll bet the President got a laugh outa that."

"Sure did. Jeez, that Funk's a screwy guy. Kinda lucky, too," he added.