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PETIT JEAN

By PATRICK MacGILL, Author of "The Great Push," etc.

Should a Christmas story be told in the summer time, when the world is aflour and the singing birds are loud in the land? This story deals with a kindly action in a country where Christmas was forgotten, and as a kindly action can claim any season for its own and make it a time of peace and good-will. This story of Spudhole Bub of the British Expeditionary Force is worth the telling.

Spudhole was the man's nickname and "Spudhole" in its ordinary use means the clink, or the guerdon. Some men spend a great part of their spare time in the guerdon, and Spudhole often declared that he knew every guerdon in France. "All because of nuffink," he remarked. "If I go into a ruined village and kick the Germans out of it, and find a hen strolling about on its own, I'm run in if I kill that hen. Somebody is sure to come up and claim damages for the fowl. My luck's out all the time." This, in essence, was true, for Spudhole was getting into continual trouble for his most trivial things. Only one thing outvalued his genius for getting into scrapes, and that was his prowess in fight. Spudhole was a great soldier.

He was very fond of the little French children who lived in the villages near the firing line. They made friends with him immediately calling him Pudhole (how he thinks that about) and adored him. On one occasion, when his company was resting in a farm, he looked after the baby while the housewife went out to do some work in the field. He was born orderly at the time, and while he was tending the child, the pigs belonging to the farm got into the barn and played havoc with the soldiers' equipment and rations. That evening Spudhole went before the C. O. and he finished the remainder of his rest in the guardroom. But to get to my story.

It was Christmas, and Spudhole was billeted with his mates in a ruined house in a ruined village. Apart from the soldiers, there were only two other occupants of the house, a mother and child, the latter a little boy of seven. The boy's father was away in the trenches. In the village there were very few inhabitants, for the Germans shelled the place daily and most of the villagers had gone further back. This woman and her child remained, however. By day the woman worked in the fields, while the little boy went to school in a convent near by, where the good nuns were teaching the children of France. At night mother and son slept in the basement of their ruined home. Spudhole and his mates slept on the ground floor.

About 10 o'clock on Christmas night the good woman of the house lifted the little boy, whose name was Jean, from the fire-side, where he had been asleep, and carried him to the head of the cellar stairs.

"Good night!" she called to the soldiers who were deep in a game of cards. "Good night!" the soldiers chorused in reply to the woman on the stair-head. Little Jean woke up. "Bon soir!" he called. "Bon soir, Pudhole."

"Petit Jean, bon garcon," said Spudhole, getting in his feet and coming over to the child. He kissed the little boy on the cheek and said: "Now, little Jean, you get to bed and be a good boy."

The child snuggled into his mother's breast, then suddenly turning his eyes up to her, he asked: "My boot. Where did you leave it?"

"Your boot! Ah, yes. I forgot it, darling."

"I'll put it out," he said, and wriggled out of her arms on to the floor.

He scrambled into a corner near the door, unearthing a hideous shoe, cracked and covered with mud, and going over to the stove he placed it on the floor. Then he came back to his mother. As Spudhole looked at the woman he fancied he saw tears in her eyes.

"Little Jean's good fairy always puts something in Jean's boot on Christmas night," said the mother. "But now—"

"Little Jean is going to get a big present to-night," said the boy, in a confident voice, wondering why his mother was in tears.

The two went downstairs. Spudhole returned to his game. Now and again his eyes turned on the ugly-looking boot. He was touched by Jean's sublime faith in placing it there. What did the little creature expect to get? On such a night and in such a place, expecting Santa Claus! It was too ridiculous.

"Play up, Spudhole," said the man next him. "What are you mooning about now?"

"I'm not mooning," Spudhole replied. "Who led?"

"Playing cards and not knowing who led!" said one of the men. "That's not the game."

"Well, it's like this," said Spudhole, laying down his cards and lighting a cigarette. "There's this little nipper, Jean, and he thinks that it's Christmas. It's more than I think. Anyway, he's put down a boot the same as the children in England put up a stocking, and he thinks that Santa Claus will come and put something in the boot. Old Santa won't come here, I bet. If he does, he'll cop a packet, so he'll have the good sense to stop away. What I think is this: We should put something in that old boot. I've got a cheap knife and a hat badge and a button. Any further offers."

A piece of chocolate from my last packet from home," said one. "A franc," said another. "A tin of bully," said a third—a bit of a humorist this man, but his joke was received in dead silence. He cleared himself from reproach by saying: "And a ring from a German nose-cap."

"Might do a little more in the cash line," another remarked. "Does everybody agree to put things in five francs altogether?" inquired Spudhole.

"We agree," was the answer of the men.

And so it happened that next morning when the little boy got up from the cellar and looked in his boot, he found that Santa Claus, indifferent to the dangers of bursting shell and spiteful bullets, had travelled all the way up to the ruined village by the gifts of that variety who stay on top of the water but don't advance any.

Now the kind of person I like is the man who when asked if he swims says, "Yes, fairly well" and then turns out to be a good swimmer.

Of course I don't mean that I like false humility. The man I mean is

one who is so modest that he doesn't overstate his powers, and so much interested in men who can do more than he that he honestly doesn't think so much of his own abilities.

Understatements are so humorous. I love the humor of understatements too. A contrast drawn between an old time and a modern prayer meeting is quoted by one of the weekly reviews. The old prayer meeting is described. It lasted from nine in the morning to five in the afternoon and included two sermons of an hour each and two prayers of two hours each besides other incidentals.

"Now," continues the review, "after quoting this description 'if we should place one of our modern prayer meetings up against this account the Methodist editor suspects the difference could be discerned.'"

No overstatement could convey so much. What a world of quiet humor comment in that little understatement of that variety who stay on top of the water but don't advance any.

Understatement is a form of reserve. You are holding back something. It suggests power and possibilities. It piques the interest and arouses confidence. Strange so few people seem to care to use it!

Germany now takes her beating, a scrap. Peace! The word has sound meaning at every meeting, from each vantage ground retreating, sick at heart and bruised and sore; soon or late we're bound to can her, and take down the flaunting banner from the Hohenzollern manor, there to tatter forevermore. Then one peace of which you're dreaming will have more than empty seeming, and no tiding will dare start scheming to incarnadine the map; for the world, at carnage winces, and no common garden quinces, be they kaisers or kron princes, will have nerve to start

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THE BOASTFUL GERMAN FISHERMAN



—New York Tribune

SIDE TALKS

By RUTH CAMERON

UNDERWEIGHT IN WORDS.

I love understatements.

One becomes so saturated with overstatements, with extravagances, with exaggerations, with fluent and un-

considered assertions, that to find someone who weighs words and is inclined to give underweight, who un-

derstates rather than overstates, is like tasting a relish of olives or salt-

ed nuts after one has grown weary of too much sweets.

Do you know what I mean?

Ask anyone if he knows how to swim.

Nine people out of ten, if they can swim at all will say, "Oh yes, I'm quite a swimmer," or something to that effect.

And Perhaps Two Out of Nine Really Swim.

Boil it down and you will find that perhaps two out of these nine are really swimmers, that is in-

swim easily, don't mind seasick-

tucked under and don't measure their progress by yards. Of the other

ix, there will be, perhaps, four mediocre swimmers and two who

are of that variety who stay on top of the water but don't advance any.

Now the kind of person I like is the man who when asked if he swims

says, "Yes, fairly well" and then turns out to be a good swimmer.

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