

THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE AT THE FRONT

The story of the Christmas truce between British and German soldiers will always remain one of the most human and most hopeful pages in the history of the present war. It was a spontaneous acknowledgment of the Feast of Friends. It is clear that the truce was only partial and took effect in those parts of the line not held by Prussian troops. The following passages taken from a host of soldiers' letters of the kind will serve to tell the story. One of the most picturesque accounts was sent to the "Evening News," a letter from a sergeant in the 3rd Rifle Brigade to his parents:—

"Christmas Day! The most wonderful day on record. In the early hours of the morning the events of last night appeared as some weird dream—but to-day, well, it beggars description.

"You will hardly credit what I am going to tell you; but thousands of our men will be writing home to-day telling the same strange and wonderful story. Listen.

"Last night as I sat in my little dug-out, writing, my chum came bursting in upon me with: 'Bob! Hark at 'em!' And I listened. From the German trenches came the sound of music and singing. My chum continued: 'They've got Christmas-trees all along the top of their trenches! Never saw such a sight.'

"I got up to investigate. Climbing the parapet, I saw a sight which I shall remember to my dying day. Right along the whole of their line were hung paper lanterns and illuminations of every description, many of them in such positions as to suggest that they were hung upon Christmas-trees. And as I stood in wonder a rousing song came over to us; at first the words were indistinguishable, then, as the song was repeated again and again, we realized that we were listening to 'The Watch on the Rhine.'

"Our boys answered with a cheer,

while a neighbouring regiment sang lustily the National Anthem.

"Some were for shooting the lights away, but almost at the first shot there came a shout in really good English, 'Stop shooting!'

"Then began a series of answering shouts from trench to trench. It was incredible. 'Hallo! Hallo you English; we wish to speak.' And everyone began to speak at once. . . .

"And there in the searchlight they stood, Englishman and German, chatting and smoking cigarettes together midway between the lines.

"A rousing cheer went up from friend and foe alike. The group was too far away for me to hear what was said, but presently we heard a cheery 'Good night. A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you all,' with which the parties returned to their respective trenches.

"After this we remained the whole night through singing with the enemy song for song. 'Give us Tipperary,' they cried. . . .

"I turned out this morning at dawn, still pondering upon the events of the previous night, and wondering if this farce was still continuing. . . .

Again I climbed on to the parapet and was staggered at the seeming audacity of our enemies. They were all out upon their earthworks, still shouting and singing, and waving cheery greetings across to us.

"'Come out,' they cried. 'We are friends to-day.'

"Already many of our chaps were going across to meet them. At first our officers remonstrated, but nobody seemed to want to do any harm, and before very long we were all out in the open exchanging souvenirs and smoking each other's cigarettes.

"But before we could really feel on easy terms there were some gruesome tasks to be performed. English and German returned for spades, and between us we gave decent burial to those poor fellows who had fallen weeks previously, and who had, perforce, to be abandoned on the field. We had tried on several occasions to get out to these bodies and bury them by night, but such a procedure always

resulted in shots being exchanged, and a hasty return whence we came.

"But to-day I stood shoulder to shoulder with a German and dug a grave for his late comrade. Crosses now mark the spots where for weeks there had lain three gruesome forms. This business over, we turned to our conversation. . . .

"War! We looked at each other and laughed, each showing his incapacity to fully realize the situation in his own peculiar way.

"One grey-coated warrior tore off his equipment, and flinging it to the ground, cried:—

"'War! This is war! Well, I'm—!' And he promptly burst into tears.

"And so we spent the day. As dusk came on we returned to our trenches, and here we sit, wonder more profound than ever holding us, awaiting what next may come.

"Even as I write I can hardly credit what I have seen and done. This has indeed been a wonderful day."

Several writers speak of carol-singing. A private of the Queen's Westminster (quoted in the "Daily Chronicle") says:—

"It started by wishing each other 'A Happy Christmas,' and after a little while they shouted out, 'Englishmen, sing to us.' We got out our hymn books, stuck candles on the tops of the trenches, and sang, 'Lead, kindly Light,' 'Abide with me,' and 'While shepherds watched their flocks by night.'

They gave us three cheers, and we then asked them to sing to us, which they did."

How spontaneous the meeting of foes was can be gathered from many accounts. "On Christmas morning," writes Mr. Harold Ashton, of the "Daily News," "two of our soldiers, after signalling truce and good fellowship from the perilous crown of their trench, walked across to the German lines with a plate of mince pies and a garniture of seasonable messages. They were most cordially received, had a good feed, washed down by a choice bottle of Liebfraumilch, and were sent back with packets of Christmas cards.

"Later in the day the Germans returned the compliment, and sent a couple of caparisoned heralds, apparently Landsturm men, across to our evergreen-embowered dug-outs.

"An extra-officious soldier promptly arrested them upon their appearance in our lines, until an officer came along.

"What in the world have you got there?" said he.

"'Beggin' your pardon, sir, a couple o' Landstreamers by the look of 'em. Said they'd come to wish us many 'appy returns, so I nabbed 'em, sir!' Realizing that this was hardly playing the game, the officer read the sentry a little homily on the amenities of the festive season, and asked the plump 'Landstreamers' to depart, with the compliments of the season, to their own lines."

The real value of the whole amazing incident to both sides can be gathered from such extracts as the following:—

"I've just spent an hour talking to the German officers and men," writes

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a major of the Leicesters (in 'The Times'), "who have drawn a line halfway between our left trenches and theirs and have all met our men and officers there. We exchanged cigars, cigarettes, and papers. They are jolly, cheery fellows for the most part, and it seems so silly under the circumstances to be fighting them."

A rifleman of the 3rd Rifle Brigade writes home (quoted by the 'Evening News'):—

"I was talking to a German bombardier yesterday afternoon. He had lived in London some time and could speak good English. His parting words were:—

"'To-day we have peace. Tomorrow you fight for your country; I fight for mine—good luck!'—and back he went. I shouldn't be surprised if he was one of the gunners shelling this morning. Such is war."

And an officer (quoted by 'The Times') says:—

"They were really magnificent in the whole thing and jolly good sorts. I have now a very different opinion of the German. Both sides have started the firing and are already enemies again. Strange it all seems, doesn't it?"

Strange, indeed—so strange that we may well wonder whether war between kinsmen can ever be repeated.—"The Challenge."

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