

“Over the Top”

By An American Soldier Who Went

ARTHUR GUY EMPEY

Everything went lovely and it was a howling success, until Alkali Ike appeared on the scene with his revolver loaded with blank cartridges.



Preparing the “Chow.”

on the left, and then the boxholders turned loose; but outside of this little fiasco the performance was a huge success, and we decided to run it for a week.

New troops were constantly coming through, and for six performances we had the “S. R. O.” sign suspended outside.

CHAPTER XIX.

On His Own.

Of course Tommy cannot always be producing plays under fire but while in rest billets he has numerous other ways of amusing himself.

The two most popular games are “Crown and Anchor” and “House.” The paraphernalia used in “Crown and Anchor” consists of a piece of canvas two feet by three feet.

The Tommies place bets on the squares, the crown or anchor being played the most. The banker then rolls his three dice and collects or pays out as the case may be.

The game of “House” is very popular also. It takes two men to run it. This game consists of numerous squares of cardboard containing three rows of numbers, five numbers to a row.

As soon as the estaminet is sufficiently crowded the proprietors of the “House” game get busy and, as they term it, “form a school.”

One of the backers of the game has a small cloth bag in which are ninety cardboard squares, each with a number printed thereon, from one to ninety. He raps on the table and cries

out: “Eyes down, my lucky lads.” All noise ceases and every one is attentive. The croupier places his hand in the bag and draws forth a numbered square and immediately calls out the number.

Then another collection is made, a school formed, and they carry on with the game. The caller-out has many nicknames for the numbers such as “Kelly’s Eye” for one, “Leg’s Eleven” for eleven, “Clickety-click” for sixty-six, or “Top of the house” meaning ninety.

Nevertheless it is not the fault of the individual officer, it is just the survival of a quaint old English custom. You know an Englishman cannot be changed in a day.

You would be convinced of this if you could see King George go among his men on an inspecting tour under fire, or pause before a little wooden cross in some shell-torn field with tears in his eyes as he reads the inscription. And a little later perhaps bend over a wounded man on a stretcher, patting him on the head.

Tommy admires Albert of Belgium because he is not a pusher of men; he leads them. With him it’s not a case of “take that trench,” it is “come on and we will take it.”

It is amusing to notice the different characteristics of the Irish, Scotch and English soldiers. The Irish and Scotch are very impetuous, especially when it comes to bayonet fighting.

Twenty minutes before going over the top the English Tommy will sit on the fire step and thoroughly examine the mechanism of his rifle to see that it is in working order and will fire properly. After this examination he is satisfied and ready to meet the Boche.

Generally there are two decks of cards in a section, and in a short time they are so dog-eared and greasy, you can hardly tell the ace of spades from the ace of hearts.

So you see, Mr. Atkins has his fun mixed in with his hardships and, contrary to popular belief, the rank and file of the British army in the trenches is one big happy family.

The French “estaminets” in the villages are open from eleven in the morning until one in the afternoon in accordance with army orders.

After dinner the Tommies congregate at these places to drink French beer at a penny a glass and play “House.”

When the game starts, each buyer places his card before him on the table, first breaking up matches into fifteen pieces.

But from my observation I find that a large percentage of the servants do go over the top, but behind the lines they very seldom engage in digging parties, fatigues, parades or drills.

There are lots of amusing stories told of “O. S.” One day one of our majors went into the servants’ billet and commenced “blinding” at them, saying that his horse had no straw and that he personally knew that straw had been issued for this purpose.

It is needless to say that the servants dispensed with their soft beds that particular night. Nevertheless it is not the fault of the individual officer, it is just the survival of a quaint old English custom.

Usually when an Irishman takes over a trench, just before “stand down” in the morning, he sticks his rifle over the top, aimed in the direction of Berlin, and engages in what is known as the “mad minute.”

The Saxons, though better than the Prussians and Bavarians, have a nasty trait of treachery in their makeup. At one point of the line where the trenches were very close, a stake was driven into the ground midway between the hostile lines.

One night a young English sergeant crawled to the stake and as he tried to detach the German paper a bomb exploded and mangled him horribly.

CHAPTER XX. “Chats With Fritz.” We were swimming in money, from the receipts of our theatrical venture, and had forgotten all about the war.

The day that these orders were issued, our captain assembled the company and asked for volunteers to go to the Machine Gun school at St. Omar.

Sixteen men from our brigade left for the course in machine gunnery. This course lasted two weeks and we

rejoined our unit and were assigned to the brigade machine gun company. It almost broke my heart to leave my company mates.

The gun we used was the Vickers. Light 303, water cooled. I was still a member of the Snickers club, having jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

During the day our gun would be dismantled on the fire step ready for instant use. We shared a dugout with the Lewis gunners.

We immediately sent up two star shells, and in their light could see two dark forms lying on the ground close to our wire.

They were two German officers, one a captain and the other an “unteroffizier,” a rank one grade higher than a sergeant general, but below the grade of lieutenant.

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They were two German officers, one a captain and the other an “unteroffizier,” a rank one grade higher than a sergeant general, but below the grade of lieutenant.

The captain’s face had been almost completely torn away by the bomb’s explosion. The unteroffizier was sitting, breathing with difficulty.

The pair had evidently been drinking heavily, for the alcohol fumes were sickening and completely pervaded the dugout.

One of our officers could speak German and he questioned the dying man. In a faint voice, interrupted by frequent hiccupping, the unteroffizier told his story.

There had been a drinking bout among the officers in one of the German dugouts, the main beverage being champagne.

They had gotten about halfway across when the drink took effect and the captain fell asleep.

After about two hours of sleep attempts the unteroffizier had almost succeeded in waking the captain.

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Meeting a Gas and Infantry Attack.

which perhaps is sinking into the mud—the bolt couldn’t be opened with a team of horses it is so rusty—but he spit on his sleeve and slowly polished his bayonet; when this is done he also is ready to argue with Fritz.

Returning to Tommy, I think his spirit is best shown in the questions he asks. It is never “who is going to win” but always “how long will it take?”

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“WIND IN THE POPLAR TREE”

A Subscriber Sends in Original Form with Merit.

There’s a rustling wind in the poplar tree, And all the leaves flutter in ecstasy.

Over the summer fields is a brooding peace, Oh, anxious heart let thine aching cease.

Some day, when the battles are fought and won, And stilled is the roar of each booming gun,

Oh, love can never lose its way You’ll see your lad again, some day.

Was it the Spirit answering me, Or only the wind in the Poplar tree?

A Subscriber