

RANDOM REMINISCENCES

There's Lots of Laughter Lurking Behind the Sandbags
in Flanders and Elsewhere and Some of the Boys
Back From Battering the Boche Tell of
Christmas on the Firing Line

By PRIVATE GEORGE STEVENS



HEY sat around the open hearth—a heterogeneous crowd. Around them were scattered (and scattered is the literal truth) the attendant luxuries of bachelordom—or forced bachelordom, and from them radiated a spirit of cheer and good fellowship that was positively contagious. One could not look at them and not smile; and this, despite the empty sleeve that was tucked in a pocket and the unruly crutch that would topple from the place assigned it. Despite wheeled chairs and bandaged heads, they were a merry congregation, the group of returned heroes that sat before that hearth fire in one of the fine old city residences that had been converted into a military hospital.

The Outsider strolled in, in the middle of a yarn. The narrator paused.

"Go right on, old man," the Outsider remarked, as he drew a chair within the circle—"I've heard many a soldier yarn in my day. I'm not intruding, I hope?"

"Not in the least," a dozen cheery voices assured him. The narrator continued:

"We were discussing," he said, "the apparently ridiculous 'red tape' that attends military movements, even on the firing line. I suppose most of you have seen Captain Bruce Bairnsfather's cartoons, 'Fragments From France,' and the rest?"

"Have we? Well, I guess!"

"Then you probably noticed that page whereon he portrays a 'red tape' incident. He shows a Colonel, whose shelter is being blown to pieces by shell, trying to talk over the telephone to Headquarters, who are insisting upon knowing immediately the exact number of tins of raspberry jam issued to his (the Colonel's) battalion, last Friday."

"Now that may sound ridiculous, boys, even to us, but I can vouch for the truth of a similar message,

a chair and went on. "We had just had our rations issued and were beginning to eat, when Fritzie took the chance to put over a few shells. Ordinarily, he would have missed every time, but as luck would have it a shell struck the edge of the trench and burst, sending a shower of earth down on top of us and knocking most of us off our feet. Well, we scrambled up again and dug the dirt out of our eyes and for a moment I thought that none of us were hurt. Then I saw the man next to me lying still. His face seemed to be pouring blood and he looked a most horrible sight. 'Poor Bill's gone this time,' I said, but to my amazement Bill's voice came back to me cheerily. 'You're another,' it replied. 'It's that confounded raspberry jam.' Sure enough we found that a splinter of shell had struck the pot, breaking it and splashing its contents all over Bill's face as he bent above it. The man hadn't a scratch."

"There are some fellows like that," broke in a third man. "I knew one fellow who drove a motor ambulance—a little, dark, thin chap he was, always laughing. The first time his ambulance came into action a shell struck it, all but wrecking it. The man sitting upon the seat beside him was blown to bits—you couldn't find a piece of him as big as a quarter, but my friend never got so much as a scratch. Twice after that the man beside him was killed and he was never touched. He was lucky all right. He used to say he was so thin that when he saw anything coming he turned sideways and split the bullet."

"Some men certainly seem to bear a charmed life," spoke a tall dark man, who was marching up and down the room without ceasing. He was suffering from neuritis, and the torture drew his face into strange contortions as he talked.

"I knew one fellow who went through from the first," he said. "He was in every battle of the war, but when I left he was on top yet."

"Once he was in a dug-out and a shell exploded on top of it. The dug-out was blown to pieces and every man in it killed but Mike. When they dug him out of the ruins he looked up at them and said, 'Boys, Fritzie nearly got me that time.' Then he went back to work again quite unconcerned. Born to be hanged he was. He'll never come to harm otherwise. You'll see, he'll land home at the end of the war with never a wound to show."

"SPEAKING of Bairnsfather," said the youth with the book.

"But we had finished with Bairnsfather long ago, Short," someone interrupted.

"Now you leave Short alone," broke in a second. "He's a-goin' to read to us, is Short."

"Well, what if I am? I'll wager precious few of you tire of Bairnsfather."

"Aw g'wan Short, we ain't fer interruptin' yu."

One of them leaned over to The Outsider. "The youngster's somewhat of an entertainer. He reads to us by the hour here, and if we didn't jolly him, he wouldn't think we appreciated him."

"We went into the trenches again on the 23rd," began 'Short.'

"Twenty-third of what?" enquired an aggravating comrade.

"Of December, you boob—is there any other month we bother about dates?" came the retort.

"—On the 23rd. The weather had now become very fine and cold. The dawn of the 24th brought a perfectly still, cold, frosty day. The spirit of Christmas began to permeate us all; we tried to plot ways and means of making the next day—Christmas—different in some way to others. Invitations from one dug-out to another for sundry meals were beginning to circulate. Christmas Eve was, in the way of weather, everything that Christmas Eve should be."

"I was billed to appear at a dug-out about a quarter of a mile to the left that evening to have rather a special thing in trench dinners—not quite so much bully, and Maconochie about as usual. A bottle of red wine and a medley of tinned things from home deputized in their absence. The day had been entirely free from shelling, and somehow we felt that the Boches too, wanted to be quiet. There was a kind of an invisible, intangible feeling extending across the frozen swamp between the two lines, which said: 'This is Christmas Eve for both of us—something in common.'"

"About 10 p.m. I made my exit from the convivial dug-out on the left of our line and walked back to my own lair. On arriving at my own bit of trench I found several of the men standing about, and all very



A Memory of Xmas: "Look at this bloke's buttons, Arry. I should reckon 'e 'as a maid to dress 'im."
—Bairnsfather in "Bullets and Billets"

cheerful. There was a good bit of singing and talking going on, jokes and jibes on our curious Christmas Eve, as contrasted with any former one, were thick in the air. One of my men turned to me and said:

"You can 'ear 'em quite plain sir."

"Hear what?" I enquired.

"The Germans over there, sir; you can 'ear 'em singin' and playin' on a band or somethin'."

"Yu ain't got the H'accent, Short, ole man," interjected a little Cockney lad nearest the fire. With a glance of noble disdain, the reader went on:

"I listened; away out across the field, among the dark shadows beyond, I could hear the murmur of voices, and an occasional burst of some unintelligible song would come floating out on the frosty air. The singing seemed to be loudest and most distinct a bit to our right. I popped into my dug-out and found the platoon commander."

"Do you hear the Boches kicking up that racket over there?" I said.

"Yes," he replied; 'they've been at it some time!'

"Come on," said I, 'let's go along the trench to the hedge there on the right—that's the nearest point to them, over there.'

"SO, we stumbled along our hard frosted ditch, and scrambling up on the bank above, strode across the field to our next bit of trench on the right. Everyone was listening. An improvised Boche band was playing a precarious version of, 'Deutschland, Deutschland, uber Alles,' at the conclusion of which some of our mouth organ experts retaliated with snatches of ragtime songs and imitations of the German tune. Suddenly we heard a confused shouting from the other side. We all stopped to listen. The shout came again. A voice in the darkness shouted in English with a strong German accent, 'come over here!' A ripple of mirth swept along our trench followed by a rude outburst of mouth-organs and laughter. Presently, in a lull, one of our sergeants repeated the request, 'Come over here.'

"You come half-way, I come half-way," floated out of the darkness.

"Come on, then!" shouted the sergeant. 'I'm coming along the hedge!'

"Ah! but there are two of you," came back the voice from the other side.

"Well, anyway, after much suspicious shouting and jocular derision from both sides, our sergeant went along the hedge which ran at right-angles to the two lines of trenches. He was quickly out of sight, but, as we all listened in breathless silence, we soon heard a spasmodic conversation taking place out there in the darkness.

"Presently the sergeant returned. He had with him a few German cigars and cigarettes which he had exchanged for a couple of Maconochie's and a tin of Capstan, which he had taken with him. The seance was over, but it had given just the requisite touch to our Christmas Eve—something a little human and out of the ordinary routine."

"On Christmas morning I awoke very early, and emerged from my dug-out into the trench. It was a perfect day. A beautiful cloudless blue sky. The ground hard and white, fading off towards the wood in a thin low-lying mist. It was such a day as is invariably depicted by artists on Christmas cards—the ideal Christmas Day of fiction."

"Fancy all this hate, war and discomfort on a day like this! I thought to myself. The whole spirit of Christmas seemed to be there, so much so that I remember thinking, 'This indiscernable something in the

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"Poor old Maggie! She seems to be 'avin' it dreadful wet at 'ome."
—Bairnsfather in "Bullets and Billets"

for I personally saw it ten minutes after its receipt at battalion headquarters.

"Part of our battalion was carrying out a bombing raid, during which all signal wires were supposed to be kept open for raid business. Well, just when the scrap was at its height a message, specified "Emergency," came pounding in.

"It read: 'O.C. —th Canadians, wire at once names one officer four of other ranks attend lecture on 'Christianity in Wartime' at C— Monday.'"

The Outsider lit his pipe. The glare of the match, on his face threw in relief a visage long used to wind and weather. He leaned his elbow on his knee, cleared his throat as if about to speak, but instead, settled himself more comfortably in the arm chair and kept silence.

A young fellow they called "Short" rose from a chair in the background. Going over to a bookcase, he selected a volume and stood turning its pages while the exchange of yarns continued.

"I REMEMBER an incident that occurred while we were in the trenches at Ypres," began a man who had hobbled up to the group. Having deposited his crutches against the wall he sank into



—Bairnsfather in "Bullets and Billets"