

WORSE THAN DEATH

Which Shows How Even in War the Scream Correspondent Carried With Him Memories of Home

By CHARLES STOKES

"THIS, colonel," said the sergeant, "is the spy I spoke of."

The colonel turned slowly round from the fire at which he was drying himself. "Where did you capture him?" he asked, indifferently.

"Near the village, sir. He was hiding behind the hedge lying in the ditch as I brought my company home. It was nearly dark, and we should not have seen him, probably, but for the fact that he betrayed himself by trying to look at us, with the result that he slipped in the muddy ditch and made a noise." The sergeant smiled at the recollection.

"You are sure he is a spy?"

"Yes, sir. Upon searching him I found his pockets full of papers and maps."

The colonel was very, very tired. He had had a gruelling day's work, and, in addition to being worn out and cold, he had become, early in the day, bored. Lately, what with the monotony of killing, his old complaint, boredom, had begun to trouble him again. "Shoot him in the morning," he said, turning again to the fire.

The young man who stood behind his back, in advance of the squad, looked aghast. "Why, good Lord, I'm a neutral," he blurted out. "I told your thick-headed fellows that!"

"Nearly all say that," replied the colonel, still gazing into the fire.

"But I'm an American," the young man went on, seemingly more in anger at a stupid mistake than in any apprehension at the sentence just awarded him.

"Lost your passports, haven't you?"

"Yes—how did you know?"

"They all do." And the squad laughed respectfully at their colonel's little joke.

"But see here," said the young man, earnestly, "I'm the accredited correspondent of the New York Scream."

"What are you doing here, then? Newspaper correspondents should stay away from the front, didn't you know?"

"I'm coming to that, if only you'll let me finish. Say, colonel, I'm as tired as you are, and as wet as a sewer-rat—can't I sit down, even if you have got to shoot me?"

"Sit here," said the colonel, flickering an eyelid. The young man sat down promptly, and proceeded.

"I was with the other correspondents, three or four hundred miles away—as near as they'd let us come—and I was bored to death—"

Then the colonel looked up. "So am I," he said.

"Shake!" cried the spy. "Indigestion?"

"Partly. The food we are provided with would

sicken a—camel. And then—I'm getting on in years—"

"Oh, I can guess! Practically retired, eh?—club life every day—same old group of fossils, daily difficulty of killing time—bored—war broke out—thought to find new interests—found them, but they palled after a time? As bored as ever now? I get you."

"You are evidently a young man of some perception."

"You bet I am! Otherwise, why should the Scream have given me this job?"

"You were bored to death, you were saying."

"So I resolved to push on—make a big scoop for the Scream, and see real war—what? So I purchased a peasant's outfit—clothes and cart and horse—speak the language like a native—and here I am."

"Here you are, as you say! How did you get here?"

"Walked. Sold cigarettes and picture-postcards to the soldiers, and packs of cards."

"I must add that as well as being clear-sighted you are resourceful, too."

"Does it strike you like that?"

"Tell me how you penetrated the lines?"

"Easy enough. Who troubles about a peasant? Still, I was lucky—I must admit that—never held up once."

"Something more than luck," said the colonel, drily.

"Meaning that—?"

"Never mind. Proceed."

"Well, anyway, everything went all right till I got here. Then my interest for news overcame my—prudence. Leaving the cart and horse in the village—gosh, what a horse it is, to be sure!—I thought I'd come out and see some trench work at close quarters. Hid in the ditch, fool that I was, and your men found me."

"And those papers and maps—newspaper material, I presume?"

"Yes—I'm going to write a book when I get back—if ever I do get back!" he concluded, ruefully. "Gosh, what a hummer that book'll be!"

"And the trifling inconsistency of your passport?"

"I don't know where the blamed thing's gone. It was in my cart this morning, under the packets of chewing gum—honest it was—put it there myself."

"Search the cart," said the colonel. "Young man," he said, "you are either a lucky imposter or a damned fool. Take him away," and he turned back to the fire.

The squad clicked their heels, brought their rifles to the slope, and led the way out. At the door the young man said: "I presume if they can't find any

passport I shall still be shot in the morning?"

"Yes. You'd be shot to-night only it's so unpleasant out in the rain."

"Then, colonel—and these are my parting words—if you love literature for its own sake you'll be sorry, because my book—"

"Come!" cried the sergeant, and they were gone.

The colonel resigned himself to his boredom, hung his coat over a chair to dry, and threw some more wood on the fire. Then he dozed a little. About thirty minutes later the sergeant stood before him.

"We have searched his outfit thoroughly, sir," he reported, "but we can find no passport. Shall I search his person?"

"Hardly necessary. If he has it on him, he will produce it when he realizes our intentions are serious. Follow the instructions."

He dozed again; and was again interrupted by the sergeant. "The spy, sir, asks if he can see you?"

"Am I never to sleep?" roared the colonel.

"It is very important, he says, sir—a personal matter, nothing to do with his sentence. He said, 'Tell your colonel it will probably relieve his boredom some.'"

"Bring him in, then." In a few minutes the same squad brought the prisoner back. By this time he had washed his face and hands, brushed some of the mud off his clothes, and combed his hair.

"Thanks for this—you're a prince!" he said. "Can I see you alone?"

The colonel looked at him through narrowed eyelids, and then nodded. "You can go, sergeant," he said, "but post two men outside. And send some wine."

"Now," he resumed, when they were alone, and a bottle of passable wine was between them, "I am treating you in a manner that is entirely without precedent."

"So I gather."

"To be frank, I can't quite convince myself whether you are speaking the truth, or not. If you are a spy, you must be shot. If, on the other hand, you are a neutral, you become our guest—a forced guest, it is true, whose liberty must be circumscribed, but still a guest. As either, you are dangerous, you see. Not being able to satisfy myself that you are not a spy, I cannot consider you in any other light, and therefore you must be treated in the customary manner: but I'm giving you the benefit of as much doubt as possible, and am treating you as a guest in order that your last hours may not be too—er—morbid."

"You have quite made up your mind about shooting me?"

"Most assuredly."

"Isn't there anything about my appearance—my talk—"

"Oh, yes. But you know we have hard and fast rules—a nuisance, I grant, but inevitable. We do not make them, and cannot break them."

"Gee, you talk like the railroad tickets in my country! Say, do you shoot many spies, colonel?"

"Quite a number. In a way, it's my special department. Will you have a cigar? But what did you want to see me for?"

"I confess I've taken a liking to you, colonel, and you look about the only man to trust round this joint." The other bowed. "Well, now, were you ever married?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever wish you weren't?"

THE colonel leant back, and fingered his moustache several moments before replying. "What makes you ask that?" he said, at length.

"You said you often used to be bored—"

"My dear wife," said the colonel, impressively, "was an angel direct from heaven. During the forty years she brightened this planet, she took care that no one forgot it."

"My case exactly! And was your wife's mother firmly convinced that her angel child had married a devil?"

"Well—well—I suppose so, young man."

"And did she come to stay with you?"

"Frequently."

"There now—doesn't it show you! All men are brothers, whatever their countries, eh?"

"I don't quite understand," said the colonel, "whether I am called upon to express sympathy, or what."

"Neither! You can shoot me as much as you please—I don't care—shoot me now, do—anything but go back to a home with a mother-in-law as a permanent guest! Oh death, where is thy sting?"

"It is now"—he pulled out his watch—"a few minutes past eleven. Hope I'm not keeping you up?"

"Go on," said the other, politely.

"In a few hours I shall be in the boneyard, providing you don't relent, eh? At precisely the same minute that your firing party lets go, that mother-in-law of mine cops—well, not a fortune, perhaps, but a nice little nest-egg, anyway."

"Your mother-in-law—not your wife?"

OFFICERS WHO HAVE DONE "IT"



This is a snapshot of three London officers with the First Canadian Contingent. On the left, Major Wood Leonard, who has been recommended for a decoration for good work in the Great Drive in September. Centre is Lieut. J. Herbert Scandrett, who transferred to the British Royal Flying Squadron, and is now home with a badly broken arm. Right is Lieut. C. F. McEwen. All were originally officers in the 3rd Field Artillery Brigade, C.E.F., under Lt.-Colonel J. H. Mitchell.