Hornung Ernest William

Notes of a Camp-Follower on the Western Front

Ernest Hornung

Notes of a Camp-Follower on the Western Front

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23146723
Notes of a Camp-Follower on the Western Front:

Содержание

E. W. Hornung
Notes of a Camp-Follower on the Western Front

AN ARK IN THE MUD

(December, 1917.)

UNDER WAY

'There's our hut!' said the young hut-leader, pointing through iron palings at a couple of toy Noah's Arks built large. 'No – that's the n^{th} Division's cinema. The Y.M.C.A. is the one beyond.'

The enclosure behind the palings had been a parade-ground in piping times; and British squads, from the pink French barracks outside the gates, still drilled there between banks of sterilised rubbish and lagoons of unmedicated mud. The place was to become familiar to me under many aspects. I have known it more than presentable in a clean suit of snow, and really picturesque with a sharp moon cocked upon some towering trees, as yet strangely intact. It was at its best, perhaps, as a nocturne pricked out by a swarm of electric torches, going and coming along the duck-boards in a grand chain of sparks and flashes. But its true colours were the wet browns and drabs of that first glimpse in the December dusk, with the Ark hull down in the mud, and the cinema a sister ship across her bows.

The hut-leader ushered me on board with the courtesy of a young commander inducting an elderly new mate; the difference was that I had all the ropes to learn, with the possible exception of one he had already shown me on our way from the local headquarters of the Y.M.C.A. The battered town was full of English soldiers, to whom indeed it owed its continued existence on the right side of the Line. In the gathering twilight, and

the deeper shade of beetling ruins, most of them saluted either my leader's British warm, or my own voluminous trench-coat (with fleece lining), on the supposition of officers within. Left to myself, I should have done the wrong thing every time. It is expressly out of order for a camp-follower to give or take salutes. Yet what is he to do, when he gets a beauty from one whose boots he is unfit to black? My leader had been showing me, with a pleasant nod and a genial civilian gesture, easier to emulate than to acquire.

In the hut he left me to my own investigations while he was seeing to his lamps. The round stove in the centre showed a rosy chimney through the gloom, like a mast in a ship's saloon; and in the two half-lights the place looked scrupulously swept and garnished for our guests, a number of whom were already waiting outside for us to open. The trestle tables, with nothing on them but a dusky polish, might have been mathematically spaced, each with a pair of forms in perfect parallels, and nothing else but a piano and an under-sized billiard-table on all the tidy floor. The usual display of bunting, cheap but cheerful, hung as banners from the joists, a garish vista from platform to counter. Behind the counter were the shelves of shimmering goods, biscuits and candles in open cases on the floor, and as many exits as a scene in a farce. One door led into our room: an oblong cabin with camp beds for self and leader, tables covered with American cloth, dust, toilet requisites, more dust, candle-grease and tea-things, and a stove of its own in roseate blast like the one down the hut.

The crew of two orderlies lived along a little passage in their kitchen, and were now at their tea on packing-cases by the boiler fire. They were both like Esau hairy men, with very little of the soldier left about them. Their unlovely beds were the principal pieces of kitchen furniture. In the kitchen, too, for obscure reasons not for me to investigate, were the washing arrangements for all hands, and any face or neck that felt inclined. I had heard a whisper of Officers' Baths in the vicinity; it came to mind like the tinkle of a brook at these discoveries.

At 4.30 the unkempt couple staggered in with the first urn, and I took my post at the tap. One of them shuffled down the hut to open up; our young skipper stuck a carriage candle in its grease on the edge of the counter, over his till, saying he was as short of paraffin as of change; and into the half-lit gloom marched a horde of determined soldiers, and so upon the counter and my urn in double file. 'Tea, please, sir!' 'Two teas!' 'Coop o' tay, plase!' The accents were from every district I had ever known, and were those of every class, including the one that has no accent at all. They warmed the blood like a medley of patriotic airs, and I commenced potman as it were to martial music.

It was, perhaps, the least skilled labour to be had in France, but that evening it was none too light. Every single customer began with tea: the mugs flew through my hands as fast as I could fill them, until my end of the counter swam in livid pools, and the tilted urn was down to a gentle dribble. Now was the chance to look twice at the consumers of our innocuous blend.

One had a sheaf of wound-stripes on his sleeve; another was fresh trench-mud from leathern jerkin (where my view of him began) to the crown of his shrapnel helmet; many wore the bonnets of a famous Scotch Division, all were in their habit as they fought; and there they were waiting for their tea, a long perspective of patient faces, like school-children at a treat. And here was I, fairly launched upon the career which a facetious density has summed up as 'pouring out tea and prayer in equal parts,' and prepared to continue with the first half of the programme till further orders: the other was less in my line – but I could have poured out a fairly fluent thanksgiving for the atmosphere of youth and bravery, and most infectious vitality, which already filled the hut.

In the meantime there was much to be learnt from my seasoned neighbour at the till, and to admire in his happy control of gentlemen on their way up the Line. Should they want more matches than it suited him to sell, then want must be their master; did some sly knave appear at the top of the queue, without having worked his way up past my urn, then it was: 'I saw you, Jock! Go round and come up in your turn!' Or was it a man with no change, and was there hardly any in the till? – 'Take two steps to the rear, my friend, and when I have the change I'll serve you!' When he had the change, the sparks might have flown with it through his fingers; he was lightning calculator and conjuror in one, knew the foul franc note of a dubious bank with less than half an eye, and how to refuse it with equal firmness and good-humour. I hardly knew whether to feel hurt or flattered at being

perpetually 'Mr.' to this natural martinet, my junior it is true by decades, but a leader I was already proud to follow and obey.

In the first lull he deserted me in order to make tea in our room, but took his with the door open, shouting out the price of aught I had to sell with an endearing verve, name and prefix included every time. It made me feel more than ever like the mate of a ship, and anxious to earn my certificate.

Then I had *my* tea – with the door shut – and already an aching back for part of the fun. For already the whole thing was my idea of fun – the picnic idea – an old weakness. Huts especially were always near my heart, and our room in this one reminded me of bush huts adored for their discomfort in my teens. Of the two I preferred the bush fireside, a hearth like a powder-closet and blazing logs; but candles in their own grease-spots were an improvement on the old slush-lamp of moleskin and mutton-fat. The likeness reached its height in the two sheetless bunks, but there it ended. Not a sound was a sound ever heard before. The continual chink of money in the till outside; the movement of many feet, trained not to shuffle; the constant coughing of men otherwise in superhuman health; the crude tinkle of the piano at the far end of the hut – the efficient pounding of the cinema piano – the screw-like throb of their petrol engine – the periodical bringing-down of their packed house, no doubt by the ubiquitous Mr. Chaplin! Those were the sounds to which we took our tea in the state-room of the Ark. She might have been on a pleasure-trip all the time.

That first night I remember going back and diving into open cases of candles, and counting out packets of cigarettes and biscuits, sticks of chocolate, boxes of matches, and reaching down tinned salmon, sardines, boot-laces, boot-polish, shaving-soap and tooth-paste, button-sticks, 'sticks of lead' (otherwise pencils), writing-pads, Nosegay Shag, Royal Seal, or twist if we had it, and shouting for the prices as I went, coping with the change by light of luck and nature, but doling out the free stationery with a base lingering relief, until my back was a hundred and all the silver of the allied realms one composite coin that danced without jingling in the till. Gold stripes meant nothing to me now; shrapnel helmets were as high above me as the stars; the only hero was the man who didn't want change. Often in the early part I thought the queue was coming to an end; it was always the sign for a fresh influx; and when the National Anthem came thumping from the cinema, the original Ark might have sunk under such a boarding-party of thirsty tea-drinkers as we had still to receive. I noted that they called it tea regardless of the contents of the urn, which changed first to coffee and then to cocoa as the night wore on: tea was the generic term.

At last the smarter and tarter of the two orderlies, he who compounded the contents of the urns, sidled without ceremony to the commander's elbow.

'It wants a minute to the 'alf-hour, sir.'

Gramophone alone could give the husky tone of chronic injury, palette and brush the red eyes of resentment turned upon

his kind beyond the counter. Our leader consulted his wrist-watch with a brisk gesture.

'I'll serve the next six men,' he ultimated, and the seventh man knocked at his heart in vain. Green curtains closed the counter in the wistful faces of the rest; if I can see them still, it is the heavenly music of those curtain-rings that I hear! The mind's eye peeps through once more, and spies the last gobblers at the splashed tables littered with mugs and empty tins; the last dawdlers on a floor ankle-deep in the envelopes of twopenny and half-franc packets of biscuits; and a little man broom-in-hand at the open door, spoiling to sweep all the lot into outer darkness.

In the kitchen, while both orderlies fell straight to work upon this Augean scene, our versatile leader, as little daunted by the hour, gave further expression to his personality in an omelette worthy of the country, and in lashings of Suchard cocoa made with a master hand. I remember with much gratitude that he also made my yawning bed, and that we turned in early to the tune of rain:

> A fusillade upon the roof,
> A tattoo on the pane.

Only the pane was canvas, and the fusillade accompanied by some local music from the guns outside the town.

A HANDFUL OF MEN

As 'the true love-story commences at the altar,' so the real work of a hut only begins at the counter. You may turn out to be the disguised prince of salesmen, and yet fail to deliver the goods that really matter. I am not thinking of 'goody' goods at all, but of the worker's personality such as it may be. It is not more essential for an actor to 'get across the footlights' than it is for the Y.M.C.A. counter-jumper to start by clearing that obstacle, and mixing with the men for all he can show himself to be worth.

The Ark was such a busy canteen that all this is easier said than it was done. Every morning we were kept at it as continuously from eleven to one as ever we were from four-thirty to eight-thirty. Those were our business hours; and though it was never quite such fierce shopping in the forenoon, it was then that the leader would go off in quest of fresh supplies and I was apt to be left in charge. This happened my very first morning. Shall I ever forget the intimidating multitude of Army boots seen under the door before we opened! And there was another of the early days, when the Somersets stormed our parapet in full fighting paraphernalia, with only me to stand up to them. Not much chance of foregathering then; but never an hour, seldom a single transaction within the hour, but brought me from the other side some quaint remark, some adorable display of patience, courtesy, or homely fun. The change difficulty was chronic, and

mutually most exasperating; it was over that stile the men were always helping each other or helping me, with never a trace of the irritation I felt myself. They were the most delightful customers one could wish to serve. But that made it the more tantalising to have but a word with them on business. My young chief was once more my better here; he had only to be behind the counter to 'get across' as much as he liked, and in as few words. But I required a slack half-hour when I could take my pipe down the hut and seek out some solitary, or make overtures to the man at the piano.

It was generally the man's chum who responded in the first instance; for every Æneas in the new legions has his staunch Achates, who collects the praise as for the firm, adding his own mite in a beaming whisper. 'He has his own choir in Edinburgh,' said one Jock of another who was playing and singing the Scottish songs with urgent power. The piano is the surest touchstone in a hut. It brings out the man of talent – but also the bore who hammers with one thick-skinned finger – but also the prevailing lenience that puts up with the bore. I *have* been entreated to keep my piano locked and the key in the till; and once on the counter I found an anonymous notice, with a line requesting me to affix it to the instrument without delay: 'If you do play, do play – If you don't play, don't!' But a pianist of any pretensions has a crowd round him in a minute; and a splendid little audience it always is. The set concert, as I heard it, was not a patch on these unpremeditated recitals.

One night the hut was full of Riflemen, one of whom was

strumming away to his own contentment, but with only the usual trusty chum for audience. I brought my pipe to the other side of the piano, and the performer got up and talked across to me for nearly an hour. He was a dark little garrulous fellow of no distinction, and he talked best with his eyes upon the keyboard, but the chum's broad grin of eager admiration never ceased to ply between us. The little Rifleman had borne a charmed life indeed, especially on Passchendaele Ridge, the scene of his latest misadventures. He was as idiomatic as Ortheris in his generation, but I only remember: 'I looked a fair Bairnsfather, not 'alf!' He was the nearest approach to a 'Bairnsfather' I ever encountered in the flesh, but the compliment to the draughtsman is no smaller for that. A third Rifleman, less demonstratively uncritical than the chum, joined the party; and at the end I ventured to ask all three in turn what they had been doing before the war.

'I,' said the little man, 'was a house-painter at Crewe.'

'And I,' said the grinning chum, 'was conductor of a 28 motor-'bus. I expect we've often dropped you at the Y.M.C.A. in Tottenham Court Road, sir.'

'And you?' – I turned to the last comer – 'if it isn't a rude question?'

'Oh, I,' said he, with the pride that would conceal itself, 'I'm in the building line. But I operate a bioscope at night!'

The historic present put his attitude in a nutshell. He might have been operating that bioscope the night before, be due back the next, and just having a look at things in France on his

night off. His expert eye was not perceptibly impressed with the spectacle of war as he was seeing it off the films; but the house-painter seemed to be making the most of his long holiday from house-painting, and my old friend the conductor did not sigh in my hearing for his 28.

I took the party back with me to the counter, where they honoured me by partaking of cocoa and biscuits as my guests. It was all there was to do for three such hardy and mature philosophers; and I never saw or heard of them again, long as their cap-badge set me looking for one or other of their pleasant faces underneath. It was always rather sad when we had made friends with a man who never came near us again. In times of heavy fighting it was no wonder, but in the winter it seemed in the nature of a black mark against the hut.

There were two other Riflemen who were in that night, and hit me harder in a softer spot. They were both tragically young, one of them a pretty boy in a muffler that might have been knitted by any mother in the land. They were not enjoying their war, these two, but they smiled none the less as they let it out; they had come in of their own free will, as soon as ever their tender years allowed, and survived all the carnage of the Somme and of Passchendaele. They could afford to smile; but they had also outlived their romantic notions of a war, and were too young to bear it willingly in any other spirit. They had honest shudders for the horrors they had seen, and they frankly loathed going back into the mud or ice of the December trenches.

'Every time,' said the pretty boy, as they took cocoa with me, 'it seems worse.'

'But for the Y.M.C.A.,' said the other, with simple feeling, 'I believe I should have gone mad.'

That was something to hear. But what was there to say to such a pair? One had been a clerk in Huddersfield; the other, a shade less gentle, but, to equalise the appeal, an only child, foreman of some works in Derbyshire. Indubitably they were both wishing themselves back in their old situations; but equally without a doubt they were both still proud of the act of sacrifice which had brought them to this. The last was the frame of mind to recall by hook or crook. One can be proud of such boys, even if their spirit is not all it was, and so perhaps make them prouder of themselves; the hard case is the man who waited for compulsion, who has no old embers of loyalty or enterprise to coax into a modest flame. This type takes a lot of waking up, and yet, like other heavy sleepers, once awake may do as well as any.

At the foot of our hut, beyond piano, billiard-table, and platform (only the case the billiard-table had come in), was the Quiet Room in which the men were entitled to read and write without interruption. One of those first nights I peeped in there with my pipe, at a moment of fourfold psychology.

In one corner two men were engaged in some form of violent prayer or intercession; not on their knees, but seated side by side. One, and he much the younger of the two, appeared to be wrestling for the other's soul, to be at all but physical grips

with some concrete devil of his inner vision; at any rate he was making a noise that entirely destroyed the character of our Quiet Room. But the other occupants, so far from complaining, seemed equally wrapped up in their own affairs, and oblivious to the pother. The third man was writing a tremendous letter, at great speed, face and hands and flying pencil strongly lighted by a candle-end almost under his nose, more shame for our poor lamplight! The fourth and last of the party, a good-looking Guardsman with a puzzled frown, poising the pencil of an unready scribe, at once invoked my aid in another form of literary enterprise. He was making his will in his field pocket-book; could I tell him how to spell the pretty name of one of his little daughters? Would I mind looking it all over, and seeing if it would do?

'Going up the Line for the first time on Tuesday,' he explained, 'and it's as well to be prepared.'

He was perfectly calm about it. He had thought of everything; his wife, I remember, was to have 'the float and the two horses, to do the best she can with'; but the little girls were specifically remembered, and the identity of each clinched by their surname after the one that took more spelling. A dairyman, I imagined from his mild phlegmatic face; but it seemed he was the village butcher somewhere in Leicestershire. His date of enrolment bespoke either the conscript or the eleventh-hour volunteer, and his sad air made me decide which in my own mind. He had obviously no stomach for the trenches, but on the other hand he

showed no fear. It was the kind of passive courage I longed to fan into enthusiasm, but knew I never could. I am glad I had not the impertinence to try. Two or three weeks later, I found myself serving a delightfully gay and jaunty Guardsman, in whom I suddenly recognised my friend.

'Come back all right, then?' I could only say.

'Rather!' said he, with schoolboy gusto. He was another being; the trenches themselves had wrought the change. I would not put a V.C. past that butcher if he is still alive, or past any other tardy patriot for that matter. Patriotism is a ray of inner light, and may never even come to a glow of carnal courage; on the other hand, it is the greatest mistake to impute cowardice to the shirker. Selfishness is oftener the restraining power, insensibility oftener still. After all, even in the officer class, it was not everybody who could see that personal considerations ceased to exist on the day war broke out. This busy butcher had been a fine man all the time, and not unnaturally taken up with the price of sheep, the tricks of the weather, the wife and the little girls. May the float and the two horses yet be his to drive more furiously than of old!

A few nights later still, and the pretty ex-clerk was smiling through his collar of soft muffler across the counter. He, too, had made his tour without disaster, or as much discomfort as he feared, and so had his chum the whilom foreman. These reunions were always a delight to me, sometimes a profound reassurance and relief. But those first three jolly Riflemen had vanished from my ken, and I wish I knew their fate.

SUNDAY ON BOARD

I see from my diary it was on a Sunday night I found that memorable quartette so diversely employed in our Quiet Room. So, after all, there had been something to lead up to the most singular feature of the scene. Sunday is Sunday in a Y.M.C.A. hut, and in ours it was no more a day of rest than it is in any regular place of worship; for that is exactly what we were privileged to provide for a very famous Division whose headquarters were then in our immediate neighbourhood.

Overnight the orderlies would work late arranging the chairs church-fashion, moving the billiard-table, and preparing the platform for a succession of morning services. These might begin with a celebration of the Holy Communion at nine, to be followed by a C. of E. parade service at ten and one for mixed Nonconformists, or possibly for Presbyterians only, at eleven; the order might be reversed, and the opening celebration was not inevitable; but the preparations were the same for all denominations and all degrees of ceremonial.

In a secular sense the hut was closed all morning. But in our private precincts those Sabbaths were not so easy to observe. The free forenoon was too good a chance to count the week's takings, amounting in a busy canteen like ours to several thousand francs; this took even a quick hand all his time, what with the small foul notes that first defied the naked eye, and then fell to shreds

between the fingers; and often have I watched my gay young leader, his confidence ruffled by an alien frown, slaving like a miser between a cross-fire of stentorian hymns. For the cinema, ever our rival, was in similar request between the same hours; and we were lucky if the selfsame hymn, in different keys and stages, did not smite simultaneously upon either ear.

On a Sunday afternoon we opened at four instead of half-past, and drove a profane trade as merrily as in the week until the hut service at six-thirty. During service the counter was closed; and after service, in our hut, we drew a firm line at tea and biscuits for what was left of the working night.

Neither of ourselves being ordained of any denomination, we as a rule requisitioned one of the many ministers among the Y.M.C.A. workers in our district to preach the sermon and offer up the prayers: almost invariably he was the shepherd of some Nonconformist fold at home, and a speaker born or made. But the men themselves set matters going, congregating at the platform end and singing hymns – their favourite hymns – not many of them mine – for a good half-hour before the pastor was due to appear. Of course, only a proportion of those present joined in; but it was a surprising proportion; and the uncritical forbearance of those who did not take part used to impress me quite as much as the unflinching fervour of those who did. But then it is not too soon to say that in all my months in an Army area I never once saw or heard Religion, in any shape or form, flouted by look or word.

The hymns were always started by the same man, a spectacled N.C.O. in a Red Cross unit, with a personality worthy of his stripes. I think he must have been a street preacher before the war; at any rate he used to get leave to hold a service of his own on Tuesday evenings, and I have listened to his sermon more than once. Indeed, it was impossible not to listen, every rasping word of the uncompromising harangue being more than audible at our end of the hut, no matter what we were doing. The man had an astounding flow of spiritual invective, at due distance the very drum-fire of withering anathema, but sorry stuff of a familiar order at close range. It was impossible not to respect this red-hot gospeller, who knew neither fear nor doubt, nor the base art of mincing words; and he had a strong following among the men, who seemed to enjoy his onslaughts, whether they took them to heart or not. But I liked him better on a Sunday evening, when his fiery spirit was content to 'warm the stage' for some meek minister by a preliminary service of right hearty song.

But those ministers were wonders in their way; not a man of them so meek upon the platform, nor one but had the knack of fluent, pointed, and courageous speech. They spoke without notes, from the break of the platform, like tight-sleeved conjurors; and they spoke from their hearts to many that beat the faster for their words. In that congregation there were no loath members; only those who liked need sit and listen; the rest were free to follow their own devices, within certain necessary limitations. The counter, to be sure, had those green curtains

drawn across it for the nonce. But all at that end of the hut were welcome as ever to their game of draughts, their cigarettes and newspapers, even their murmur of conversation. It generally happened, however, that the murmur died away as the preacher warmed to his work, and the bulk of the address was followed in attentive silence by all present. I used to think this a greater than any pulpit triumph ever won; and when it was all over, and the closing hymn had been sung with redoubled fervour, a knot of friendly faces would waylay the minister on his passage up the hut.

And yet how much of his success was due to the sensitive response of these simple-hearted, uncomplaining travellers in the valley of Death! No work of man is easier to criticise than a sermon, no sort of criticism cheaper or maybe in poorer taste; and yet I have felt, with all envy of their gift and their sincerity, that even these powerful preachers were, many of them, missing their great opportunity, missing the obvious point. Morality was too much their watchword, Sin the too frequent burden of their eloquence. It is not as sinners that we should view the men who are fighting for us in the great war against international sin. They are soldiers of Christ if ever such drew sword; then let them contemplate the love of Christ, and its human reflex in their own heroic hearts, not the cleft in the hoof of all who walk this earth! That, and the grateful love we also bear them, who cannot fight ourselves, seem to me the gist of war-time Christianity: that, and the immortality of the soul they may be rendering up at any

moment for our sake and for His.

It is hateful to think of these great men in the light of their little sins. What thistledown to weigh against their noble sacrifice! Yet there are those who expatiate on soldiers' sins as though the same men had never committed any in their unregenerate civil state, before putting hand to the redemption of the world; who would charge every frailty to the war's account, as if vice had not flourished, to common knowledge and the despair of generations, in idyllic villages untouched by any previous war, and run like a poisoned vein through all the culture of our towns. The point is not that the worst has still to be eradicated out of poor human nature, but that the best as we know it now is better than the best we dared to dream in happier days.

Such little sins as they denounce, and ask to be forgiven in the sinner's name! Bad language, for one; as if the low thoughtless word should seriously belittle the high deliberate deed! The decencies of language let us by all manner of means observe, but as decencies, not as virtues without which a man shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Taste is the bed-rock of this matter, and what is harmless at one's own fireside might well empty a public hall and put the police in possession. To stigmatise mere coarseness of speech as a first-class sin is to defeat an admirable end by the unwitting importation of a false yet not unnatural glamour.

The thing does matter, because the modern soldier is less 'full of strange oaths' than of certain *façons de parler* which must not

be suffered to pass into the currency of the village ale-house after the war. They are base coin, very; but still the primary offence is against manners, not morals; and public opinion, not pulpit admonition, is the thing to put it down.

In a Y.M.C.A. hut the wise worker will not hear very much more than he is meant to hear; but there are times when only a coward or a fool would hold his own tongue, and that is when an ounce of tact is worth a ton of virtue. It is well to consider every minute what the men are going through, how entirely the refining influence of their womankind has passed out of their lives, and how noticeably far from impropriety are the thoughts that clothe themselves in this grotesque and hateful habit of speech.

Let me close a tender topic with the last word thereon, as spoken by a Canadian from Vimy Ridge, who came into my hut (months later, when I had one of my own) but slightly sober, yet more so than his friends, with whom remonstrance became imperative.

'I say! I say!' one had to call down from the counter. 'The language is getting pretty thick down there!'

'Beg pardon, sir. Very sorry,' said my least inebriated friend, at once; then, after a moment's thought – 'But the shells is pretty thick where we come from!'

It was a better answer than he knew.

CHRISTMAS UP THE LINE

(1917)

UNDER FIRE

Soon the shy wintry sun was wearing a veil of frosted silver. The eye of the moon was on us early in the afternoon, ever a little wider open and a degree colder in its stare. All one day our mud rang like an anvil to the tramp of rubicund customers in greatcoats and gloves; and the next day they came and went like figures on the film next-door, silent and outstanding upon a field of dazzling snow.

But behind the counter we had no such seasonable sights to cheer us; behind the counter, mugs washed overnight needed wrenching off their shelf, and three waistcoats were none too many. In our room, for all the stove that reddened like a schoolgirl, and all the stoking that we did last thing at night, no amount of sweaters, blankets, and miscellaneous wraps was excessive provision against the early morning. By dawn, which leant like lead against our canvas windows, and poked sticks of icy light through a dozen holes and crannies, the only unfrozen water in the hut was in the kitchen boiler and in my own hot-water bottle. I made no bones about this trusty friend; it hung all day on a conspicuous nail; and it did not prevent me from being the first up in the morning, any more than modesty shall deter me from trumpeting the fact. One of us had to get up to lay the stove and light the fire, and it was my chance of drawing approximately even with my brisk commander. No competing

with his invidious energy once he had taken the deck; but here was a march I could count on stealing while he slept the sleep of the young. Often I was about before the orderlies, and have seen the two rogues lying on their backs in the dim light of their kitchen, side by side like huge dirty children. As for me, blackened and bent double by my exertions, swaddled in fleece lining and other scratch accoutrements, no doubt I looked the lion grotesque of the party; but, by the time the wood crackled and the chimney drew, I too had my inner glow.

So we reached the shortest day; then came a break, and for me the Christmas outing of a lifetime.

The Y.M.C.A. in that sector had just started an outpost of free cheer in the support line. It was a new departure for the winter only, a kind of cocoa-kitchen in the trenches, and we were all very eager to take our turn as cooks. The post was being manned by relays of the workers in our area, one at a time and for a week apiece; but at Christmas there were to be substantial additions to the nightly offering. It was the obvious thing to suggest that extra help would be required, and to volunteer for the special duty. But one may jump at such a chance and yet feel a sneaking thrill of morbid apprehension, and yet again enjoy the whole thing the more for that very feeling. Such was my case as I lit the fire on the morning of the 21st of December, foolishly wondering whether I should ever light it again. By all accounts our pitch up the Line was none too sheltered in any sense, and the severity of the weather was not the least intimidating prospect. But for forty

mortal months I would have given my right eye to see trench life with my left; and I was still prepared to strike that bargain and think it cheap.

The man already on the spot was coming down to take me back with him: we met at our headquarters over the mid-day meal, by which time my romantic experience had begun. I had walked the ruined streets in a shrapnel helmet, endeavouring to look as though it belonged to me, and had worn a gas-mask long enough to hope I might never have to do so for dear life. The other man had been wearing his in a gas-alarm up the Line; he had also been missed by a sniper, coming down the trench that morning; and had much to say about a man who had not been missed, but had lain, awaiting burial, all the day before on the spot where we were to spend our Christmas … It was three o'clock and incipient twilight when we made a start.

Our little headquarters Ford 'bus took us the first three miles, over the snow of a very famous battle-field, not a whole year old in history, to the mouth of a valley planted with our guns. Alighting here we made as short work of that valley as appearances permitted, each with a shifty eye for the next shell-hole in case of need; there were plenty of them, including some extremely late models, but it was not our lot to see the collection enlarged. Neither had our own batteries anything to say over our heads; and presently the trenches received us in fair order, if somewhat over-heated. I speak for myself and that infernal fleece lining, which I had buttoned back into its proper place. It alone

precluded an indecent haste.

But in the trenches we could certainly afford to go slower, and I for one was not sorry. It was too wonderful to be in them in the flesh. They were almost just what I had always pictured them; a little narrower, perhaps; and the unbroken chain of duck-boards was a feature not definitely foreseen; and the printed sign-boards had not the expected air of a joke, might rather have been put up by order of the London County Council. But the extreme narrowness was a surprise, and indeed would have taken my breath away had I met my match in some places. An ordinary gaunt warrior caused me to lean hard against my side of the trench, and to apologise rather freely as he squeezed past; a file of them in leather jerkins, with snow on their toe-caps and a twinkle under their steel hat-brims, almost tempted me to take a short cut over the top. I wondered would I have got very far, or dropped straight back into the endless open grave of the communication trench.

Seen from afar, as I knew of old, that was exactly what the trenches looked like; but from the inside they appeared more solid and rather deeper than any grave dug for the dead. The whole thing put me more in mind of primitive ship-building – the great ribs leaning outwards – flat timbers in between – and over all sand-bags and sometimes wire-work with the precise effect of bulwarks and hammock-netting. Even the mouths of dug-outs were not unlike port-holes flush with the deck; and many a piquant glimpse we caught in passing, bits of faces lit by

cigarette-ends and half-sentences or snatches of sardonic song; then the trench would twist round a corner into solitude, as a country road shakes off a hamlet, and on we trudged through the thickening dusk. Once, where the sand-bags were lower than I had noticed, I thought some very small bird had chirped behind my head, until the other man turned his and smiled.

'Hear that?' he said. 'That was a bullet! It's just about where they sniped at *me* this morning.'

I shortened my stick, and crept the rest of the way like the oldest inhabitant of those trenches, as perhaps I was.

CASUALTIES

It was nearly dark when our journey ended at one of those sunken roads which make a name for themselves on all battle-fields, and duly complicate the Western Front. Sometimes they cut the trench as a level crossing does a street, and then it is not a bad rule to cross as though a train were coming. Sometimes it is the trench that intersects the sunken road; this happened here. We squeezed through a gap in the sand-bags, a gap exactly like a stile in a stone fence, and from our feet the bleak road rose with a wild effect into the wintry sunset.

It was a road of some breadth, but all crinkled and misshapen in its soiled bandage of frozen snow. Palpable shell-holes met a touchy eye for them on every side; one, as clean-cut as our present footprints, literally adjoined a little low sand-bagged shelter, of much the same dimensions as a blackfellow's gunyah in the bush. This inviting habitation served as annex to a small enough hut at least three times its size; the two cowered end to end against the sunken roadside, each roof a bit of bank-top in more than camouflage, with real grass doing its best to grow in real sods.

'No,' said the other man, 'only the second half of the hut's our hut. This first half's a gum-boot store. The sand-bagged hutch at the end of all things is where we sleep.'

The three floors were sunk considerably below the level of the road, and a sunken track of duck-boards outside the semi-

detached huts was like the bottom of a baby trench. We looked into our end; it was colder and darker than the open air, but cubes of packing-case and a capacious boiler took stark shape in the gloom.

'I should think we might almost start our fire,' said the other man. 'We daren't by daylight, on account of the smoke; we should have a shell on us in no time. As it is, we only get waifs and strays from their machine-guns; but one took the rim off a man's helmet, as neat as you could do it with a pair of shears, only last night out here on these duck-boards.'

Yet those duck-boards outside the hut were the next best cover to the hut itself; accordingly the men greatly preferred waiting about in the open road, which the said machine-guns could spray at pleasure on the chance of laying British dust. So I gathered from the other man: so I very soon saw for myself. Night had fallen, and at last we had lighted our boiler fire, with the help of a raw-boned orderly supplied by the battalion of Jocks then holding the front line. And the boiler fire had retaliated by smoking all three of us out of the hut.

This was an initial fiasco of each night I was there; to it I owe sights that I can still see as plain as the paper under my pen, and bits of dialogue and crashes of orchestral gun-fire, maddeningly impossible to reproduce. Are there no gramophone records of such things? If not, I make a present of the idea to those whom it officially concerns. They are as badly needed as any films, and might be more easily obtained.

The frosty moon was now nearly full, and a grey-mauve sky, wearing just the one transcendent jewel of light, as brilliant in its way as the dense blue of equatorial noon. Upon this noble slate the group of armed men, waiting about in the road above the duck-boards, was drawn in shining outline; silvered rifles slung across coppery leathern shoulders; earthenware mugs turned to silver goblets in their hands, and each tilted helmet itself a little fallen moon. A burst of gun-fire, and not a helmet turned; the rat-tat-tat of a machine-gun, but no shining shoulder twinkled with the tiniest shrug. And yet the devil's orchestra might have been tuning up at their feet, under the very stage they trod with culpable unconcern.

Two melodramatic little situations (as they seemed to me, but not to them) came about for our immediate benefit, and in appropriately quick succession as I remember them. A wounded Jock figured in each; neither was a serious case; the first one too light, it was feared, to score at all. The man did just come limping along our duck-boards, but only very slightly, though I rather think a comrade's arm played a fifth-wheel part in the proceedings. It was only a boot that had been sliced across the instep. A shoemaker's knife could not have made a cleaner job so far; but 'a bit graze on ma fut' was all the sufferer himself could claim, amid a murmur of sympathy that seemed exaggerated, ill as it became a civilian even to think so.

The other casualty was a palpable hit in the fore-arm. First aid had been applied, including an empty sand-bag as top

bandage, before the wounded man appeared with his escort in the moonlight; but now there was a perverse shortage of that very commiseration which had been lavished upon the man with the wounded boot. This was a real wound, 'a Blighty one' and its own reward: the man who could time matters to so cynical a nicety with regard to Christmas, and then only 'get it in the arrum,' which notoriously means a long time rather than a bad one, was obviously not a man to be pitied. He was a person to be plied with the driest brand of North British persiflage. Signs of grim envy did not spoil the joke, for there were those of as grim a magnanimity behind it all; and the pale lad himself, taking their nonsense in the best of part, yet shyly, as though they had a right to complain, and he only wished they could all have been wounded and sent home together, was their match in simple subtlety and hidden kindness. And between them all they were better worth seeing and hearing than the moonlight and the guns.

It is easy to make too much of a trifle that was not one to me, but in a sense my first casualty, almost a poignant experience. But there are no trifles in the trenches in the dead of winter; there is not enough happening; everything that does happen is magnified accordingly; and the one man hit on a quiet day is a greater celebrity than the last survivor of his platoon in the day of big things. The one man gets an audience, and the audience has time to think twice about him.

In the same way nothing casts a heavier gloom than an isolated death in action, such as the one which had occurred here only

the previous day. All ranks were still talking about the man who had lain unburied where his comrades were now laughing in the moonlight; detail upon detail I heard before the night was out, and all had the pathos of the isolated case, the vividness of a portrait as against a group. The man had been a Lewis gunner, and he had died flushed with the crowning success of his career. That was the consoling detail: in his last week on earth, in full view of friend and foe, he had brought off the kind of shot a whole battalion boasts about. His bird still lay on No-Man's Land, a jumble of wire and mangled planes; not the sight to sober a successful sportsman, and him further elated by the promise of special and immediate leave. No time for a lad of his mettle to weary of well-doing; and he knew of a sniper worth adding to his bag. The sniper, however, would seem to have known of him, and in the ensuing duel took special care of himself. Not so the swollen-hearted sportsman who was going on leave and meant earning it. Many shots had been exchanged without result; at last, unable to bear it any longer, our poor man had leapt upon the parapet, only to drop back like a stone, shot dead not by the other duellist but by a second sniper posted elsewhere for the purpose. And this tragically ordinary tragedy was all the talk that night over the mugs. Grim snatches linger. One quite sorrowful chum regretted the other's braces, buried with him and of all things the most useless in a grave, and he himself in need of a new pair. It did seem as though he might have taken them off the body, and with the flown spirit's hearty sanction.

They did not say where they had buried him, but our sunken roadside was not without its own wooden cross of older standing. It was the tiniest and flimsiest I ever saw, and yet it had stood through other days, when the road was in other hands; those other hands must have put it up. 'An Unknown British Hero of the R.F.A.' was all the legend they had left to endure with this ironical tenacity.

About midnight we came to an end of our water, supplied each morning by a working-party detailed for the job: with more water we might have done worse than keep open all night and kill the bitter day with sleep. As it was, we were soon creeping through a man-hole curtained by a frozen blanket into the corrugated core of the sand-bagged gunyah. It was as much as elbow-high down the middle of the span; the beds were side by side, so close together that we had to get in by the foot; and only for a wager would I have attempted to undress in the space remaining.

But not for any money on such a night! A particularly feeble oil-stove, but all we had to warm the hut by day, had been doing what it could for us here at the eleventh hour; but all it had done was to stud the roof with beads of moisture and draw the damp out of the blankets. We got between them in everything except our boots; even trench-coats were not discarded, nor fleece linings any longer to be despised. The other man was soon asleep. But I had provided myself with appropriate reading, and for some time burnt a candle to old James Grant and *The Romance of War*.

There are those who delight in declaring there is no romance in this war; there was enough for me that night. Not many inches from my side the nearest shell had burst, not many days ago by some miracle without blowing in a sand-bag; not many inches from my head, and perhaps no deeper in the earth, lay the skull of our 'unknown hero of the R.F.A.' I for one did not sleep the worse for his honoured company, or for our common lullaby the guns.

AN INTERRUPTED LUNCH

But there was another side to our life up the line, thanks to the regal hospitality of Battalion Headquarters. Thither we were bidden to all meals, and there we presented ourselves with feverish punctuality at least three times a day.

It was only about a minute's walk along the trench, past more dug-outs lit by cigarette-ends, past a trench store-cupboard quietly labelled BOMBS, and a sentry in a sand-bagged *cul-de-sac*. The door at which we knocked was no more imposing than our own, the sanctuary within no roomier, but like the deck-house of a well-appointed yacht after a tramp's forecastle. Art-green walls and fixed settees, a narrow table all spotless napery and sparkling glass, forks and spoons as brilliant as a wedding-present, all these were there or I have dreamt them. I would even swear to flowers on the table, if it were a case of swearing one way or other. But what they gave us to eat, with two exceptions, I cannot in the least remember; it was immaterial in that atmosphere and company, though I recall the other man's bated breathings on the point. My two exceptions were porridge at breakfast and scones at tea; both were as authentic as the mess-waiter's speech; and it would not have surprised me if the porridge had been followed by trout from the burn, so much was that part of the Line just then a part of Scotland.

It was a genial atmosphere in more ways than one. Always on

coming in one's spectacles turned to ground-glass and one's outdoor harness to melting lead. The heat came up an open stairway from the bowels of the earth, as did the chimney which I painfully mistook for a hand-rail the first night, when the Colonel was kind enough to take me down below. It was the first deep dug-out I had seen in working order, and it seemed to me deliciously safe and snug; the officers' berths in fascinating tiers, again as on shipboard, all but the Colonel's own, by itself at one end. It made me very jealous, yet rather proud, when I thought of our freezing lair upon the sunken road.

Then, before we went, he took me up to an O.P. on top of all. I think we climbed up to it out of the *cul-de-sac*, and I know I cowered behind a chunk of parapet; but what I remember best is the zig-zag labyrinth in the foreground, that unending open grave with upturned earth complete, yet quiet as any that ever was filled in; and then the wide sweep of moonlit snow, enemy country nearly all, but at the moment still and peaceful as an arctic floe. Our own trenches the only solid signs of war, like the properties in front of a panorama; not a shot or a sound to give the rest more substance than a painted back-cloth. It was one of those dead pauses that occur on all but the noisiest nights, and make the whole war nowhere more unreal than on the battle-field.

But when the very next day was at its quietest we had just the opposite experience. We were sitting at luncheon in this friendly mess, and the guns might have been a thousand miles away until they struck up all at once, like a musical-box in the middle of

a tune. Their guns, this time; but you would not have thought it from the faces round the table. One or two exchanged glances; a lifted eyebrow was answered by a smile; but the conversation went on just the same until the officer nearest the door withdrew detachedly. New subject no longer avoidable, but treated with becoming levity. Not a bombardment, just a Strafe, we gathered; it might have been with blank shell, had we not heard them bursting. Exit another officer; enter man from below. Something like telegram in his hand: retaliation requested by front line. 'Put it through to Brigade.' Further retirements from board; less noise for moment. New sound: enemy 'plane over us, seeing what they've done. New row next door: our machine-guns on enemy 'plane! New note in distance: retaliation to esteemed order… Other man and I alone at table, dying to go out and see fun, but obviously not our place. And then in a minute it is all over, not quite as quickly as it began, but getting on that way. Strafe stopped: 'plane buzzing away again: machine-guns giving it up as a bad job: cheery return of Belisarii, in the order of their going, Colonel last and cheeriest of all.

'Had my hair parted by a whizz-bang,' says he, 'up in that O.P. we were in last night.'

And, as he replenished a modest cup, the curtain might have fallen on the only line I remember in the whole impromptu piece, which could not have played quicker as a music-hall sketch, or held a packed audience more entranced than the two civilian supers who had the luck to be on the stage.

But we had to pay for our entertainment; for although it turned out to have been an absolutely bloodless Strafe, yet a portion of our parapet had been blown in, which made it inexpedient for us to go round the front line that afternoon, as previously arranged by our indulgent hosts. In the evening they were going into reserve, and another famous Regiment coming to 'take over.' The new-comers, however, were just as good to us in their turn; and the new Colonel so kind as to take me round himself on Christmas morning.

CHRISTMAS DAY

The tiny hut is an abode of darkness made visible by a single candle, mounted in its own grease in the worst available position for giving light, lest the opening of the door cast the faintest beam into the sunken road outside. On the shelf flush with the door glimmer parental urns with a large family of condensed-milk tins, opened and unopened, full and empty; packing-cases in similar stages litter the duck-board flooring, or pile it wall-high in the background; trench-coats, gas-masks, haversacks and helmets hang from nails or repose on a ledge of the inner wall, which is sunken roadside naked and unashamed. Two weary figures cower over the boiler fire; they are the other man and yet another who has come up for the night. A third person, who may look more like me than I feel like him, hovers behind them, smoking and peering at his watch. It is the last few minutes of Christmas Eve, and for a long hour there has been little or nothing doing. Earlier in the evening, from seven or so onwards, there seemed no end to the queue of armed men, calling for their mug of cocoa and their packet of biscuits, either singly, each for himself, or with dixies and sand-bags to be filled for comrades on duty in the trenches.

The quiet has been broken only by the sibilant song of the boiler, by desultory conversation and bursts of gunfire as spasmodic and inconsequent. Often a machine-gun has beaten a

brief but furious tattoo on the doors of darkness; but now come clogged and ponderous footfalls – mud to mud on the duck-boards leading from the communication trench – and a chit is handed in from the outer moonlight.

'24 – 12 – 17.
'To Y.M.C.A. Canteen,
' – Avenue.

'Dear Sirs, – I will be much obliged if you will supply the bearer with hot cocoa (sufficient for 90 men) which I understand you are good enough to issue to units in this line. The party are taking 2 hot-food containers for the purpose.
'Thanking you in anticipation,
'I am, yours faithfully,
'(Illegible),
'O/C B Co.,
'1/8 (Undesirable).'

Torpid trio are busy men once more. Not enough cocoa ready-made for ninety; fresh brew under way in fewer seconds than it takes to state the fact. Third person already anchored beside open packing-case, enormous sand-bag gaping between his knees, little sealed packets flying through his hands from box to bag in twins and triplets. By now it is Christmas morning; cakes and cigarettes are forthwith added to statutory biscuits, and a sack is what is wanted. Third person makes shift with second sand-bag, which having filled, he leaves his colleagues working like benevolent fiends in the steam of fragrant cauldrons, and joins

the group outside among the shell-holes.

They are consuming interim dividends of the nightly fare, as they stand about in steely silhouette against the shrouded moonlight. The scene is not quite so picturesque as it was last night, when no star of heaven could live in the light of the frosty moon and every helmet was a shining halo; to-night the only twinkle to be seen is under a helmet's rim.

'Merry Christmas, sir, an' many of 'em,' says a Tyneside voice, getting in the first shot of a severe bombardment. The third person retaliates with appropriate spirit; the interchange could not have been franker or heartier in the days of actual peace on earth and apparent good-will among men. But here they both are for a little space this Christmas morning. Cannon may drum it in with thunderous irony, and some corner-man behind a machine-gun oblige with what sounds exactly like a solo on the bones, but here in the midst of those familiar alarms the Spirit of Christmas is abroad on the battle-field. He may be frightened away – or become a casualty – at any moment. One lucky flourish with the bones, one more addition to these sharp-edged shell-holes, and how many of the party would have a groan left in him? One of them groans in spirit as he thinks, never so vividly, of countless groups as full of gay vitality as this one, blown out of existence in a blinding flash. But his hardy friends are above such morbid imaginings; the cold appears to be their only trouble, and of it they make light enough as they stamp their feet. Some are sea-booted in sand-bags, and what with their jerkins and low, round

helmets, look more like a watch in oilskins and sou'-westers than a party of Infantry.

'We nevaw died o' wintaw yet,' says the Tynesider. 'It takes a lot to kill an old soljaw.' But he owns he was a shipyard hand before the war; and not one of them was in the Army.

All hope it is the last Christmas of the war, but the Tyneside prognostication of 'anothaw ten yeaws' is received with perfect equanimity. There is general agreement, too, when the same oracle dismisses the latest peace offer as 'blooff.' But it must be confessed that articulate ardour is slightly damped until somebody starts a subject a great deal nearer home.

'Who'd have thought that we should live to see a Y.M. in the support line!'

Flattering echoes from entire group.

'Do you remember that chap who kept us all awake in barracks, talking of it?'

'I nevaw believed him. I thought it was a myth, sir. And nothing to pay an' all! It must be costing the Y.M. a canny bit o' money, sir?'

The third person – who has been hovering on the verge of the inveterate first – only commits himself to the statement that he helped to give away 785 cups of cocoa and packets of biscuits the night before. Rapid calculations ensue. 'Why, that must be nearly ten pounds a night, sir?'

'Something like that.'

'Heaw that, Corporal! An' now it's cigarettes an' cakes an' all!'

But the containers are ready, lids screwed down upon their steaming contents. Strong arms hoist them upon stronger backs; the plethoric sand-bags are shouldered with still less ado, and off go the party into the slate-coloured night, off through the communication trenches into the firing-line they are to hold for England until the twelve hundred and thirty-ninth daybreak of the war.

Peering after them with wistful glasses, the third person relapses altogether into the first. Take away the odd two hundred, and for a thousand days and nights my heart has been where their muffled feet will be treading in another minute. Yes; a round thousand must be almost the exact length of days since I first came out here in the spirit, and to stay. But never till this year did I seriously dream of following in the flesh, or till this moment feel the front line like a ball at my feet. Even the day before yesterday the arrangement was not so definite as it is to-day; it was not the Colonel himself who was to have taken us round by special favour and appointment. Yet how easily, had the Strafe happened half-an-hour later than it did, might we not have come in for it, perhaps at the very place where the parapet was blown down! It would have been a wonderful experience, especially as there were no casualties. Will anything of the kind happen to-day? I have a feeling that something may; but then I have had that feeling every sentient moment up the Line. And nothing that can come can come amiss; that is another of my feelings here, if not the strongest of them all. This Christmas morning it rings almost

like a carol in the heart, almost like a peal of Christmas bells – jangled indeed by the heart's own bitter flaws, and yet piercing sweet as Life itself.

But for all my elderly civilian excitement, before a risk too tiny to enter a young fighting head at all, sleep does not fail me on a new couch of my own construction. The sand-bagged lair was none too dry in the late hard frost; in the unseasonable thaw that seems to be setting in, it is no place for crabbed age. Youth is welcome to the two beds with the water now standing on their indiarubber sheets, and youth seems quite honestly to prefer them; so I make mine on the biscuit-boxes in the shed, turn my toes to the still glowing coke in the boiler fire, press my soles to the hot-water bottle which has distinguished itself by freezing during the day, and huddle down as usual in all the indoor and outdoor garments I have with me, under my share of the blankets, which I have been drying assiduously every evening. *The Romance of War* performs its nightly unromantic office … and I have had many a worse night upon a spring-mattress.

Colonel finished breakfast when I reach the mess; ready for me by the time I have had mine. We glove and muffle ourselves, adjust gas-masks 'at the ready,' and sally forth on his common round and my high adventure, tapping the still slippery duck-boards with our sticks.

A colourless morning, neither freezing nor thawing; visibility probably low, luminosity certainly mediocre; in fact, typical Christmas weather of the modern realistic school, as against the

Christmas Number weather of the last ten days. Yet it is the Christmas Number atmosphere that haunts me as an aura the more tenacious for its utter absence on all sides: the sprig of holly in the cake, the presents on the table, the joys of parent and child – never more at one – and blinding visions in both capacities, down to that last war-time Christmas dinner at the Carlton … such are the sights that await me after all in the front-line trench! I have dreamt of it for years, yet now that I am here it is of the dead years I dream, or of this Christmas morning anywhere but where it is one's beatitude to be spending it.

Not that I fail to see a good deal of what is before my eyes at last; but never for many yards is the trench that we are in the only one I seem to see, and a comparison between the two is irresistible. Perhaps the width and solidity of this trench would impress me less if it were not all so different from Belgium as I all but knew it in 1915; the machine-gunners at their posts in the deep bays, like shepherds sheltering behind a wall, yet somehow able to see through the wall, would stand out less if the fire-step also were manned in the old way. But now trenches are held more by machinery and by fewer men, at any rate, in daytime; and at night men evidently do not sleep so near their work as then they did; at least, I look in vain for dug-outs in this sector of the front line. And I still look in vain for trouble, though all the time I feel all sorts of possibilities impending: a strange mixture of curiosity and dread it is – ardent curiosity, and quite pleasurable dread – that weaves itself into the warp of all inward

and outward impressions whatsoever: can it be peculiar to self-ridden civilians, or are there really brave men like the Colonel in front of me (with a bar to his D.S.O.) who have undergone similar sensations at their baptism of fire?

It is not exactly mine; nothing comes anything like so near me as that sniper's bullet on the way up the other day; but little black bursts do keep occurring high overhead, where one of our airmen is playing peep among the clouds. The fragments must be falling somewhere in the neighbourhood; and a more alarming kind of shell has just burst on the high ground between our parados and the support line. Not very close – I must have been listening to something else – but the Colonel points out the smoking place with his stick and his quiet smile. His smile is part of him, very quiet and contained, full of easy-going power, and a kindness incapable of condescension. He might be my country-house host pointing out the excellence of his crop, but his touch is lighter and I am not expected to admire. He is, of all soldiers I ever met, just the one I would choose to be alongside if I had to be hit. I don't believe his face would alter very much, and I should be dying not to alter it more than I could help.

But, in spite of all interior preparation, it is not to be. He has given me a glimpse of No-Man's Land, not through a periscope but in a piece of ordinary looking-glass; we are nearing the damaged place where his presence is required and mine emphatically is not. Not that he says anything of the sort, but I see it in his kindly smile as he hands me over to his runner

for safe-conduct to the place from whence I came. Still as much disappointed as relieved, as though a definite excitement had been denied to me, I turned and went with equal reluctance and alacrity.

'The bravest officer in the British Army!' was the runner's testimony to our friend. I have heard the honest words before, but this hero-worshipper had chapter and verse for his creed: 'Six times he has been wounded in this war, and never yet gone back to Blighty for a wound!'

I had not noticed the six gold stripes – if any – but it is not everybody who wears his full allowance. And if ever I met a man who cared less than most brave men about all such things, I believe I said good-bye to him last Christmas Day.

We were to meet again in the evening; in the meantime I was to have my Christmas dinner with the other Colonel and his merry men, now in reserve. I found them in an ex-Hun dug-out, more like a forecastle than the other headquarters; everything underground, and the bunks ranged round the board; but there was the same sheen on the table-cloth, the same glitter of glass and plate, the same good cheer and a turkey worthy of the day, and a ham worthy of the turkey, and a plum-pudding worthy of them both. It is not for the guest of a mess to say grace in public; but Christmas dinner in the trenches is a case apart. As the school tag might have had it, *non cuivis civi talia contingunt*.

There were crackers, too, I suddenly remember, and the old idiotic paper caps and mottoes, and Christmas cards wherever

one went. In the new legions there is nearly always some cunning hand to supply the unit with a topical Christmas card: one of our two Battalions had a beauty, and even the Y.M.C.A. made bold to circulate an artistic apotheosis of our quarters on the sunken road. But those are not the Christmas cards I still preserve; my ill-gotten souvenirs are typewritten scraps on typewriting-paper, unillustrated, but all the more to the point: 'Best wishes for Xmas and Good Luck in 1918, from the Brigadier and Staff, – th Infantry Brigade.' – 'Christmas Greetings and All Good Luck from – th Infantry Brigade Headquarters.' – 'Christmas Greetings and Good Luck from – th Divisional Artillery.' I must say this kind appealed to me, though I sent away a good many of the more ambitious variety. In neither was there any conventional nonsense about a 'happy' or even a 'merry' Christmas; and that, in view of the well-known perversity of the Comic Spirit, may have been one reason why so much merriment accrued. Nor did the contrast between unswerving ceremonial and a sardonic simplicity, as shown in this matter of the Christmas cards, begin or end there; for while I had followed crystal and fine table-linen into reserve for my Christmas dinner, the hospitable board behind the front line was now spread with newspapers, and we drank both our whisky-and-soda and our coffee out of the same enamelled cup.

The Colonel who had taken me into the front line after breakfast was not at dinner that night; for all his wounds he had gone down with common influenza, and I was desolated. It was my last chance of thanking him, as the other man and I were

leaving in the early morning. All day I had been thinking of all that I had seen, and of all I had but foreseen, though so vividly that I felt more and more as though I had actually had some definite escape; besides, the things I had heard about him after we parted made me covet the honour of shaking hands once more with so very brave a man. I had my wish. In the middle of dinner a servant emerged from below to say: 'The Colonel would like to see the Y.M.C.A. officer before he went.'

I can see him still, as I found him, hot and coughing on the bunk in the corner by itself. 'I thought you would be interested to hear,' said he, 'that the very minute you left me this morning a rum-jar burst on the parados just behind me. You know how I wear my helmet, with the strap behind? It blew it off.'

So my escape had been fairly definite after all, and the thing I was so ready for had really happened 'the very minute' my back was turned! But that, unhappily, is not the whole coincidence. Five months later it was written of 'this good and gallant leader' that 'while inspecting his battalion in the trenches he was struck by a fragment of shell from a trench mortar (i.e. a rum-jar) and killed instantaneously.' My parenthesis; the rest from *The Times* notice, which also bears out the story of the six wounds, except that they were seven, and four of them earned ('with an immediate award of the D.S.O.') on a single occasion. There is more in the notice that I should like to quote, more still that I could say even on the strength of that one morning's work; but who am I to praise so grand a man? I only know that I shall never

see another Christmas without seeing that front-line trench, and a quiet, dark man in the pride and prime of perfect soldierhood, self-saddled with an old camp-follower who felt as a child beside him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.