

ABOUT TURN!

A Picturesque Description of Life at the Front

By LIEUT. AUGUSTUS MUIR

DUSK had drawn down; the wind scattered the clouds so that a few pale stars winked with a chill, unkindly light; there was no moon. Starlight is a frail illumination even at the best of times and in the most perfect place; but in the depth of the trench it yielded a steely grey gleam which accentuated the blackness of the surrounding night; so that a clump of shattered pine-trees on the near horizon stood out against the dark indigo sky with the clean-cut sharpness of a silhouette.

"As soon as the relieving company is in the trenches," came the order, "retire by platoons from the right."

From down the communication-trench sounded a jerking, unsteady plos! plos! Round the bend came the vanguard of the relieving company: fresh men, untried by their primal baptism of fire; clear of eye; healthy of skin; with tunics that told no tale of nights of muddy travail. There was a quick conference of officers—and what a contrast, as they crouched beneath the parapet; the outfits of the new arrivals, a virginal, clear-cut black, standing out against the light, mud-caked grey of the old hands' accoutrements! A few hurried directions: the listen-

ing posts described; gun emplacements explained; dangerous spots pointed out; and the subaltern of the waiting platoon plunged into the darkness of the communication trench with the sharp whisper, "Lead on!" And so, close on his heels we filed out of the firing line, a tired and weary muster of men who had for a seeming eternity of days and nights suffered the taxing rigours of ceaseless battle.

Plunging into muddy puddles, tripping over obstacles on the trench floor, bumping into the gnarled walls so that stones and clay were dislodged to drop with a patter as we passed, we stumbled on joyous with a vast relief. The trench grew shallower; suddenly we emerged into the open; between us and the Bosche lines loomed the black, rugged figure of a square, solid, shell-torn house; in front of us lay the uneven street of a shattered village, silent as the hushed, deserted aisles of death; and into the midst of its slumber and shadows led our way of sanctuary and of rest. The wind freshened. It cut sharply across our cheeks. It was like the fragrant breath of hope to tired bodies and war-sick souls. Though it came from the battlefield it bore sweet burdens of joy and promise; and flavouring its fresh and tingling touch, we plunged into the darkness and mystery of the desolate village. I recall, not without emotion, the strange sensation of moving again on a path unbounded by two clay walls. The open street, pale in the star-light, was like a symbol of glorious freedom; and this sudden foretaste of unfettered release was a beneficent balm that lingered like some soothing lenitive upon our wearied and stricken souls. Freedom and rest!—these were the fuel of joy. In the silence of our hearts we laughed aloud.

THE crisp clatter of musketry grew fainter, till it died to a softened and spasmodic crackling in the dim distance. We left the village in the rear,

and our road led along by the tall outline of poplars that stood like silent sentinels beneath the stars. We ploughed through an invisible lake of mud; but to us it was a lake of pure, unbridled joy; for the road was the pathway of peace leading to a spell of sweet security untried by war's importunate alarms; every succeeding step gave a glimpse of coming comfort; each bend in the road yielded a vision of silent and fragrant nights. Dies irae—these we relegated to the limbo of the harsh, unkindly past; we were pilgrims whose faces were turned toward the Happy Land—

The road swerved sharply. We heard the hollow echo of footsteps that presently fell into a rhythm quickly caught up, and we knew that the head of the column had entered a street of houses. A sudden halt; a slow melting of the men into the darkness; the crisp accents of an officer as billets were meted out; and our section was guided to the blackness of a gaping doorway. We were Home—here in the long last, we had attained our haven! . . . The scent of hay floated to our nostrils and evoked the sweet prospect of perfumed slumber—to our weary limbs, the zenith of joy. . . .

And then came the harsh accents that shattered all things: "Halt!" It rang out clear on the night air. There followed a gripping silence. . . . "Officers forward." . . . The clatter of a few boots on cobble stones. . . . The muffled tones of an authoritative voice. . . . Again the clink of feet.

"About turn!" The order ran like a spreading flame burning into the consciousness of every weary brain, and with it the whisper that we should return to the trenches for yet another endless night; an attack foreseen. . . . "About turn!" . . . It rang in our ears like a knell; and giving a last hunch to our packs and rifle we turned about to face the pitiless burden of battle.

THE OLD SHOEBOX BUGGY

A Recollection of My Dominion Day in 1881

By JACOB HOLDFAST
Elucidated by Augustus Bridle

IT was all on account of the old shoebox buggy. Perhaps you never saw one—shaped like a broad boot with the dashboard for a toe and the part behind the seat covered in for a heel, the seat being the instep; in 1881 as much a rarity by survival as the top buggy was by innovation. Top buggies became as common as measles before I got away from the farm. And the old shoebox went into a corner between the corner and the hog pen for the hens to roost upon and hatch out chickens under the seat—till finally a Jew-junk man came along and got the old irons.

Cyrus Pincher's old shoebox and I were in league together for one hectic day, July 1, 1881. The reason I remember the year so well is that President Garfield was shot that spring and died that summer; and for about two months that kept the community adjacent to Jericho in a state of agitation.

Being wise enough to ask for no 24th of May, and having made it quite clear that I had no intention of mortgaging the 12th of July in the middle of wheat-cutting. I had persuaded Cyrus Pincher, my new boss—successor to Hiram Buckle—that he should let me have Dominion Day.

"All right, Bub," says he, with a wry flicker on his quidgy old face that came to a focus in a little wedge of greybeard. "I ain't never beheld any sense in that holiday. I dunno what she celebrates outside o' Confederation, and I'm pledged if I know what wuz."

However, he had offered me the loan of the old shoebox buggy for the celebration at Tilbury and the driving horse, which was a good one; and I rather suspect now that he suspicioned I had a girl in my mental photograph gallery—whom I had, and her name was Maggie Malone. By the Tilbury Times and sundry large posters on the telegraph poles out Jericho way, there was to be a regatta on the river, a field day in the park, and a circus out on the timothy meadow opposite the fair grounds. The circus was Forepaugh, who was then a second up to Barnum, and had the reputation of not dividing his show into more than two parts for the small towns. The great and only Ned Hanlan, then in one of his zeniths of glory on three continents, was to row an exhibition mile under the two bridges of the Idlewild—which wasn't the name of the river at all, but the kind of name that it ought to have been.

I had Maggie's promise to go with me. She was the first girl I had ever asked to go anywhere. Naturally she was a phantom of immeasurable delight. My taste may have been amateur. But Maggie was the only girl who ever had looked at me as

though she knew she was picked for the same programme.

Evening of June 30th I took off the wheels of the old buggy and put lard and tallow on the end of each axle. I also washed and shined the old thing by lantern-light, and afterwards put in an hour furbishing up the single harness, which, to my way of thinking, had rather too many toggles to be undeniably topping. Then, I polished my Sunday boots till Maggie could have seen her face in them, laid out my Sabbath clothes, celluloid collar, fat green tie and all, along with a pair of clean socks and a white shirt; put my Waterbury watch under the pillow and turned in to rehearse every blessed mile of that twenty-mile drive with Maggie, which was to begin at seven in the morning. And the last thing I remember doing before I faded to sleep was to feel in my trousers pockets for the tuck of a five dollar bill along with a pair of quarters that hadn't been aired for three weeks. I was prepared to spend every cent of it on Maggie if it seemed necessary—which I hoped it wouldn't.

Up at break of day I curried Bob, the chestnut horse, put on the harness, backed out the old buggy and got the new whip and the buggy-spread with tassels on the edge.

"Got no time to lose, Bub," growled Cyrus Pincher, as he lugged in the milk. "That gal's probably got her bes' bib an' tucker on a'ready."

That of course took away all my leisure for breakfast, after which I hooked up Bob, whose peck of oats I tucked away in the knot of a grain-bag under the shoebox seat. Bob was a rather ungainly beast with a long, tireless reach and a pair of bellows that never had been tucked out by his legs. All I had to do was to rub one hand down the whip as I drove out the lane, to start him off at a three-minute clip.

When I got to the high turnpike of the new-graded road I thought I had never seen or smelled so perfect a morning. The clover hay was all in. The fall wheat was nearly ripe. The corn was knee-high to a small boy. The oats were heading out. And the sun danced a jig through the screens of the glad

green bush into the clearing whose log houses and frame houses and barns of both kinds became a whirling panorama of first impressions to me as I put Bob over the two and a half miles that led to the Becket side-road where Maggie Malone was the eye of the morning.

By my Waterbury, as I turned on to her side-road, it was yet ten minutes of seven. So I slowed up a bit, not wanting to appear too frenziedly eager. First farm round the turn was Becket's—well-up folks that had recently got a top buggy for young Dave, two years older than myself. They had offered me a job at sixteen a month that spring, but I had no desire to play second fiddle to young Dave, who was a high-lifted young pacer supposed to be in love with one of the girls over on the next side-road.

Sure enough, there were buggy-tracks out of Becket's. So Dave also was off to the celebration. I suspected he would be—with that top buggy, and I rather resented the fact that he had got off first. However, Maggie and I might pass him on the road.

I pause here to knock the ashes from my cigar, reflecting upon the crookedness of some people I have known in modern business. Making what money has come my way I have noticed that some men like to get what somebody else is entitled to. That seems to be human nature. Most men don't know how to be creative. They have an idea that a merger, for instance, pays Paul without robbing Peter.

Cigar is out. Well—

I was just about to say that when I turned out a bit to turn in at Malone's—I noticed that some other buggy had done the same trick.

"Whoa!" I says to Bob, not too loud, hoping that none of the Malones would hear me.

I leaned over the shoebox to scan those tracks. Now I noticed that the same buggy had turned out again. From the marks where the wheels left the bridge that was plain as one of my shiny boots. Furthermore, it was the same hoof-tracks—in and out again; and it was Dave's high-stepper, the dapple bay with the long neck! I looked up the lane because I couldn't help it; and I saw where his buggy had turned at the chip hill.

"Bob," I said, with a ragged voice. "That bird of ours has flown with another gaffer. Maggie Malone didn't—wait for you and me—and we're just a minute too soon by my Waterbury."

I headed him into the road.

"I guess, Bob," I soliloquized, "we'd better pike home again to Cyrus Pincher, eh?"

The way he whinnied and pawed the road I could almost hear him say, "Not much, Mary Ann!"