

Case Carleton Britton

**Stories from the Trenches:
Humorous and Lively Doings
of Our 'Boys Over...**



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Содержание

THE MAN WHO “CAME BACK”	5
FRANCO-YANKO ROMANCES	9
TRENCH SUPERSTITIONS	14
IN THE TRAIL OF THE HUN	16
WHEN “ACE” LUFBERY BAGGED NO. 13	21
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	22

Carleton B. Case

Stories from the Trenches: Humorous and Lively Doings of Our 'Boys Over There'

THE MAN WHO “CAME BACK”

ONE of the strangest of the many personal romances which the war has brought is the tale of a man who, dismissed from the British Army by court martial, redeemed himself through service with that most heterogeneous of organizations, the French Foreign Legion. His name was John F. Elkington, and he had held an honored post for more than thirty years. Then, just as his regiment, in the closing months of 1914, was going into the fighting on the Western front, he was cashiered for an unrevealed error and deprived of the opportunity to serve his country.

Heavy with disgrace, he disappeared, and for a long time no one knew what had become of him. Some even went so far as to surmise that he had committed suicide, until finally he turned up as an enlisted soldier in the Foreign Legion. In their ranks he went into the conflict to redeem himself. Today, says the *New York Herald*, he is back in England. He will never fight again, for he has practically lost the use of his knees from wounds. But he is perhaps the happiest man in England, and the account tells why, explaining:

Pinned on his breast are two of the coveted honors of France – the Military Medal and the Military Cross – but most valued possession of all is a bit of paper which obliterates the errors of the past – a proclamation from the official London *Gazette* announcing that the King has “graciously approved the reinstatement of John Ford Elkington in the rank of lieutenant-colonel, with his previous seniority, in consequence of his gallant conduct while serving in the ranks of the Foreign Legion of the French Army.”

Not only has Colonel Elkington been restored to the Army, but he has been reappointed in his old regiment, the Royal Warwickshires, in which his father served before him.

In the same London *Gazette*, at the end of October, 1914, had appeared the crushing announcement that Elkington had been cashiered by sentence of general court martial. What his error was did not appear at the time, and has not been alluded to in his returned hour of honor. It was a court martial at the front at a time when the first rush of war was engulfing Europe and little time could be wasted upon an incident of that sort. The charge, it is now stated, did not reflect in any way upon the officer's personal courage.

But with fallen fortunes he passed quietly out of the Army and enlisted in the Legion – that corps where thousands of brave but broken men have found a shelter, and now and then an opportunity to make themselves whole again.

Colonel Elkington did not pass unscathed through fire. His fighting days are ended. His knees are shattered and he walks heavily upon two sticks.

“They are just fragments from France,” he said of those wounded knees, and smiled in happy reminiscence of all they meant.

“It is wonderful to feel,” said Colonel Elkington, “that once again I have the confidence of my King and my country. I am afraid my career in the field is ended, but I must not complain.”

Colonel Elkington made no attempt to cloak his name or his former Army service when he entered the ranks of the Legion.

“Why shouldn't I be a private?” he asked. “It is an honor for any man to serve in the ranks of that famous corps. Like many of the other boys, I had a debt to pay. Now it is paid.”

The press of London is unanimous in welcoming the old soldier back into his former rank. One of them, *The Evening Standard*, contains the account of how he went about enlisting for France when he saw he would best leave London. It is written by a personal friend of Colonel Elkington, with all the vividness and sympathy of an actual observer of the incidents detailed. We are told:

“Late in October, 1914, I met him, his Army career apparently ruined. He had told the truth, which told against him; but in the moment when many men would have sunk, broken and despairing, he bore himself as he was and as he is today, a very gallant gentleman. He had been cashiered and dismissed from the service for conduct which, in the judgment of the court martial, rendered him unfit and incapable of serving his sovereign in the future in any military capacity. The *London Gazette* came out on October 14, 1914, recording the fact, and it became known to his many friends. For over thirty years he had served, and for distinguished service wore the Queen’s medal with four clasps after the Boer War. He went to France with the Royal Warwickshire Regiment at the outbreak of this conflict. His chance had come after twenty-eight years.”

During the first terrible two months he had done splendid work. A moment sufficient to try the discretion of any officer arrived. He made his mistake. He told his story to the general court martial. He vanished – home; and the *London Gazette* had the following War-Office announcement:

“Royal Warwickshire Regiment. – Lieutenant-Colonel John F. Elkington is cashiered by sentence of a general court martial. Dated September 14, 1914.”

He recognized at once, as he sat with me, what this meant. We chatted about various projects, and at last he said, “There is still the Foreign Legion. What do you say?”

Being acquainted with it, I told him what I knew; how it was the “refuge” for men of broken reputations; how it contained Italians, Germans, Englishmen, Russians, and others who had broken or shattered careers; the way to set about joining it by going to the recruiting office at – ; how the only requirement was physical fitness; that no questions would be asked; that I doubted if he would like all his comrades; that the discipline was very severe; that he might be sent to Algiers; that he would find all kinds of men in this flotsam – men of education and culture, perhaps scoundrels and blackguards as well; but he would soon discover perfect discipline.

Now for a man of his age to smile as he did, to set out on the bottom rung of the ladder as a ranker in a strange army, among strangers, leaving all behind him that he held dear, was a great act of moral courage. We heard of him at intervals, but such messages as dribbled through to his friends were laconic. We heard also he had been at this place and that, and that he was well and apparently doing well. That he had been repeatedly in serious action of recent months we also knew, and then came the news that he had won the coveted *Médaille Militaire* – and more, that it was for gallant service. A curious distinction it is in some ways. Any meritorious service may win it; but not all ranks can get it. A *generalissimo* like General Joffre or Sir Douglas Haig may wear it for high strategy and tactics, and a non-commissioned officer or private may win and wear it for gallantry or other distinction. But no officer below a *generalissimo* can gain it. This distinction Elkington won. We all felt he had made good in the Legion, where death is near at all times, and we waited.

Today’s *Gazette* announcement has given all who knew him the greatest pleasure. He has told none of them for what particular act he received the coveted medal – just like Jack Elkington’s modesty.

But, as soon as he arrived home in England, the interviewers went after him hot and heavy. He found it all very boresome, for, now that the affair was over, he could see no use in talking about it to everybody. A reporter for *The Daily Chronicle*, however, managed to get what is probably the most satisfactory interview with him and one which shows to best advantage the peculiar psychology of this man who has experienced so many different sides of life. The interviewer, in telling of their conversation, portrays the Colonel as saying:

“Complaint? Good Lord, no! The whole thing was my own fault. I got what I deserved, and I had no kick against anyone. It was just ‘Carry on!’”

Brave words from a brave man – a man who has proved his bravery and worth in what surely were as heartrending circumstances as ever any man had to face. My first sight of the Man Who Has Made Good was as he descended the stairs, painfully and with the aid of two sticks, into the hall of his lovely old home by the river at Pangbourne. It is a house which the great Warren Hastings once called home also.

Very genial, very content, I found the man whose name today is on everyone's lips; but very reticent also, with the reticence natural to the brave man who has achieved his aim and, having achieved it, does not wish it talked of.

“And now,” I suggested, “you have again got what you deserve?”

Colonel Elkington drew a long breath. “I hope so,” he said, at length, very quietly. “I have got my name back again, I hope cleared. That is what a man would care for most, isn't it?”

“There is always a place in the Foreign Legion for someone who is down in the world,” he told me. “Directly after the court martial, when the result appeared in the papers, I said I must do something; that I could not sit at home doing nothing, and that as I could not serve England I would serve France. Yes, I did offer my services again to England, but it is military law that no man who has been cashiered can be employed again for the King while the sentence stands. So there was nothing for it but the Foreign Legion – that home for the fallen man.”

Of that strange and famous corps Colonel Elkington cannot speak without a glint of pride in his keen blue eyes. Splendid men, the best in the world, he calls them, “and every one was as kind as possible to me.” Many there were who had become legionaries because they, too, had failed elsewhere, “lost dogs like myself,” the Colonel called them; but the majority of the men with whom he served were there because there was fighting to be done, because fighting was second nature to them, and because there was a cause to be fought for. The officers he describes as the “nicest fellows in the world and splendid leaders.”

When Colonel Elkington first joined there were many Englishmen included in its ranks, but most of these subsequently transferred to British regiments. He enlisted in his own name, but none knew his story, and often he was questioned as to his reason for not transferring – “and I had to pitch them the tale.”

He kept away from British soldiers as much as possible, “but one day someone shouted my name. I remember I was just about to wash in a stream when a staff motor drove by and an officer waved his hand and called out. But I pretended not to hear and turned away...”

“I don't think that the men in the Legion fear anything,” he said. “I never saw such men, and I think in the attack at Champaigne they were perfectly wonderful. I never saw such a cool lot in my life as when they went forward to face the German fire then. It was a great fight; they were all out for blood, and, though they were almost cut up there, they got the German trenches.”

The time he was recognized, as detailed above, was the only one. At no other time did any of his comrades suspect his identity, or else, if they did, they were consideration itself in keeping it to themselves. Of this recognition and some of his subsequent experiences, the London *Times* remarks, speaking of its own interview with him:

It was the only voice from the past that came to him, and he took it as such. A few minutes afterward he was stepping it out heel and toe along the dusty road, a private in the Legion.

Shot in the leg, Colonel Elkington spent ten months in hospital and eight months on his back. This was in the Hôpital Civil at Grenoble. He could not say enough for the wonderful treatment that was given him there. They fought to save his life, and when they had won that fight, they started to save his leg from amputation. The head of the hospital was a Major Termier, a splendid surgeon, and he operated eight times and finally succeeded in saving the damaged limb. When he was first in hospital neither the patients nor any of the hospital staff knew what he was or what he had done. Elkington himself got an inkling of his good fortune at Christmas when he heard of his recommendation for the *Croix de Guerre*.

“Perhaps that helped me to get better,” he said. “The medals are over there on the mantelpiece.” I went over to where there were two glass cases hanging on the wall. “No, not those; those are my father’s and my grandfather’s.” He showed me the medals, and on the ribbon of the cross there was the little bronze palm-branch which doubles the worth of the medal.

When he was wounded Dr. Wheeler gave him a stiff dose of laudanum, but he lay for thirteen hours until he saw a French patrol passing. He was then 100 yards short of the German second line of trenches, for this was in the Champagne Battle, on September 28, when the French made a magnificent advance.

It was difficult to get Colonel Elkington to talk about himself. As his wife says, he has a horror of advertisement, and a photographer who ambushed him outside his own lodge-gates yesterday made him feel more nervous than when he was charging for the machine gun that wounded him. To say he was happy would be to write a platitude. He is the happiest man in England. He is now recuperating and receiving treatment, and he hopes that he will soon be able to walk more than the 100 yards that taxes his strength to the utmost at present.

FOUR TO THE GOOD

In times of peace Smith might have been an author who had drifted into some useful occupation, such as that of a blacksmith, but just now he is cook to the Blankshire officers’ mess. Smith sent Murphy into the village to bring home some chickens ordered for the mess.

“Murphy,” said Smith, the next day, “when you fetch me chickens again, see that they are fastened up properly. That lot you fetched yesterday all got loose, and though I scoured the village I only managed to secure ten of them.”

“Sh!” said Murphy. “I only brought six.”

FRANCO-YANKO ROMANCES

THE story is told of a British “Tommy” who could not make up his mind whether to acquire a farm or a village store, by marriage, “somewhere in France.” He could have either, but not both. Dispatches say that the banns have already been read for some of our “Sammies,” and when the war is over France will have some sturdy Yankee citizens. Difference of language seems to form no bar; in fact, the kindly efforts of each to learn the language of the other acts as an aid. It must be said that the British, so far, have rather the best of it. They have beaten the Yankees to the altar of Hymen, but they had the field to themselves for some time. By the end of the war the Americans may have caught up, for love and war have always walked hand in hand with Uncle Sam’s boys. Nevertheless the British have a big start, for Judson C. Welliver, writing to the New York *Sun* from Paris, says that in Calais hundreds of young English mechanics have married French girls. The writer tells of being accosted by a young man from “the States” at the corner of the Avenue de l’Opéra and “one of those funny little crooked streets that run into it.” Breezily the American introduced himself and said:

“Say, do you happen to know a little caffy right around here called the – the – blame it, I can’t even remember what that sign looked like it was trying to spell.”

I admitted that the description was a trifle too vague to fit into my geographic scheme of Paris.

“Because,” he went on, “there’s a girl there that talks United States, and she’s been waiting on me lately. I get all the best of everything there and don’t eat anywhere else. But this morning I took a walk and coming from a new direction I can’t locate the place. I promised her I’d be in for breakfast this morning.”

“Something nifty?” I ventured, being willing to encourage that line of conversation. Whereat he plainly bridled:

“She’s a nice girl,” he said; “family were real people before the war. Learned to talk United States in England; went to school there awhile. Why, she wouldn’t let me walk home with her last night, but said maybe she would tonight.”

There isn’t anybody quite so adaptable as the young Frenchwoman. Only in the last few months has Paris seen any considerable number of English-speaking soldiers, because earlier in the war the British military authorities kept their men pretty religiously away from the alleged “temptations” of the gay capital. Later they discovered that Paris was rather a better place than London for the men to go.

So the French girls, in shops and cafés, have been learning English recently at an astounding rate. They began the study because of the English invasion; they have continued it with increased zeal because since the Americans have been coming it has been profitable.

To be able to say “Atta boy!” in prompt and sympathetic response to “Ham and eggs” is worth 50 centimes at the lowest. The capacity to manage a little casual conversation and give a direction on the street is certain to draw a franc.

Besides, there aren’t going to be so many men left, after the war, in France!

Mademoiselle, figuring that there are a couple of million Britishers in the country and a million or maybe two of Americans coming, has her own views about the prospect that the next generation Frenchwomen may be old maids.

In Calais there is a big industrial establishment to which the British military authorities have brought great numbers of skilled mechanics to make repairs to machinery, reconstruct the outworn war-gear, tinker obstreperous motor-vehicles, and, in short, keep the whole machinery and construction side of the war going. Most of the mechanics who were sent there were young men.

Calais testifies to the ability of the Frenchwomen to make the most of their attractions. English officers tell me that hundreds of young Englishmen settled in Calais “for the duration” have married French girls and settled into homes. They intend, in a large proportion of cases, to remain there, too.

The same thing is going on in Boulogne, which is to all intents and purposes nowadays as much an English as a French port. Everywhere English is spoken and by nobody is it learned so quickly as by the young women.

Frenchwomen have always had the reputation of making themselves agreeable to visiting men, but one is quite astonished to learn the number of Englishmen who married Frenchwomen even before the war. The balance is a little imperfect, for the records show that there are not nearly as many Frenchmen marrying English girls. But, says the writer in the *Sun*, a new generation of girls of marriageable age has arrived with the war, and:

Not only in the military, industrial, and naval base towns are the British marrying these Frenchwomen, but even in the country nearer the front. There are incipient romances afoot behind every mile of the trench-line.

Two related changes in French life are coming with the war which make these international marriages easier. Both relate to the *dot* [dowry] system. On the one side there are many French girls who have lost their *dots* and have small prospect of reacquiring the marriage portion. To live in these strenuous times is about all they can hope for. For these the free-handed Americans, Canadians, and Australians look like good prospects for a well-to-do marriage.

Even the British Tommy, though he enjoys no such income as the Americans and colonials, is nevertheless quite likely to have a bit of private income from the folks “back in Blighty” to supplement the meager pay he draws. The portionless French maid sees in these prosperous young men who have come to fight for her country not only the saviors of the nation, but a possibility of emancipation from the *dot* system that has broken down in these times.

On the other side, there are more than a few young women in France who must be rated “good catches” to-day, though their *dots* would have been unimportant before the war. A girl who has inherited the little property of her family, because father and brothers all lie beneath the white crosses along the Marne, not infrequently finds herself possessed of a little fortune she could never have expected under other conditions. Many of these, likewise, bereft of sweethearts as well as relatives, have been married to English and colonial soldiers or workmen; and pretty soon we will be learning that their partiality for America – for there is such a partiality, and it is a decided one – will be responsible for many alliances in that direction.

How it will all work out in the end is only to be guessed at as yet. The British officers who have been observing these Anglo-French romances for a long time assert that the British Tommy who weds a Frenchwoman is quite likely to settle in France; particularly if his bride brings him a village house or a few hectares of land in the country.

On the other hand, the colonials insist on taking their French brides back to New Zealand or Canada, or wherever it may be – India, Shanghai, somewhere in Africa – no matter, the colonial is a colonial forever; he has no idea of going back to the cramped conditions of England. He likes the motherland, all right, is willing to fight for it, but wants room to swing a bull by the tail, and that isn't to be had in England, he assures you.

Probably the Americans will be like the colonials; those who find French wives will take them home after the war. That a good many of them will marry French wives can hardly be doubted.

Yes, the French girls like the American boys. But there is another scene. It is that of the country billet, which varies from a château to a cellar, the ideal one – from the point of view of a billeting officer – being a bed for every officer, and nice clean straw for the men. Get this picture of “Our Village, Somewhere in France,” back of the line, as drawn by Sterling Hielig in the *Los Angeles Times*:

A French valley full of empty villages, close to the fighting line. No city of tents. No mass of shack constructions. The village streets are empty. Geese and ducks waddle to the pond in Main Street.

It is 4 o'clock a. m.

Bugle!

Up and down the valley, in the empty villages, there is a moving-picture transformation. The streets are alive with American soldiers – tumbling out of village dwelling-houses!

Every house is full of boarders. Every village family has given, joyfully, one, two, three of its best rooms for the cot beds of the Americans! Barns and wagon-houses are transformed to dormitories. They are learning French. They are adopted by the family. Sammy's in the kitchen with the mother and the daughter.

Bugle!

They are piling down the main street to their own American breakfast – cooked in the open, eaten in the open, this fine weather.

In front of houses are canvas reservoirs of filtered drinking-water. The duck pond in Main street is being lined with cement. The streets are swept every morning. There are flowers. The village was always picturesque. Now it is beautiful.

Chaplains' clubs are set up in empty houses. The only large tent is that of the Y. M. C. A.; and it is *camouflaged* against enemy observers by being painted in streaked gray-green-brown, to melt into the colors of the hill against which it is backed up, practically invisible. Its "canteen on wheels" is loaded with towels, soap, razors, chocolate, crackers, games, newspapers, novels, and tobacco. At cross-roads, little flat Y. M. C. A. tents (painted grass and earth color) serve as stations for swift autos carrying packages and comforts. In them are found coffee, tea, and chocolate, ink, pens, letter-paper, and envelopes; and a big sign reminds Sammy that "You Promised Your Mother a Letter, Write It Today!"

All decent and in order. Otherwise the men could never have gone through the strenuous coaching for the front so quickly and well.

In "Our Village," not a duck or goose or chicken has failed to respond to the roll call in the past forty days – which is more than can be said of a French company billet, or many a British.

Fruit hung red and yellow in the orchards till the gathering. I don't say the families had as many bushels as a "good year"; but there is no criticism.

In a word, Sammy has good manners. He looks on these French people with a sort of awed compassion. "They had a lot to stand!" he whispers. And the villagers, who are no fools ("as wily as a villager," runs the French proverb), quite appreciate these fine shades. And the house dog wags his tail at the sight of khaki, as the boys come loafing in the cool of the back yard after midday dinner.

In the evening the family play cards in the kitchen, and here no effort is necessary to induce the girls to learn English, for, though they pretend that they are teaching French, they are really – very slyly – "picking up" English while they are being introduced to the mysteries of draw-poker. Says the writer in *The Times*:

So, it goes like this when they play poker in the kitchen – the old French father, the pretty daughter, the flapper girl cousin, and three roughnecks. (One boy has the sheets of "Conversational French in Twenty Days," and really thinks that he is conversing – "*Madame, mademoiselle, maman, monsieur, papa, or mon oncle, pass the buck and get busy!*")

"You will haf' carts, how man-ny? (business.) Tree carts, fife carts, ou-one cart, no cart, an' zee dee-laire seex carts!" – "Here, Bill, wake up!" – "Beel sleep! *Avez-vous sommeil, Beel?*" – "*Oui, mademoiselle, I slept rotten last night, I mean I was tray jenny pars'ke that darned engine was pumping up the duck pond –*"

"Speak French!" – "Play cards!" – "*Vingt-cinq!*" – "*Et dix!*" "*Et encore five cen-times. I'm broke. Just slip me a quarter, Wilfred, to buy jet-toms!*" And a sweet and plaintive voice: "I haf' tree paire, *mon oncle*, an' he say skee-doo, I am stung-ed. I haf' seex carts!" – "Yes, you're out of it, I'm sorry, *mademoiselle. Come up!*" "Kom opp? Comment, kom opp?"

"Stung-ed" has become French. Thus does Sammy enrich the language of Voltaire. His influence works equally on pronunciation. There is a tiny French village named Hinges – on which

hinges the following. From the days of Jeanne d'Arc, the natives have pronounced it "Anjs," in one syllable, with the sound of "a" as in "ham"; but Sammy, naturally, pronounces it "hinges," as it is spelled, one hinge, two hinges on the door or window. So, the natives, deeming that such godlings can't be wrong on any detail, go about, now, showing off their knowledge to the ignorant, and saying, with a point of affection: "I have been to 'Injes!'"

I should not wonder if some of these boys would marry. They might do worse. The old man owns 218 acres and nobody knows what Converted French Fives. Sammy, too, has money. A single regiment of American marines has subscribed for \$60,000 worth of French war-bonds since their arrival in the zone – this, in spite of their depositing most of their money with the United States Government.

Sammy sits in the group around the front door in the twilight. Up and down the main street are a hundred such mixed groups. Already he has found a place, a family. He is somebody.

And what American lad ever sat in such a group at such a time without a desire to sing? And little difference does it make whether the song be sentimental or rag; sing he must, and sing he does. The old-timers like "I Was Seeing Nellie Home" and "Down by the Old Mill Stream" proved to be the favorites of the listening French girls. For they will listen by the hour to the soldiers' choruses. They do not sing much themselves, for too many of their young men are dead. But, finally, when the real war-songs arrived, they would join timidly in the chorus, "Hep, hep, hep!" and "Slopping Through Belgium" electrified the natives, and *The Times* says:

To hear a pretty French girl singing "Epp, epp, epp!" is about the limit.

Singing is fostered by the high command. Who can estimate the influence of "Tipperary?" To me, American civilian in Paris, its mere melody will always stir those noble sentiments we felt as the first wounded English came to the American Ambulance Hospital of Neuilly. For many a year to come "Tipperary" will make British eyes wet, when, in the witching hour of twilight, it evokes the khaki figures in the glare of the sky-line and the dead who are unforgotten!

Who can estimate, for France, the influence of that terrible song of Verdun – "*Passeront pas!*" Or who can forget the goose-step march to death of the Prussian Guard at Ypres, intoning "*Deutschland Uber Alles!*"

"It is desired that the American Army be a singing army!" So ran the first words of a communication to the American public of Paris, asking for three thousand copies of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" – noble marching strophes of Julia Ward Howe, which 1864-1865 fired the hearts of the Northern armies in 1864-1865.

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!

They are heard now on the American front in France. One regiment has adopted it "as our marching song, in memory of the American martyrs of Liberty." And in Our Village, you may hear a noble French translation of it, torn off by inspired French grandmothers!

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps;
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I have read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps;
His day is marching on.

Bear with me to hear three lines of this notable translation. Again they are by a woman, Charlotte Holmes Crawford, of whom I had never previously heard mention. They are word for word, vibrating!

Je L'ai entrevu Qui planait sur le cercle large des camps,

On a érigé Son autel par les tristes et mornes champs,
J'ai relu Son juste jugement à la flamme des feux flambants,
Son jour, Son jour s'approche!

It's rather serious, you say? Rather solemn?
Sammy doesn't think so.

CUTE, WASN'T SHE?

He was a young subaltern. One evening the pretty nurse had just finished making him comfortable for the night, and before going off duty asked: "Is there anything I can do for you before I leave?"

Dear little Two Stars replied: "Well, yes! I should like very much to be kissed good-night."

Nurse rustled to the door. "Just wait till I call the orderly," she said. "He does all the rough work here."

EVERY ONE TO HIS TASTE

Visitor – "It's a terrible war, this, young man – a terrible war."

Mike (badly wounded) – "'Tis that, sor – a tirrible warr. But 'tis better than no warr at all."

TRENCH SUPERSTITIONS

IT is told in the chronicles of “The White Company” how the veteran English archer, Samkin Aylward, was discovered by his comrades one foggy morning sharpening his sword and preparing his arrows and armor for battle. He had dreamed of a red cow, he announced.

“You may laugh,” said he, “but I only know that on the night before Crécy, before Poitiers, and before the great sea battle at Winchester, I dreamed of a red cow. To-night the dream came to me again, and I am putting a very keen edge on my sword.”

Soldiers do not seem to have changed in the last five hundred years, for Tommy Atkins and his brother the *poilu* have warnings and superstitions fully as strange as Samkin’s. Some of these superstitions are the little beliefs of peace given a new force by constant peril, such as the notion common to the soldier and the American drummer that it is unlucky to light three cigars with one match; other presentiments appear to have grown up since the war began. In a recent magazine two poems were published dealing with the most dramatic of these – the Comrade in White who appears after every severe battle to succor the wounded. Dozens have seen him, and would not take it kindly if you suggested they thought they saw him. They are sure of it. The idea of the “call” – the warning of impending death – is firmly believed along the outskirts of No Man’s Land. Let us quote some illustrations from the Cincinnati *Times*:

“I could give you the names of half a dozen men of my own company who have had the call,” said Daniel W. King, the young Harvard man, who was transferred from the Foreign Legion to a line regiment; just in time to go through the entire battle of Verdun. “I have never known it to fail. It always means death.”

Two men were quartered in an old stable in shell-range of the front. As they went to their quarters one of them asked the other to select another place in which to sleep that night. It was bitterly cold and the stable had been riddled by previous fire, and the army blanket under such conditions seems as light as it seems heavy when its owner is on a route march.

“Why not roll up together?” said the other man. “That way we can both keep warm.”

“No,” said the first man. “I shall be killed to-night.”

The man who had received the warning went into the upper part of the stable, the other pointing out in utter unbelief of the validity of a call that the lower part was the warmer, and that if his friend were killed it would make no difference whether his death chamber were warm or cold. A shell came through the roof at midnight. It was a “dud” – which is to say that it did not explode. The man who had been warned was killed by it. If it had exploded the other would probably have been killed likewise. As it was he was not harmed.

A few days ago the chief of an aeroplane section at the front felt a premonition of death. He was known to all the army for his utterly reckless daring. He liked to boast of the number of men who had been killed out of his section. He was always the first to get away on a bombing expedition and the last to return. He had received at least one decoration – accompanied by a reprimand – for flying over the German lines in order to bring down a *Fokker*.

“I have written my letters,” he said to his lieutenant. “When you hear of my death, send them on.”

The lieutenant laughed at him. That sector of the line was quiet, he pointed out. No German machine had been in the air for days. He might have been justified in his premonition, the lieutenant said, on any day of three months past. But now he was in not so much danger as he might be in Paris from the taxicabs. That day a general visited the headquarters and the chief went up in a new machine to demonstrate it. Something broke when he was three thousand feet high and the machine fell sidewise like a stone.

It is possible, say the soldiers, to keep bad fortune from following an omen by the use of the proper talisman. The rabbit's foot is unknown, but it is said that a gold coin has much the same effect – why, no one seems to know. A rabbit's foot, of course, must be from the left hind leg, otherwise it is good for nothing, and according to a *poilu* the efficacy of the gold piece depends upon whether or no it puts the man into touch with his “star.” It is said in the New York *Sun*:

Gold coins are a mascot in the front lines, a superstition not difficult to explain. It was at first believed that wounded men on whom some gold was found would be better looked after by those who found them, and by degrees the belief grew up, especially among artillery, that a gold coin was a talisman against being mutilated if they were taken prisoners, whether wounded or not.

The Government's appeals to have gold sent to the Bank of France and not to let it fall into enemy hands in case of capture has since reduced the amount of gold at the front, but many keep some coins as a charm. Many men sew coins touching one another in such a way as to make a shield over the heart.

“Every man has his own particular star,” a Lyons farm hand said to Apollinaire, “but he must know it. A gold coin is the only means to put you in communication with your star, so that its protecting virtue can be exercised. I have a piece of gold and so am easy in my mind I shall never be touched.” As a matter of fact he was seriously wounded later.

Perhaps he lost his gold-piece!

The Sun relates another story which indicates the belief that if the man does not himself believe that he had a true “call” he will be saved. It is possible to fool the Unseen Powers, to pull wool over their eyes. To dream of an auto-bus has become a token of death, attested by the experience of at least four front-line regiments. And yet a sergeant succeeded in saving the life of a man who had dreamed of an auto-bus by the use of a clever ruse – or lie, if you prefer. As the anecdote is told in *The Sun*:

A corporal said he had dreamed of an auto-bus. “How can that be,” the sergeant asked, “when you have never been to Paris or seen an auto-bus?” The corporal described the vision. “That an auto-bus!” declared the sergeant, although the description was perfect. “Why, that's one of those new machines that the English are using. Don't let that worry you!” He didn't, and lived!

A regiment from the south has the same belief about an automobile lorry.

But, unfortunately for the scientifically minded, a disbelief in omens does not preserve the skeptic from their consequences. On the contrary, he who flies in the face of Providence by being the third to get a light from one match is certain of speedy death. *The Sun* continues:

Apollinaire tells how he was invited to mess with a friend, Second Lieutenant François V – , how this superstition was discussed and laughed at by François V – , and how François V – happened to be the third to light his cigaret with the same match.

The morning after, François V – was killed five or six miles from the front lines by a German shell. It appears that the superstition is that the death is always of this nature, as Apollinaire quotes a captain of a mixed *tirailleur* and *zouave* regiment as saying:

“It is not so much the death that follows, as death no longer is a dread to anyone, but it has been noticed that it is always a useless form of death. A shell splinter in the trenches or, at best, in the rear, which has nothing heroic about it, if there is anything in this war which is not heroic.”

IN THE TRAIL OF THE HUN

WAR has become so much a part of the life of the French peasants that they have little fear under fire. Frenchmen over military age and Frenchwomen pursue their ordinary avocations with little concern for exploding shells. To be sure, it is something of a nuisance, but children play while their mothers work at the tub washing soldier clothing. And as the Allied armies advance, wresting a mile or two of territory from the enemy at each stroke, the peasant follows with his plow less than a mile behind the lines. War has become a part of their lives. Newman Flower, of *Cassell's Magazine*, has been "Out There," and he thus records some of his impressions in the trail of the war:

The war under the earth is a most extraordinary thing. In the main, the army you see in the war zone is not a combatant army. It is the army of supply. The real fighters you seldom set eyes on unless you go and look for them. And, generally speaking, the ghastliness of war is carried on beneath the earth's level.

Given time, the *Boche* will take a lot of beating as an earth delver. At one spot on the Somme I went into a veritable underground town, where, till the British deluge overtook them, three thousand of the toughest Huns the Kaiser had put into his line lived and thrived. They had sets of compartments there, these men, with drawing-rooms complete, even to the piano, kitchen, bathroom, and electric light, and I was told that there was one place where you could have your photograph taken, or buy a pair of socks! Every visitor down the steps – except the British – was required to turn a handle three times, which pumped air into the lower regions. If you descended without pumping down your portion of fresh air you were guilty of bad manners.

Anything more secure has not been invented since Adam. But this impregnable city fell last year, as all things must fall before the steady pressing back of British infantry.

The writer tells of discovering in an old French town that was then under fire a shell-torn building on which were displayed two signs reading "First Aid Post" and "Barber Shop." He says:

When I dived inside I saw one man having his arm dressed, for he had been hit by a piece of shell in the square, and in a chair a few yards away a Tommy having a shave. Coming in as a stranger, I was informed that if I didn't want a haircut or a shave, or hadn't a healthy wound to dress, this was not the Empire music hall, so I had better "hop it."

It was in "hopping it" that I got astride an unseen fiber of British communication. I went into the adjoining ruins of a big building. A single solitary statue stood aloof in a devastation of tumbled brick and stone. Then, as I was stepping from one mound of rubble to another, as one steps from rock to rock on the seashore, I heard voices beneath me. The wreckage was so complete, so unspeakably complete, that human voices directly under my feet seemed at first startling and indefinite. Moreover, to add to my confusion, I heard the baa-ing of sheep, likewise under the earth. But I could see no hole, no outlet.

With the average curiosity of the Britisher I searched around till I discovered a small hole, a foot in diameter, maybe, and a Tommy's face framed in it laughing up at me.

"Hello!" he said.

I pulled up, bewildered, and looked at him.

"What in Heaven's name are you doing in there?" I asked.

"We're telephones... Got any matches?"

"I heard sheep," I informed him.

"And what if you did? Got them matches?"

I tossed him a box. He dived into darkness, and I heard him rejoicing with his pals because he'd found some one who'd got a light. It meant almost as much to them as being relieved.

So here was a British unit hidden where the worst Hun shell could never find it, and, what was more, here was the food ready to kill when, during some awkward days, the *Boche* shells cut off supplies.

Then look on this picture of a war-desolated country where nature has been stupidly scarred by Teuton ruthlessness, and rubble-heaps are marked by boards bearing the name of the village that had stood there:

The desert was never more lonely than those vast tracts of land the armies have surged over, and this loneliness and silence are more acute because of the suggestions of life that have once been there. It is impressive, awe-inspiring, this silence, like that which follows storm.

Clear away to the horizon no hedge or tree appears, all landmarks have gone, hills have been planed level by the sheer blast of shells. Here is a rubble-heap no higher than one's shoulders where a church has stood, and the graves have opened beneath pits of fire to make new graves for the living. Patches of red powder, washed by many rains, with a few broken bricks among them, mark the places where houses, big and small, once rested. To these rubble-heaps, which were once villages, the inhabitants will come back one day, and they will scarcely know the north from the south. Indeed, if it were not for the fact that each rubble-heap bears a board whereon the name of the village is written, in order to preserve the site, they would never find their way there at all, for the earth they knew has become a strange country. Woods are mere patches of brown stumps knee-high – stumps which, with nature's life restricted, are trying to break into leaf again at odd spots on the trunks where leaves never grew before. Mametz Wood and Trone Wood appear from a short distance as mere scabblings in the earth.

The ground which but a few months ago was blasted paste and pulverization has now under the suns of summer thrown up weed growth that is creeping over the earth as if to hide its hurt. Wild convolvulus trails cautiously across the remnants of riven trenches, and levers itself up the corners of sand bags. In this tangle the shell holes are so close that they merge into each other.

The loneliness of those Somme fields! No deserts of the world can show such unspeakable solitude.

One comes from the Somme to the freed villages as one might emerge from the desert to the first outposts of human life at a township on the desert's rim. Still there are no trees on the sky-line; they have all been cut down carefully and laid at a certain angle beside the stumps just as a platoon of soldiers might ground their arms. For the German frightfulness is a methodical affair, not aroused by the heat of battle, but coolly calculated and senseless. Of military importance it has none.

In these towns evacuated by the Germans life is slowly beginning to stir again and to pick up the threads of 1914. People who have lived there all through the deluge seem but partially aware as yet that they are free. And some others are returning hesitatingly.

Mr. Flower notes with interest the temperamental change that has been wrought by the war in the man from twenty to thirty-five years old. To the older ones it all is only a "beastly uncomfortable nuisance," and when it is over they will go back to their usual avocations. Here is the general view of the middle-aged men in the battle line:

"What are you going to do after the war?" I asked one.

I believe he thought I was joking, for he looked at me very curiously.

"Do?" he echoed. "I'm going to do what any sane man of my age would do. I'm going straight back to it – back to work. This is just marking time in one's life, like having to go to a wedding on one's busiest mail day. I'm not going to exploit the war as a means of getting a living, or emigrate, or do any fool thing like that. I'm going straight back to my office, I am. I know exactly where I turned down the page of my sales book when I came out – it was page seventy-nine – and I'm going to start again on page eighty."

With the younger men it is different. It has struck a new spark in them and fired a spirit of adventure. There are those who even enjoy the war, and to whom one day, when peace comes, life will seem very tame. The writer cites this case:

He is quite a young man, and what this adventurous fellow was before he took his commission and went to the war I do not pretend to know. But he displayed most conspicuous bravery and usefulness from the hour he fetched up at the British front.

One day he was very badly wounded in the back, and as soon as he neared convalescence he became restive and wished to return to his men, and he did return before he should have done. The doctor knew he would finish a deal quicker when he got back to the lines than he would in a hospital.

There are some rare creatures who are built that way. Shortly afterward he was wounded again, and while walking to the dressing station was wounded a third time, on this occasion very badly.

He stuck it at the hospital as long as he could – then one day he disappeared. No one saw him go. He had got out, borrowed a horse, and ridden back to his lines.

The absence of the fighting men from the view of an observer of a modern battle strongly impressed the writer, who says:

Most men who come upon a modern battle for the first time would confess to finding it not what they expected. For the old accepted idea of battle is hard to eliminate. One has become accustomed to looking for great arrays of fighters ready for the bout, with squadrons of cavalry waiting somewhere beyond a screen of trees, and guns – artfully hidden guns – bellying smoke from all points of the compass. The battle pictures in our galleries, the lead soldiers we played with as children and engaged in visible conflict, have kept up the illusion.

You know before you come to it that it is not so in this war, but this battle of hidden men pulls you up with a jolt as not being quite what you expected to see. You feel almost as if you had been robbed of something.

The first battle I saw on the western front I watched for two and a half hours, and during that time (with the exception of five men who debouched from a distant wood like five ants scuttling out of a nest of moss, to be promptly shot down) I did not see a man at all. The battle might have been going on in an enormous house and I standing on the roof trying to see it.

But if there is little or nothing to be seen of the human agents that direct the devastating machines of war during a battle, the scene of the field after the fight has been waged discloses all the horror that has not been visible to the eye of an observer. Mr. Flower thus describes one section of the theater of war in France:

Our car rushes down a long descending road, and is driven at breakneck speed by one of those drivers with which the front is strewn, who are so accustomed to danger that to dance on the edge of it all the time is the breath of life. To slow down to a rational thirty miles an hour is to them positive pain; to leap shell holes at fifty or plow across a newly made road of broken brick at the same velocity is their ecstasy. And one of the greatest miracles of the war is the cars that stand it without giving up the unequal contest by flying into half a hundred fragments.

But this road is tolerable even for a war road, and it runs parallel with a long down which has been scabbled out here and there into patches of white by the hands of men. It is Notre Dame de Lorette, no higher than an average Sussex down, mark you, and lower than most. Yet I was told that on this patch of down over a hundred thousand men have died since the war began. Running at right angles at its foot is a lower hill, no higher than the foothill to a Derbyshire height, but known to the world now as Vimy Ridge. And this road leads you into a small section of France, a section of four square miles or so, every yard of which is literally soaked with the blood of men.

On the right is Souchez, and the wood of Souchez all bare stumps and brokenness; here the sugar refinery, which changed hands eight times, and is now no more than a couple of shot-riddled boilers, tilted at odd angles with some steel girders twirled like sprung wire rearing over them; and around this conglomeration a pile of brick powder. You wonder what there was here worth dying for,

since a rat would fight shy of the place for want of a square inch of shelter. And where is Souchez River? you ask, for Souchez River is now as famous as the Amazon. Here it is, a sluggish sort of brook, crawling in and out of broken tree-trunks that have been blasted down athwart it, running past banks a foot high or so, a river you could almost step across, and which would be well-nigh too small to name in Devonshire.

We leave our cars under a bank and come on down through the dead jetsam of the village of Ablain St. Nazaire. The old church is still here on the left, the only remnant of a respectable rate-paying hamlet. The remaining portion of its square tower is clear and white, for the stonework has been literally skinned by flying fragments of steel, till it is about as clean as when it was built.

We reach the foot of Vimy Ridge and climb up. Here, some one told me, corn once grew, but now it is sodden chalk, pasted and mixed as if by some giant mixing machine with the shattered weapons of war.

Broken trenches – the German front line – in places remain and extend a few yards, only to disappear into the rubble where the tide swept over them.

As we climb, the earth beneath my foot suddenly gives way, letting me down with a jerk to the hip, and opening up a hole through which I peer and see a dead *Boche* coiled up, his face – or so I suspect it was – resting upon his arm to protect it from some oncoming horror.

We climb on up. We drop into pits and grope out of them again, pasted with the whiteness of chalk. From somewhere behind us a howitzer is throwing shells over our heads, shells that come on and pass with the rush of a train pitching itself recklessly out of control. We listen to the clamor as it goes on – a couple of miles or so – separating itself from the ill assortment of snarling and smashing and breaking and grunting that rises from the battlefield.

As they climbed the ridge the guns seemed to be muffled until they got beyond the shelter of Notre Dame de Lorette. Then, says the writer:

We suddenly appeared to tumble into a welter of sound. And the higher we climbed Vimy, the louder the tumult became. “Aunty,” throwing over heavy stuff, had but a few moments before been the only near thing in the battle. Now the contrast was such as if we had been suddenly pushed into the middle of the battle. The air was full of strange, harsh noises and crackings and cries. And the earth before us was alive with subdued flame flashes and growing bushes of smoke.

Five miles away, Lens, its church spires adrift in eddies of smoke, appeared very unconscious of it all. Just showing on the horizon was Douai, and I wondered what forests of death lay waiting between those Lens churches and the Douai outlines where the ground was sunken and mysterious under the haze.

Here, then, was the panorama of battle. Never a man in sight, but the entire earth goaded by some vast invisible force. Clots of smoke of varying colors arrived from nowhere, died away, or were smudged out by other clots. A big black pall hung over Givenchy like the sounding-board over a cathedral pulpit. A little farther on the village of Angres seemed palisaded with points of flame. Away to the right the long, straight road from Lens to Arras showed clear and strong without a speck of life upon it.

No life anywhere, no human thing moving. And yet one believed that under a thin crust of earth the whole forces of Europe were struggling and throwing up sound.

Among all the combatants there is a desire for peace, says Mr. Flower, who found a striking example of the sentiment of the *Boche* in what had been the crypt of the Bapaume cathedral. He writes:

I saw scores of skulls of those who were dead many decades before the war rolled over Europe, and on the skull of one I saw scribbled in indelible pencil:

“*Dass der Friede kommen mag*”
 (“Hurry up, Peace.”) —*Otto Trübner*.

Now, Otto Trübner may be a very average representative of his type. And maybe Otto Trübner's head now bears a passing likeness to the skull he scribbled on in vandal fashion before he evacuated Bapaume. But whether or no, he is, metaphorically speaking, a straw which shows the play of the wind.

SOME STUNT – TRY IT

Sergeant (drilling awkward squad) – “Company! Attention company, lift up your left leg and hold it straight out in front of you!”

One of the squad held up his right leg by mistake. This brought his right-hand companion's left leg and his own right leg close together. The officer, seeing this, exclaimed angrily:

“And who is that blooming galoot over there holding up both legs?”

WHEN THE HUN QUIT SMOKING

Tommy I – “That's a top-hole pipe, Jerry. Where d'ye get it?”

Tommy II – “One of them German Huns tried to take me prisoner an' I in'erited it from 'im.”

WHEN “ACE” LUFBERY BAGGED NO. 13

LIEUT. GERVAIS RAOUL LUFBERY, an “Ace” of the Lafayette Escadrille, has brought down his thirteenth enemy airplane. The German machine was first seen by Lufbery – who was scouting – several hundred yards above him. By making a wide detour and climbing at a sharp angle he maneuvered into a position above the enemy plane at an altitude of five thousand yards and directly over the trenches. The German pilot was killed by Lufbery’s first shot and the machine started to fall. The gunner in the German plane quickly returned the fire, even as he was falling to his death. One of his bullets punctured the radiator and lodged in the carburetor of Lufbery’s plane, and he was forced to descend.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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