



Extract from the Leamington Courier

Christmas Season


How some spent Christmas at the Front

Solemn and Amusing Time

The Press Association has received the following letter from a subaltern at the Front



December 31st 1914

 "Christmas come and gone - certainly the most extraordinary celebration of it any of us will ever experience. We were due back in the trenches on Christmas Eve and the Battalion's official Christmas Day was consequentially held on Wednesday, the 23rd. For the time being all ranks put aside the grim recollection of the events of the past week and gave themselves up to keeping this day as pleasantly as possible. There were stacks of presents for officers and men and no lack of comfortable hampers full of good things. In the yard of the farmhouse where my company was billeted there is a huge cauldron. In this no less than 125 pounds of pudding in tins were boiled at a time. We turned out to see them dished out. It was a Gargantuan spectacle. The next day we returned to the trenches groaning under loads of comestibles and condiments destined to alleviate our lot on the morrow. That night it froze hard and Christmas Day dawned on an inappropriately sparking landscape.

A Solemn Occasion

A truce had been arranged for the few hours of daylight for the burial of the dead on both sides who had been lying out in the open since the fierce night fighting of a week earlier. When I got out I found a large crowd of officers and men, English and German grouped around the bodies which had already been gathered together and laid out in rows. I went along these dreadful ranks and scanned the faces fearing at every step to recognise one I knew. It was a ghastly sight. They lay stiffly in contorted attitudes dirty with frozen mud and powdered with rime. The digging parties were already busy on the two big common graves, but the ground was hard and the work and laborious. In the intervals of superintending it we chatted with the Germans, most of whom were quite affable if one could not exactly call them friendly, which indeed was neither to be expected nor desired. We exchanged confidences about the weather and the diametrically opposite news from East Prussia.

The way they maintained the truth of their marvellous victories because they were official. (with bated breath) was positively pathetic. They had no doubt of the issues in the East and professed to regard the position in the West as a definite stalemate. It was most amusing to observe the bland innocence with which they put questions, a truthful answer to which might have had unexpected consequences in the future.





An amiable German Officer

One charming Lieutenant of Artillery was anxious to know just where my dugout "The Cormorants" was situated. No doubt he wanted to shoot his card tied to a "Whistling Willie". I waved my hand airily over the next company's line, giving him choice of various mangel heaps in the rear. They spoke of a bottle of champagne. We raised our wistful eyes in hopeless longing. They expressed astonishment and said how pleased they would have been had they only known to have sent to Lille for some. "A charming little town Lille. Do you know it?" "Not yet" we assured them. There laughter was quite frank that time.

A tiny spruce little lieutenant spoken of to his manifest chagrin as "Der Kleine" by his comrades attached himself to me and sent his Bursche back for a bottle of cognac and we solemnly drank "Gesundheiten". He was an amiable little soul really with the typical Prussian officer snap in his speech. Every few words were punctuated with "nich!" meanwhile time drew on and it was obvious that the burying would not be half finished with the expiration the armistice agreed upon so we decided to renew it the following morning. At the set hour, everyone returned to the trenches and when the last man was in my little lieutenant and I solemnly shook hands, saluted and marched back ourselves.

Our friends the enemy

They left us alone that night to enjoy a peaceful Christmas. I forgot to say that the previous night - Christmas Eve - their trenches were a blaze of Christmas trees and our sentries were regaled for hours with the traditional songs of the Fatherland. Their officers even expressed annoyance the next day that some of these trees had been fired on, insisting that they were part almost of a sacred rite.

On Boxing Day, at the agreed hour, on a pre arranged signal being given we turned out again. The output of officers of higher rank on their side was more marked and the proceedings were more formal in consequence. But while the gruesome business of burying the dead went forward there was still a certain interchange of pleasantries. The German soldiers seemed a good-tempered amiable lot, mostly peasants from the look of them. One remarkable exception, who wore the Iron Cross and addressed us in slow but faultless English, told us he was Professor of early German and English dialects at a Westphalian University. He had a wonderful fine head.

They distributed cigars and cigarettes freely amongst our digging party who were much impressed by the cigars. I hope they were not disillusioned when they came to smoke them. Meanwhile the officers were amusing themselves by taking photographs of mixed groups. The Germans brought us copies to send to the English illustrated papers as they received them regularly. The digging completed, the shallow graves were filled in and the German officers remained to pay their tribute of respect while our chaplain read a short service. It was one of the most impressive





things I have ever witnessed. Friend and foe stood side by side, bare headed, watching the tall grave figure of the padre outlined against the frosty landscape as he blessed the poor broken bodies at his feet. Then with more formal salutes we turned and made our way back to our respective ruts.

A wish for football

Life runs rather in grooves here. By the way, if there is ever another armistice my little lieutenant has promised me a case of Rhenish. Though he would certainly be as good as his word, I fear I shall never see it. Elsewhere along the line, I hear our fellows played the Germans at football on Christmas Day. Our own pet enemies remarked that they would like a game, but as the ground in our part is all root crops and much cut up by ditches as moreover we had not got a football, we had to call it off.

This remark rather recalls the story of the German Burgomaster who summoned to explain to his irate Grand Ducal Sovereign why his arrival at the little town had not been signalled by the ringing of joy-bells, said firstly that the keys of the church could not be found; secondly, that the bell ringers were all dead; and "finally your Majesty, there are no bells here" I returned to the scenes of what was low comedy in comparison. That night the frost turned abruptly to rain, and all was slime and water instead of good hard surface."

