

CHRISTMAS AND THE NEW YEAR
(1915-16).

“Christmas, Christmas, happy time!
Joy bells ring a merry chime.”

So sang one of the men as, on Christmas Eve, we marched up towards the trenches from the billets in the rear where we had been resting for two days. We marched in a terrific down-pour of rain, and those who, like myself, were not wearing greatcoats or leather jerkins, were skin-wet within a few minutes of the commencement of the rain.

“Not much suggestion of joy bells about this,” said little Jimmy M——. “Reminds me more of a ship’s hose in full blast than of anything else.”

I was one of a fatigue party detailed to carry the Orderly Room equipment up the trenches to Headquarters. Besides being burdened with our own heavy accoutrements, each of us bore on his shoulder a large box or bale. Owing to some oversight none of us was provided with rubber boots, and as, immediately we entered

the communication trench, we plunged into eighteen inches of water, the resultant feeling was not pleasant.

"This is 'bon,'" said The Artist, who preceded me in the file. "Surf bathing! A novel pastime for Christmas Eve!"

"Look out there!" shouted the leading man. "The water's getting deeper."

"Keep your weather eye open for periscopes! German submarines skulking in this deep lake we're coming to," was how The Artist passed the warning to me.

The water reached well above our knees, and as we progressed it became muddier and thicker, until we were tugging and straining and barging through a slimy quagmire of the consistency of cold porridge. Panting and gasping, our faces exuding a muddy sweat, we struggled on with our heavy burdens, and at intervals of every fifty yards or so we were compelled to halt to regain our breath.

After an awful hour and a half of this we reached the dugout dignified by the title of Headquarters and deposited our burdens. We were wet and muddied all over, and physically exhausted, and soon our discomfort from the cold was intense. It was nearing 9 p.m., and we had eaten nothing since early morning, so

hunger was added to our growing miseries. With difficulty we collected a little fuel and lit a fire, but the wood was damp, and it was long ere the pan of water boiled and we regaled ourselves with tea. Coldly miserable we sat around the brazier and watched the last handful of embers crumble into grey dust, all the available fuel being exhausted.

The Artist broke a long silence. "Jolly way to spend Christmas Eve," said he.

"And at home they're making merry
'Neath the white and scarlet berry:
What place have France's exiles in their mirth?"

I adapted some lines of Kipling's.

"But they're not," said Ginger suddenly; "they're not making merry . . . this year. I believe those at home will be about as miserable as we are."

"Poor beggars!" said The Artist compassionately.

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"Fall in for rum!"

With our tin cups in our hands we lined up in the trench beside the Headquarters dugout. An officer issued the "tots," and in his presence the men gulped down the strong, burning fluid. Some choked and gasped for a few moments and

had not breath to say a "Thank you, sir!" But the more seasoned old sweds—some of them having weathered barely nineteen Summers—smacked satisfied lips, and there was increased reverence in their parting salute.

"Abominable stuff that," said Ginger, when we had retired again to our dugout. "I loathe the taste of it—yet, Lord knows, that wee tot has been the one bright spot in this Christmas Eve."

We were certainly warmer and less miserable now, and we composed ourselves on the ground, our wet and muddied coats thrown over us, for sleep. We had all changed into dry socks, and the old ones, clogged and heavy with mud, were hung around the edge of the empty brazier.

"Poor old Santa Claus will get a shock when he puts his hand in these to-night," said The Artist.

And, "I'm sorry for his reindeer if they have to come up the trenches," said Ginger pensively. Then we tried to sleep.

Christmas Day was like any other day spent in the trenches, and was without exciting incident. There was none of the friendly but foolish communication with the enemy that occurred a year ago (Christmas, 1914), and while

the German artillery at our portion of the line was comparatively quiet, the British guns kept up an intermittent bombardment all day, which must have had a disturbing effect on any festivities going on in the German trenches.

Three days later we were relieved and marched back for an eagerly anticipated rest. It was not until the third day of our journey that we reached St. Hilaire, the village that was our destination, and on that day the battalion presented as brave and fine a sight as I have witnessed for long.

When in the danger zone a battalion on the march never proceeds as a whole, but is broken up into platoons or half-companies, with an interval of several hundreds of yards between each. But now we were far from the madding shells, and the battalion marched in column of route even as in the days of our training. The pipe band led the way, and thrilling and soothing was the music of the pipes to ears long accustomed to the hellish din of bursting lyddite. Muddled still were the boys after their spell in the trenches, but jauntily did they step out, and blythe were their hearts and active their tongues. The transport section followed in the rear of the battalion, a long and imposing procession, for it was swollen beyond its normal

proportions by reason of the many tons of Christmas and New Year gifts which it carried for distribution among the "Jocks."

On Hogmanay, after we were settled in our new quarters, these presents were issued to the men along with their rations, and for the rest of the day every Highlander one met was smoking a fat cigar or talked with difficulty through a mouthful of sweets or fruit.

It was permitted us to hold "a jollification" in our several billets that night. Shortly before midnight the skirl of the pipes was heard, and incontinently we rushed out into the dark street. The pipe band was advancing up the middle of the roadway, and the air was thrilling to its strains. We followed in its wake—some hundreds of us—dancing and capering as perhaps only men just relieved from the misery of the trenches could do, and there was much flashing and waving of electric torches. A halt was made in front of the Headquarters Mess, at the door of which the officers were gathered, and on the stroke of midnight a mighty cheer arose, and then there was a general scramble as men rushed around trying to seek out their particular friends, and the air resounded with shouted greetings in healthy Doric and sick French, and excitement and hilarity prevailed.

Then the band marched off playing a lively tune, and immediately the Regimental Police adjured the men to return to their billets. Within ten minutes the streets of the little French village were silent, dark, and deserted.

On our return to the billet a cheering sight confronted us. A blaze of light filled the barn, emanating from an improvised table set in the centre of the straw-covered floor. The table was covered with newspapers in lieu of a cloth, and at each corner was an upright bayonet entwined with holly. Eight or nine empty champagne bottles served as candle sconces, and they were artistically arranged amid a picturesque and appetising litter of viands. Currant bun, shortbread, and cakes of many kinds, fruit and sweets, and plum puddings rich and steaming hot, were there. We had pooled our individual "Jock's Boxes," and this was the result. And there was a nip of "real Scotch" for every man—just enough to lend the flavour of a Scots Ne'erday to the proceedings, and to make believe that it was a "really, truly banquet" we were attending.

We lay on the straw-covered floor and ate our fill, and afterwards we had a song-fest; and it was only when the hour was three o'clock

and the candles had guttered down and out that we sought our blankets and repose.

Thus it was that in innocent, light-hearted fashion the Highlanders laughed the New Year in.