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FIREBRAND TREVISON
THE VENGEANCE OF JEFFERSON GAWNE
THE RANGE BOSS, ETC ETC

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CHAPTER I

CARTER CORWIN had lunched alone at an exclusive little restaurant on a side street. A certain front-page article in the *Observer*—Falltown's only daily newspaper—had taken the edge off Corwin's appetite. To be sure, the event had been impending—the somber shadow of war had long been stretching westward over the mighty expanse of water that certain credulous and trusting Americans had glibly and unthinkingly referred to as providing "immunity from invasion".

But the President's war message had come as a distinct shock despite the expectancy which had preceded it—and Corwin got up from the table with a conviction that the country faced a task the enormity of which could not be comprehended on the instant. And, he grimly assured himself as he walked down Main street, there were persons in America who would never comprehend it.

Nor could Corwin entirely grasp the mighty significance of the thing. He was convinced that the volume of production, hitherto fixed at certain limits, would have to be vastly increased; there would have to be extensions, enlargements, and intensive schemes to speed up the manufacture of munitions and the thousand and one implements of destruction which are the essentials of war; there would have to be rapid and hazardous adjustments; and in some cases a complete rebuilding of many industries. The whole country would have to work and save as it never worked and saved before—and the country would have to work and save under the handicap of a startling labor loss. For the khaki-clad stream that must be poured into devastated Europe would have to be recruited from field and office and factory. There was no magic by which an army could be raised through merely expressing the wish.

Filled with a vague disquiet, Corwin made his way down Main street until he reached Meridian avenue.

Main and Meridian formed the business center of Falltown. It was shortly after noon when Corwin reached the corner, and the hum of traffic had somewhat subsided.

Corwin had an appointment with Gary Miller, president of the Merchant's Bank; and he still had fifteen minutes to spare when he arrived at the corner. So he halted and leaned against one of the massive marble columns that supported the ornamented facade of the building.

The two streets formed a gigantic cross around which clustered many business blocks. They were the only business streets in Falltown, and the quiet residence sections surrounding exerted a subduing influence, imparting an atmosphere of peace and quiet.

The peace-atmosphere seemed to be powerful today—at least to Corwin. For Corwin's reflections were running to contrasts just at this instant—the contrasts of the pursuits of peace and the appalling devastation of war.

One section of Main street ran eastward. Corwin could see the street, paved for some distance, broad and inviting, with the sunlight streaming upon it, until it merged with the gravel road that dipped gently into a valley beyond the edge of town. There it was lost. But it reappeared farther on, crowning a long slope and stretching on and on—a sinuous white ribbon in the glaring noonday sun—an artery that connected Falltown with the pulsing, throbbing world.

However, Corwin's thoughts did not stop with the end of the road—they went right on to the Atlantic coast, leaped the mysterious waters, and took him to the shores of France. And for a while, unleashing his imagination, and feeding it with the graphic accounts he had read in the newspapers, he looked upon the battlefields; saw the Hun hordes ravage the land; saw them sweep on in serried waves—a succession of finely-trained armies hurled at the world's throat.

It seemed to Corwin as he leaned against the marble pillar of the Merchant's Bank that he could hear the thunder of the mighty guns; he visualized the endless streams of stretcher-bearers returning from the front with their shattered human wrecks; the ruined towns and villages—he saw the ghastly horror unfold in grisly de-

tail; he glimpsed the spectacle of a gallant nation sacrificing its wealth and its manhood to stem the human avalanche which was sweeping the world to its doom. The fate of the world was in the balance; and Corwin could see multitudes of faces turned toward the western horizon—pallid, drawn faces bearing marks of suffering, all turned westward in mute appeal, awaiting the decision of the mighty nation which held the future of the world in the hollow of its hand.

The picture had been vivid, and Corwin's chest swelled with impotent sympathy as the scene shifted and he gazed around at Falltown, basking in its atmosphere of peace and quiet.



"Why should we slaughter our youth to help England?"

Here was a contrast! Corwin could see far eastward, down Main street; by turning he could see equally as far westward; looking up Meridian avenue he could look for miles out into the fertile countryside; and down Meridian avenue he could see other fertile miles of land. But Corwin could see farther than that—and with closed eyes!

On all sides the country unfolded—plains and mountains and hills and valleys and virgin forest—miles of cultivated land, eastward, westward, north and south; with teeming millions of people in shop and factory and field and office—all dwelling in peace and fancied security, with unlimited power and wealth on every hand. While at the very doors of this paradise of peace a maniac lust for power, backed by millions of his equally fanatical subjects, was engaged in an orgy of murder and rape and destruction. And that demonic leader, pointing a reeking finger at the fair country of Corwin's birth, had declared, insolently: "I'll stand no nonsense from America after this war!"

Corwin grinned—it was the grim smile of the American fighting-man accepting a challenge to do battle. And the emotion that seethed in Corwin's heart was identical with that which pulsed through the veins of the sturdy youth of the country on the day their president solemnly drew the sword.

There was no gnawing disquiet in Carter Corwin's breast. He was an American. And whatever he was called upon to do, he would do—cheerfully, eagerly—not sullenly, as though he were making a sacrifice, but with the conviction that he had been endowed with a rare privilege.

He looked at his watch, found he had been dreaming for fifteen minutes—and entered the bank building where, an instant later, he was sitting at a leather covered mahogany table in President Gary Miller's private office, grinning, his face flushed, a proud light in his eyes.

CHAPTER II

CORWIN liked Gary Miller. Miller was big and loud-voiced, with a bluff, hearty manner and a ready smile. Corwin likewise believed in Miller. Perhaps that was because he had never had any direct dealings with the

man. For some of Falltown's citizens could have acquainted Corwin with incidents which reflected very little credit on Miller's business instincts and ability. Those persons might also have called Corwin's attention to Miller's egotism. But as several of those persons who might have given Corwin that information were members of the board of directors of the Merchant's Bank, they did not think it wise to disseminate the burden of their convictions. For Miller certainly did attract depositors.

For several seconds following Corwin's entrance, Miller watched him with a genial smile.

"Well," said Corwin; "it is war."
 Miller ceased smiling and settled back into his chair. He wrinkled his forehead, squinted his eyes and pursed his lips. If he struck a knotted fist against the lips he might have resembled Rodin's famous "thinker". He would have presented a gross caricature, a positive libel upon the master's creation, but it would have been the nearest counterfeit of a thinking posture Miller could have assumed.

But Miller's wrinkled brows and thoughtful eyes had impressed many of Falltown's citizens. They impressed Corwin; and when Miller turned and fixed Corwin with a penetrating gaze, grunting "H'm", through his pursed lips, a chill came over the young man's enthusiasm.

"Speaking in a strictly confidential manner, Corwin," said Miller, heavily; "I think it is a mistake—a monstrous blunder. The President is catering to the jingo element in this country. Why in thunder do we want to interfere in the affairs of Europe, eh?"

"The Kaiser's dream of World—"
 "Bosh!" laughed Miller, heartily; "bancombe! You've been listening to the jingo orators. Let Europe work out its own salvation. Why should we squander our resources and slaughter the youth of our land to pull England's chestnuts out of the fire?"

"The Lusitania—" began Corwin.
 "Regrettable, but a mere incident of war," declared Miller. "Those things will happen. Germany must pay for that, of course—and will, no doubt. She has already sent her regrets. However, that incident of itself does not provide a basis for war. This country is becoming too idealistic!"

Corwin wondered if what Miller said were true. Corwin, like millions of his fellow Americans, had been content to trust the President. His own half-formed and hazy opinions had not seemed to get him anywhere. He was not a statesman, a diplomatist or a politician; and he had no knowledge of the inner workings of the machinery of government.

Miller's patronizing smile nettled him—made him feel insignificant, ignorant. Miller's position, bringing him into contact with men of large affairs, undoubtedly gave him an opportunity to learn things that the average citizen did not even dream of.

He saw a tolerant gleam in Miller's eyes—it was as though Miller was thinking that Corwin could not be expected to have definite opinions upon so abstruse a subject. Corwin even saw a glint of pity in the big man's eyes—a fatherly, benignant, humorous pity.

Corwin desired Miller's good opinion, and he divined that to persist in disagreeing with the man would be nonsensical. And perhaps the country was becoming too idealistic. Certainly the country should not be plunged into the appalling catastrophe of war on foreign soil for merely sentimental reasons.

Corwin was convinced that he had yielded too completely to the spell of patriotism which had held him in its clutch a few minutes before entering Miller's office. He knew that really big men never permitted their enthusiasm to rule them—stern repression, dignity and much deliberation were the mental weapons with which they fought the betraying ebullient emotions. They did not permit the world to know their thoughts.

Miller, Corwin was convinced, had signally honored him by taking him into his confidence, and he was conscious of a certain shame as he silently watched the big man.

Miller observed the collapse of Corwin's structure of incipient enthusiasm, and his smile grew bland and condescending.

"To be sure," he went on; "we shall all be called upon to make sacrifices—if Germany accepts our challenge. We shall have to do things we have never done before, and we shall have to face unheard-of conditions—abnormal and startling. We shall have to raise money—billions! And of course we shall all do what we can. This bank, I presume, will have to bear its share of the burden. And we shall bear it cheerfully. And I do not want to be understood as opposing the war; I am merely too overly enthusiastic about it. But I am telling you this in strictest confidence, you know."

When Corwin emerged from the bank building a few minutes later—after concluding his business with Miller—he felt that his glowing pictures of a few minutes before had been daubed with too much color. Looking eastward as he paused for an instant on the corner of Main and Meridian, he could see no farther than the crest of the slope where the gravel road stretched. He made no fanciful mental flight to the battlefields of stricken France and Belgium—it all seemed vague and far, now.

Corwin squared his shoulders as though to adjust them to a new weight that seemed to be on them. And a fugitive grin wreathed his lips as he crossed Meridian avenue and walked down Main street toward his office.

Perhaps Miller had not meant exactly what he had said; he might

have been slyly poking fun at Corwin for the the latter's quick defense of the President. For Miller had declared his intention of helping as much as he could. Or perhaps Miller had been suffering from an attack of indigestion. Corwin's grin grew to a broad smile.

Half way between Meridian and the next corner, Corwin heard a hurried step behind him, and a friendly hand was laid on his shoulder. He turned to see Morley Roberts, president of the Falltown Steel Products Company, smiling gravely at him.

Roberts fell into step with Corwin, and they proceeded down Main street.

Corwin had always felt flattered by Roberts' friendliness, and he had not failed to notice the man's frank interest in him. At the club—where Corwin spent many of his evenings—Roberts seemed to deliberately seek him out.

Corwin had cultivated Roberts, for though Corwin had inherited considerable wealth and was not forced to search for clients, the prospects of one day getting the legal business that Roberts could throw in his way was not to be lost.

Roberts was tall, dark, with black, lambent eyes, straight, strong features and a hard mouth. He was broad shouldered and erect, suave, and smoothly courteous.

"Heard the news, Corwin?" he asked.

Corwin nodded. "Everybody seems to have heard it," he replied. He smiled, calling Roberts' attention to the little groups of Falltown's citizens who were eagerly discussing the new phase of the international situation. Newsboys were shrilling the momentous intelligence, dunning it into the ears of probable customers; men were shouting to one another; a street car clacked by, loaded with grim-faced, eager-voiced men; the town seemed to have shaken off its mid-day lethargy, and was humming and throbbing with life.

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