

Ruth of the U. S. A.

By Edwin Balmer

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Ruth of the U. S. A.



Ruth crouched beside Gerry, and shot through the wreckage at the circling German plane

TO
THE MEMORY OF
My father
AN ENGLISHMAN AND AN
AMERICAN

RUTH OF THE U. S. A.

CHAPTER I

A BEGGAR AND A PASSPORT

It was the day for great destinies. Germany was starving; yet German armies, stronger and better prepared than ever before, were about to annihilate the British and the French. Austria, crumbling, was secretly suing for peace; yet Austria was awaiting only the melting of snow in the mountain passes before striking for Venice and Padua. Russia was reorganizing to fight again on the side of the allies; Russia, prostrate, had become a mere reservoir of manpower for the Hohenzollerns. The U-boats were beaten; the U-boats were sweeping the seas. America had half a million men in France; America had only "symbolical battalions" parading in Paris.

A thousand lies balanced a thousand denials; the pointer of credulity swung toward the lies again; and so it swung and swung with everything uncertain but the one fact which seemed, on this day, perfectly plain—American effort had collapsed. America not only had failed to aid her allies during the nine months since she had entered the war; she seemed to have ceased even to care for herself. Complete proof of this was that for five days now industries had been shut down, offices were empty, furnaces cold.

Upon that particular Tuesday morning, the fifth day of this halt, a girl named Ruth Alden awoke in an underheated room at an Ontario Street boarding house—awoke, merely one of the millions of the inconsiderable in Chicago as yet forbidden any extraordinary transaction either to her credit or to her debit in the mighty accounts of the world war. If it be true that tremendous

fates approaching cast their shadows before, she was unconscious of such shadows as she arose that morning. To be sure, she reminded herself when she was dressing that this was the day that Gerry Hull was arriving home from France; and she thought about him a good deal; but this was only as thousands of other romance-starved girls of twenty-two or thereabouts, who also were getting up by gaslight in underheated rooms at that January dawn, were thinking about Gerry Hull. That was, Ruth would like, if she could, to welcome him home to his own people and to thank him that day, in the name of his city and of his country, for what he had done. But this was to her then merely a wild, unrealizable fantasy.

What was actual and immediately before her was that Mr. Sam Hilton—the younger of the Hilton brothers, for whom she was office manager—had a real estate deal on at his office. He was to be there at eight o'clock, whether the office was heated or not, and she also was to be there to draw deeds and releases and so on; for someone named Cady who was over draft age, but had himself accepted by an engineer regiment, was sacrificing a fine factory property for a quick sale and Sam Hilton, who was in class one but still hoped somehow to avoid being called, was snapping up the bargain.

So Ruth hurried downtown much as usual upon that cold morning; and she felt only a little more conscious contempt for Sam Hilton—and for herself—as she sat beside him from eight until after nine, with her great coat on and with her hands pulled up in her sleeves to keep them warm while he schemed and reschemed to make a certain feature of his deal with the patriotic Cady more favorable to himself. He had tossed the morning paper upon his desk in front of him with the columns folded up which displayed Gerry Hull's picture in his uniform and which told about Gerry

Hull's arriving that morning and about his service in France. Thus Ruth knew that Sam Hilton had been reading about Lieutenant Hull also; and, indeed, Hilton referred to him when he had made the last correction upon the contract and was in good humor and ready to put business aside for a few minutes and be personal.

"Gerry Hull's come home today from France, I see. Some fighter, that boy!" he exclaimed with admiration. "Ain't he?"

Ruth gazed at Hilton with wonder. She could have understood a man like Sam Hilton if he refused to read at all about Gerry Hull; or she could have understood if, reading, Sam Hilton denied admiration. But how could a young man know about Lieutenant Hull and admire him and feel no personal reproach at himself staying safe and satisfied and out of "it"?

"Some flier!" he was going on with his enthusiastic praise. "How many Huns has he got—fourteen?"

Ruth knew the exact number; but she did not tell him. "Lieutenant Hull is here under orders and upon special duty," she said. "They sent him home or he wouldn't be away from the front now." The blood warmed in her face as she delivered this rebuke gently to Sam Hilton. He stared at her and the color deepened, staining her clear, delicate temples and forehead. "They had to send him here to stir us up."

"What's the matter with us?" Sam Hilton questioned with honest lack of concern. Her way of mentioning Gerry Hull had not hit him at all; and he was not seeking any answer to his question. He was watching Ruth flush and thinking that she was mighty pretty with as much color as she had now. He liked her in that coat, too; for the collar of dark fur, though not of good quality, made her

youthful face even more “high class” looking than usual. Sam Hilton spent a great deal of money on his own clothes without ever achieving the coveted “class” in his appearance; while this girl, who worked for him and who had only one outfit that he ever saw, always looked right. She came of good people, he knew—little town people and not rich, since she had to work and send money home; but they were “refined.”

Ruth’s bearing and general appearance had pretty well assured Sam of this—the graceful way she stood straight and held up her head, the oval contour of her face as well as the pretty, proud little nose and chin, sweet and yet self-reliant like her eyes which were blue and direct and thoughtful looking below brown brows. Her hair was lighter than her brows and she had a great deal of it; a little wavy and a marvelous amber in color and in quality. It seemed to take in the sunlight like amber when she moved past the window and to let the light become a part of it. Her hands which she thrust from her sleeves now and clasped in front of her, were small and well shaped, though strong and capable too. She had altogether so many “refined” characteristics that it was only to make absolutely certain about her and her family that Sam had paid someone ten dollars to verify the information about herself which she had supplied when he had employed her. This information, fully verified, was that her father, who was dead, had been an attorney at Onarga, Illinois, where her mother was living with three younger sisters, the oldest fourteen. Mrs. Alden took sewing; and since Ruth sent home fifteen dollars a week out of her twenty-five, the family got along. This fifteen dollars a week, totaling seven hundred and eighty a year which the family would continue to need and would expect from Ruth or from whomever married her, bothered Sam Hilton. But he thought this morning that

she was worth wasting that much for as he watched her small hands clasping, watched the light upon her hair and the flush sort of fluttering—now fading, now deepening—on her smooth cheek. Having banished business from his mind, he was thinking about her so intently that it did not occur to him that she could be thinking of anyone else. Sam Hilton could not easily imagine anyone flushing thus merely because she was dreaming of a boy whom she had never met and could never meet and who certainly wouldn't know or care anything about her.

“He was hurt a couple of weeks ago,” she said, “or probably he wouldn't have left at all.”

That jolted Sam Hilton. It did not bring him any rebuke; it simply made him angry that this girl had been dreaming all that time about Gerry Hull instead of about himself.

“Was the Lady Agnes hurt too?” he asked.

“Hurt? No.”

“Well, she's come with him.” Sam leaned forward and referred to the folded newspaper. “Lady Agnes Ertyle, the daughter of the late Earl of Durran who was killed at Ypres in 1915, whose two brothers fell, one at Jutland on the *Invincible* and the other at Cambrai,” he read aloud, “is also in the party.” He skipped down the column condensing the following paragraphs: “She's to stay at his mamma's house on Astor Street while in Chicago. She's twenty-one; her picture was printed yesterday. Did you see it?”

This was a direct question; and Ruth had to answer, “Yes.”

“He's satisfied with her, I should say; but maybe he's come home to look further,” Sam said with his heaviest sarcasm. He

straightened, satisfied that he had brought Ruth back to earth. “Now I’m going over to see Cady; he’ll sign this as it is, I think.” Sam put the draft of the contract in his pocket. “He leaves town this noon, so he has to. I’ll be all clear by twelve. You’re clear for the day now. Have lunch with me, Miss Alden?”

Ruth refused him quietly. He often asked her for lunch and she always refused; so he was used to it.

“All right. You’re free for the day,” he repeated generously and, without more ceremony, he hurried off to Cady.

Ruth waited until he had time to leave the building before she closed the office and went down the stairs. She stepped out to the street, only one girl among thousands that morning dismissed from bleak offices—one of thousands to whom it seemed ignominious that day, when all the war was going so badly and when Gerry Hull was arriving from France, to go right back to one’s room and do nothing more for the war than to knit until it was time to go to bed and sleep to arise next morning to come down to make out more deeds and contracts for men like Sam Hilton.

Had it been a month or two earlier, Ruth again would have made the rounds of the headquarters where girls gave themselves for real war work; but now she knew that further effort would be fruitless. Everyone in Chicago, who possessed authority to select girls for work in France, knew her registration card by heart—her name, her age, the fact that she had a high-school education. They were familiar with the occupations in which she claimed experience—office assistant; cooking; care of children (had she not taken care of her sisters?); first aid; can drive motor car; operate typewriter. Everyone knew that her health was excellent; her sight and hearing

perfect. She would go “anywhere”; she would start “at any time.” But everyone also knew that answer which truth had obliged her to write to the challenge, “What persons dependent upon you, if any?” So everyone knew that though Ruth Alden would give herself to any work, someone had to find, above her expenses, seven hundred and eighty dollars a year for her family.

Accordingly she could think of nothing better to do this morning than to join the throng of those who were going to Michigan Avenue and to the building where the British and French party, with which Gerry Hull was traveling, would be welcomed to the city. Ruth had no idea of being admitted to the building; she merely stood in the crowd upon the walk; but close to where she stood, a limousine halted. A window of the car was down; and suddenly Ruth saw Gerry Hull right before her. She knew him at once from his picture; he was tall and active looking, even though sitting quiet in the car; he was bending forward a bit and the sudden, slight motions of his straight, lithe shoulders and the quick turn of his head as he gazed out, told of the vigor and impetuosity which—Ruth knew—were his.

He had a clear, dark skin; his hair and brows were dark; his eyes, blue and observant and interested. He had the firm, determined chin of a fighter; his mouth was pleasant and likable. He was younger looking than his pictures had made him appear; not younger than his age, which Ruth knew was twenty-four. Indeed, he looked older than four and twenty; yet one could not say that he looked two years older or five or ten; the maturity which war had brought Gerry Hull was not the sort which one could reckon in years. It made one—at least it made Ruth—pulse all at once with amazing feeling for him, with a strange mixture of anger that such a boy must have experienced that which had so seared his soul, and

of pride in him that he had sought the experience. He was a little excited now at being home again, Ruth thought, in this city where his grandfather had made his fortune, where his father had died and where he, himself, had spent his boyhood; he turned to point out something to the girl who was seated beside him; so Ruth gazed at her and recognized her, too. She was Lady Agnes Ertyle, young and slight and very lovely with her brown hair and gray eyes and fair, English complexion and straight, pure features. She had something too of that maturity, not of years, which Gerry Hull had; she was a little tired and not excited as was he. But for all that, she was beautiful and very young and not at all a strange creation in spite of her title and in spite of all that her family—her father and her brothers and she herself—had done in Belgium and in France. Indeed, she was only a girl of twenty-two or three. So Ruth quite forgot herself in the feeling of rebuke which this view of Gerry Hull and Lady Agnes brought to her. They were not much older or intrinsically different from herself and they had already done so much; and she—nothing!

She was so close to them that they had to observe her; and the English girl nodded to her friendlily and a little surprised. Gerry Hull seemed not surprised; but he did not nod; he just gazed back at her.

“What ought I be doing?” Ruth heard her voice appealing to them.

Lady Agnes Ertyle attempted no reply to this extraordinary query; but Gerry Hull’s eyes were studying her and he seemed, in some way, to understand her perplexity and dismay.

“Anyone can trust you to find out!” he replied to her aloud, yet as if in comment to himself rather than in answer to her. The car

moved and left Ruth with that—with Gerry Hull’s assurance to himself that she could be trusted to discover what she should do. She did not completely understand what he meant; for she did not know what he had been thinking when she suddenly thought out aloud before him and surprised him into doing the same. Nevertheless this brief encounter stirred and stimulated her; she could not meekly return to her room after this; so, when the crowd broke up, she went over to State Street.

The wide, wind-swept way, busy and bleak below the towering sheer of the great department stores, the hotels and office buildings on either hand seemed to Ruth never so sordid and self-concerned as upon this morning. Here and there a flag flapped from a rope stretched across the street or from a pole pointing obliquely to the sky; but these merely acknowledged formal recognition of a state of war; they were not symbols of any evident performance of act of defense. The people who passed either entirely ignored these flags or noticed them dully, without the slightest show of feeling. Many of these people, as Ruth knew, must have sons or brothers in the training camps; a few might possess sons in the regiments already across the water; but if Ruth observed any of these, she was unable to distinguish them this morning from the throng of the indifferent going about their private and petty preoccupations with complete engrossment. Likewise was she powerless to discriminate those—not few in number—who mingled freely in the groups passing under the flags but who gazed up, not with true indifference, but with hotly hostile reactions.

The great majority even of the so-called Germans in Chicago were loyal to America, Ruth knew; but from the many hundred thousand who, before the American declaration of war, had sympathized with and supported the cause of the Fatherland, there were

thousands now who had become only more fervent and reckless in their allegiance to Germany since the United States had joined its enemies—thousands who put the advantage of the Fatherland above every individual consideration and who, unable to espouse their cause now openly, took to clandestine schemes of ugly and treacherous conception. Thought of them came to Ruth as she passed two men speaking in low tones to each other, speaking in English but with marked Teutonic accent; they stared at her sharply and with a different scrutiny from that which men ordinarily gave when estimating Ruth's face and figure. One of them seemed about to speak to her; but, glancing at the other people on the walk, he instantly reconsidered and passed by with his companion. Ruth flushed and hurried on down the street until suddenly she realized that one of the men who had stared at her, had passed her and was walking ahead of her, glancing back.

She halted, then, a little excited and undecided what was best to do. The man went on, evidently not venturing the boldness of stopping, too; and while Ruth remained undecided, a street beggar seized the opportunity of offering her his wares.

This man was a cripple who, in spite of the severe cold of the morning, was seated on the walk with his crutches before him; he pretended to be a pencil vendor and displayed in his mittened hand an open box half full of pencils; and he had a pile of unopened boxes at his side. He had taken station at that particular spot on State Street where most people must pass on their way to and from the chief department stores; but his trade evidently had been so slack this morning that he felt need of more aggressive mendicancy. He scrambled a few yards up the walk to where Ruth had halted and, gazing up at her, he jerked the edge of her coat.

“Buy a pencil, lady?”

Ruth looked down at the man, who was very cold and ill-dressed and pitiful; she took a dime from her purse and proffered it to him. He gazed up at her gratefully and with keen, questioning eyes; and, instead of taking a pencil from his open box, he picked up one of the unopened boxes which he had carried with him.

“Take a box, lady,” he pleaded, squirming with a painful effort which struck a pang of pity through Ruth; it made her think, not alone of his crippled agony, but the pain of the thousands—of the millions from the battle fields.

Ruth returned her dime to her purse and took out a dollar bill; the beggar thrust the mittened fingers of his left hand between his teeth, jerked off the ragged mitten and grabbed the dollar bill.

“That pays for two boxes,” he said, gazing again up at Ruth keenly.

“I’ll take two,” Ruth said, accepting the sale which the man had forced rather than deciding it herself.

He selected two boxes from the pile at his side and, glancing at her face sharply once more, he handed her the boxes and thanked her. She thrust the boxes into her muff and hurried on.

When she realized the strangeness of this transaction a few moments later, it seemed to have been wholly due to the beggar’s having taken advantage of her excitement after meeting Gerry Hull and her uneasiness at being followed by the German. She had no use for two boxes of cheap pencils and she could not afford to give a dollar to a street cripple who probably was an impostor. She felt that she had acted quite crazily; now she had to take a North State Street car to return to her room.

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