Chevrons

By Leonard Nason

Illustrations by IRWIN MYERS, D. S. C.

Copyright by George H. Doran Company. Printed by permission.

Continued From Last Week

CHAPTER X

Home

From a little way south of Bordeaux almost to the Spanish border stretches a desolate waste of sand, forested with pitch pine. Shepherds live there and gatherers of pitch, and a few fishermen, and during the war the French established training camps for their Senegalese and Annamite battalions against the pines. The poverty, most out of the way, and the worst constructed of these camps was Le Cornera. Malingerers had been there, and after them the Russians, and after the Russians mutinied, had been subdued, and taken away, the camp was turned over to the Americans. Row after row of dirty, white-washed huts, sand, black with the dust and dirt of its thousands of former occupants, a brick guardhouse with no windows, and the deep encompassing of the forest, such was the camp.

A mess stood at the main gate of the camp in the early hours of the morning, watching the details going out to work and the companies being marched to drill. The man was Reformed Enlisted and in the intervening after his arrival at Le Cornera. It was cold, a damp raw wind that kept the thermometer hovering around the freezing point three before it a cold rain, and the marching men beat their heads against it. What a universal thing an overseas cap was in a rain!

Eadie had breakfasted on sour ham and bacon, with a cupful of coffee ground to wash it down with. He had slept in his clothes and overcoat, but even then he had been cold. First call for drill had blown, and then secondly, but Eadie had not assisted at roll call. He had been in his camp before and knew that it would be several days before his name would appear on the roster. He had also gone away from his camp the last time without the formality of a travel order.

"I think I'll do it again," muttered the sergeant. It was cold, though, mess and the trains don't run to the front any more. Where would a guy go?

Yet why rush away? He had only been here a few hours. They might be going to send him home from here after all. Le Coreson was the artillery replacement camp for the A. E. F. and would be the logical place to send an artilleryman who had seen the St. He couldn't expect to go home all by himself like a returning tourist. And his nurse friend had said she had seen his name on the order to go home. Yeh, but when? The whole A. E. F. was going home some day.

Eadie fared the other way and looked at the wall of forest across the road. The last time he had been near he used to go into those woods every day and lie up under the pines until the hour for drill was over. It had been summer then and warm. The pines looked dreary enough now after pining with rain and swaying in the wind. Still the sergeant had better be getting under cover, for a man standing about with no evident purpose would be the prey of the first officer that went by in search of some one to cut kindling wood or dig a latrine, no matter if the man had as many stripes as a zebra on his arm. Eadie turned and moved out of the gate to the road, where he stopped to consider the best route to take.

"Get to h—l back inside that gate!"

Eadie turned. There were two horsemen there, that, riding on the grass beside the road, had approached without his hearing them. They were armed with pistols and had rifles in their gun boots.

"Great!" snarled the man again. "G—d d—n you, get the h—l back there! Where the h—l do you think you are, anyway?"

Eadie still looked at the two men. They were not military police, for they were no brassards. They had campaign hats, with red tat cords, and must be a part of the permanent personnel of the camp. They had heavy, unintelligent faces and cruel mouths with tobacco-stained lips. One of the men spurred his horse toward the sergeant and kicked at him savagely with his spurred heel. Eadie turned and went back inside the gate. What good would it do him to stay in the road to resist those two brutes? The guardhouse, perhaps. Even suppose he hurled a rock at one of them, the other would shoot him down. Killed by accident," the casualty list would read. A fine ending to a military career. The mounted men looked at him a minute or two and then rode on.

"They're a fine pair o' birds, ain't they?"

Eadie turned. Another soldier stood beside him, a red-faced man, older than Eadie, and this man also wore the campaign hat that marked him as a member of the camp personnel.

"Two kind of guys are getting'ip up all over France," observed the man without waiting for Eadie's answer. "The war is over an' they ain't afraid of bein' sent up to the lines any more. War is hell, but it ain't got nothin' on peace."

"I'll say," agreed Eadie. "I've seen hard-boiled M. P.'s in my time, but I always knew that under his hard-boiled skin the M. P. was just a soldier trying to keep himself out of the guardhouse like the rest of us. But—"

Eadie was still very weak, he stops every afternoon, and a walk from the barracks to the camp gate exhausted him. And how about home, where a man could take off his uniform and forget it all?

"Shh," said Eadie aloud. "I'm a noncommissioned officer of the Regular army and wherever my home is, I'm home."

He went into the hospital, into a large room full of men who had just moved his clothes as the other men had. These doctors stood in the circle of naked men, and the men went through various exercises under their toes, extending their arms bending down, all with the intention of displacing any loose accumulation to the three doctors. Then the men looped up and down in place for some time, and after that the doctors went about with stethoscopes listening to chests and saying each man the nature of his wound. The doctor passed before Eadie and poked his scar with a stubby finger.

"What gave you that?" asked the doctor.

"Appendicitis," replied Eadie.

"Hmm. They did a poor job on you. How do you feel?"

"Fine," replied Eadie.

"Want to go back to your outfit?"

"Yes, sir," replied Eadie.

The man down "A:" directed the doctor, and went on to the next man.

A week at Le Coreson! That was the way hell of battle to be compared to it? No. But the week finally passed and on the eighth day Eadie found himself getting first sergeant of a detachment of replacements for the Army of Occupation. They went away early in the afternoon in box freight cars and Eadie began his third journey to relieve the battle. It was just like the old wartime trips, with a trainload of shouting, singing soldiers full of red wine and cheering fuller every time the train stopped, with men falling out of cars on the tops of roofs and losing the train at stations and sometimes disappearing and being caught an express, and finally disappearing for good. No, things hadn't changed. Every station was guarded by an infantile barrage of police. Where the tank cars fed the locos used to stand ungoarded there were now railway employees still in