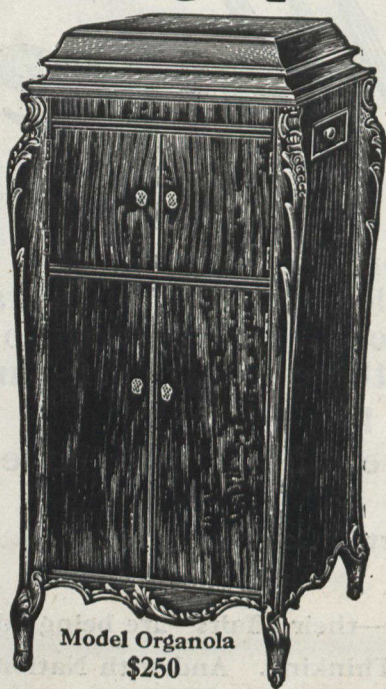


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Random Reminiscences

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15)

air, this Peace and Goodwill feeling surely will have some effect on the situation here to-day!" And I wasn't far wrong; it did around us, anyway, and I have always been so glad to think of my luck in, firstly, being actually in the trenches on Christmas Day, and, secondly, being on the spot where quite a unique little episode took place.

"Walking about the trench discussing the curious affair of the night before, we suddenly became aware of the fact that we were seeing a lot of evidences of Germans. Heads were bobbing about and showing over their parapet in a most reckless way, and, as we looked, this phenomenon became more and more pronounced.

"A complete Boche figure suddenly appeared on the parapet, and looked about itself. This complaint became infectious. It didn't take 'Our Bert' long to be up on the skyline (it is one long grind to ever keep him off it). This was the signal for more Boche anatomy to be disclosed, and this was replied to by all our Alf's and Bill's, until, in less time than it takes to tell, half a dozen or so of each of the belligerents were outside their trenches and were advancing towards each other in no-man's land.

"A strange sight, truly!" "I clambered up and over our parapet, and moved out across the field to look. Clad in a muddy suit of khaki and wearing a sheepskin coat and Balaclava helmet, I joined the throng about half-way across to the German trenches.

"I all felt most curious; here were these sausage-eating wretches, who had elected to start this informal European fracas, and in so doing had brought us all into the same muddy pickle as themselves.

"This was my first real sight of them at close quarters. Here they were—the actual, practical soldiers of the German army. There was not an atom of hate in either side that day; and yet, on our side, not for a moment was the will to war and the will to beat them relaxed. It was just like the interval between the rounds in a friendly boxing match. The difference in type between our men and theirs was very marked. There was no contrasting the spirit of the two parties. Our men, in their scratch costumes of dirty, muddy khaki, with their various assorted head-dresses of woollen helmets muffled and battered hats, were a light-hearted, open, humorous collection as opposed to the sombre demeanour and stolid appearance of the Huns in their grey-green faded uniforms, top boots, and pork-pie hats.

"The shortest effect I can give of the impression I had was that our men, superior, broadminded, more frank, and lovable beings, were regarding these faded, unimaginative products of perverted culture as a set of objectionable but amusing lunatics whose heads had got to be eventually smacked.

"I spotted a German officer, some sort of lieutenant, I should think, and being a bit of a collector, I intimated to him that I had taken a fancy to some of his buttons.

"We both then said things to each other which neither understood, and agreed to do a swap. I brought out my wire clippers, and, with a few deft snips, removed a couple of his buttons and put them in my pocket. I then gave him two of mine in exchange.

"Whilst this was going on a babbling of guttural ejaculations emanating from one of the laager-schisters, told me that some idea had occurred to some one.

"Suddenly, one of the Boches ran back to his trench and presently reappeared with a large camera. I posed in a mixed group for several photographs, and have ever since wished I had fixed up some arrangement for getting a copy. No doubt framed editions of this photograph are reposing on some Hun mantelpieces, showing clearly and unmistakably to admiring strainers how a group of perfidious British surrendered unconditionally on Christmas Day to the brave Deutschers.

"Slowly the meeting began to disperse; a sort of feeling that the authorities on both sides were not very enthusiastic about this fraternizing seemed to creep across the gathering. We parted, but there was a distinct and friendly understanding that Christmas Day would be left to finish in tranquility. The last I saw of this little affair was a vision of one of my machine gunners, who was a bit of an amateur hairdresser in civil life, cutting the unnaturally long hair of a docile Boche

who was patiently kneeling on the ground whilst the automatic clippers crept up the back of his neck."

WITHOUT a word of comment 'Short' closed the book, threw it up on the mantelpiece and disappeared through a rear door.

"Funny youngster, that," one of the crowd broke the silence. "Can sort of make you re-live it, in the telling, eh?"

Everyone agreed, but no one answered. Each was deep in his thoughts, for another Christmas was but a few days off and they were all home again—home, in such varying conditions!

Then—"I remember one rather funny experience I had," laughed one, "though it didn't seem funny to me then. Rather a tragedy! It was Christmas Eve and we expected to spend our Christmas in Rest Billets behind the line, but we were unexpectedly moved into the trenches. How we did curse! The air was blue with it.

"It was very cold and raining hard. We had no dug-out, only a little shelter trench. You couldn't light a fire for fear of Fritz spotting it. So our Christmas breakfast consisted of bully beef and hardtack and our Christmas dinner was hardtack and bully beef. Well, late in the afternoon I discovered in my pocket half a dozen squares of soup—not Oxo, some vegetable soup it was. So we rigged up a screen with macintoshes and lighted a little trench heater, filled a billy full of water and dropped in the whole half dozen squares. I had two mates, a big fellow, whom we called Long, and a little bit of a wizened up Scotchman. We watched that thing boiling and thought how much we were going to enjoy the nice hot soup. I tell you it smelled heavenly. Then, just as we were going to take it off, what does Long do but upset the whole pot of it. We couldn't even save a drop. We laughed—we couldn't help it. The look on Long's face would have made a cat laugh. But he never smiled again that day. He went round for the next twenty-four hours looking so gloomy that he made us all miserable—and I tell you we didn't need it. It rained for seven weeks on end and none of us knew what it was to be dry all that time. The worst of it was that we hadn't any more soup tablets. You can imagine what a pleasant Christmas we put in!"

All this time, the Outsider sat and smoked. Everyone had, on first sight, wondered who, or what he could be, but somehow, he seemed to belong, so they, in true fraternal spirit, asked no questions.

Suddenly, he leaned forward in his chair and pointed his pipe at them.

"Well," he said, and his voice was deep and resonant. Everyone turned in his direction, expecting something worth hearing.

"I had one pretty exciting experience myself. You fellows in the army think you get all the fighting, but I tell you it isn't so.

"Until the last three or four weeks I have been foreman on a boat running horses and mules across the Atlantic for the use of the Allies. I'm taking a short holiday just now, but I expect five or six uneventful voyages, and come through quite safely, but the luck was too good to hold and the last voyage did me for some little time. We had horses on board for Brest, France, and for Genoa, Italy. Dead calm all the way over and we made fine time.

"We delivered our horses at Brest and left there on a glorious summer morning, with two hundred horses still on board to steam to Genoa. Ten miles off the Italian coast, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, I had gone below to my bunk for a snooze. I had been up all the previous night, doctoring some sick horses and I was good and tired. I dropped asleep as soon as I struck my bunk and first thing I knew I was roused by wild yells from the deck. Then there was dead silence. I lay half awake wondering what it all meant and presently I began to feel that there was something funny about the motion of the vessel.

"Bill, old man," says I, "It's time you were getting on deck."

"SO I got up and left my bunk and the first thing I heard was the horses screaming. Say, did you ever hear that sound? It's worse than a hundred battlefields. I know, because I've been there. I fought on land before you boys knew what war was.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 47)