

A Soldier's Christmas

Caporal David Clandon shivered as he stared into no-man's land. Damn it was cold tonight! He stomped his boots on the fire step in a vain attempt to warm his feet. Just his luck to get picked for the midnight watch on Christmas Eve. Or was it Christmas morning? He guessed technically it was now Christmas morning, but it didn't much matter. No one expected the Germans to launch a raid on Christmas, certainly not in this quiet sector. Nevertheless, just as *le Capitaine* arrived with a rum punch he'd somehow scrounged from the British, *Sergent* Laurent tapped David on the shoulder and told him he had the watch. This after he'd spent the previous night repairing the wire in front of the trench, praying the Germans wouldn't sweep the parapet with one of their random machine gun outbursts! For some reason *Sergent* Laurent picked him for all the lousy jobs. You'd think the *sergent* would be grateful that he had volunteered to join the Foreign Legion and fight for France. This wasn't his war. President Wilson said the US was "too proud to fight," but David found he couldn't sit back and watch France fall to a foreign invader. He was doing his bit for civilization, but *Sergent* Laurent treated him with the same disdain he showed for all the non-French recruits.

David's thoughts went back to the August afternoon in 1914 when he'd joined the Legion. He had been working as a cab driver in Paris, trying to save enough money to go back to architecture school when the war broke out. Swept away by patriotic fever, he lined up with dozens of other Americans to join the Foreign Legion. The recruiter acted like it was a big deal that he could enroll for the duration of the war only, instead of for the standard 5-year commitment. Of course, at the time everyone thought they would be able to sweep through Germany and end the war in a few weeks. When that didn't happen the prediction changed to "out of the trenches by Christmas." Well, this was his fourth Christmas in the trenches, and it didn't look like the war was going to end any time soon. That idiot Wilson had finally opened his eyes to what Germany was doing and brought the US into the war, but it hadn't seemed to make a difference. That was back in, when? April? He had yet to see a single American soldier at the front. Here it was, Christmas 1917. He'd probably be standing in this same damned mud on Christmas of 1920. Or 1925. That is, if he lived that long.

That thought brought his focus back to the present. He peered more intently into the darkness. It was a moonless night. He could barely make out the stakes of the barbed wire closest to the trench, silhouetted against the night sky. He thought he could discern the edges of a few shell craters, but that might be his eyes playing tricks on him. The distant horizon was faintly visible against the sky. He kept a constant scan of this horizon, looking for movement. If anyone was up to no good in no-man's-land, sooner or later they would reveal themselves against that horizon.

It was quiet, too. Earlier he had listened wistfully to the sounds of laughter and singing from his own company in the trench behind him. When that died down he heard the hauntingly

faint sound of German Christmas carols from the enemy trenches. Now they had gone to bed, too. Occasionally he heard the soft skittering of a nearby rat. A metallic noise had put him on his guard for a moment, until he recognized it as the sound of a rat scraping the remains from an empty tin can which someone had thrown over the parapet into no-man's-land. Far off in the distance there was a "tuk-tuk-tuk" of a German machine gun, but that stopped after a few seconds.

Suddenly he was blinded by the light of a parachute flare fired by a nervous sentry on the German side of the lines. He squinted against the brilliant light and searched for any signs of movement in no-man's-land. The painfully bright highlights and long black shadows created a surreal landscape of craters, twisted wire, and the shattered remnants of trees, buildings, and men. It was virtually impossible to recognize anything in that black and white wasteland. Only movement was detectable. He knew from his own experience that if you were caught in no-man's-land when a flare went off but you froze the instant you saw the light, there was very little chance the enemy would see you amid the twisted lights and shadows. Tonight he saw nothing he could recognize as a threat before the flare fizzled out and he was left in the dark, his night vision destroyed by its temporary incandescence.

He focused all his attention on listening while he waited for his vision to return. Bill Jackson had his throat slit by a raiding party only seconds after a flare died out. The Germans must have been less than twenty yards away while the flare was burning, unseen amidst the shadows of the night. That was during the Somme offensive. The Legion lost over a dozen Americans during that battle, and even more during the battles of the Artois and Champagne the year before. David had known all of them. They weren't all close friends, but Americans in the Legion were a tight little group and they kept track of one another. There weren't many left any more. Several had transferred to Aviation, but your chances of getting killed in that service were even higher than in the trenches. David wondered what the chances were that he'd live to see another Christmas.

Where the hell was his relief? Surely his watch must be about over by now. He stamped his feet again and shook his head to ward off sleep. He was so damned tired. No sleep last night because of the wiring party, only a few short catnaps during the day, and now sentry duty. And on Christmas, too. His mind wandered back to past Christmases, with trees and lights, friends and family. Egg nog and mistletoe. There was no sentry duty, no mud, and no sleepless nights. And what were his family and friends doing now? Sleeping, no doubt. In warm houses. Tomorrow they'd wake up to presents, laughter, and warm food. If he was lucky and the rations made it through he'd wake up to cold coffee and a handful of bread. Would his friends think of him? Did it even matter that he was freezing his toes off in a strange land? Fighting a war he didn't really understand?

A tap on his shoulder made him jump. How the hell had his relief walked up behind him without making a sound? He spun around to say "It's about time," but the words froze on his lips. The man behind him wasn't his relief. He might have been a soldier, but he certainly wasn't French. He was short, and wrapped in an overcoat that was so tattered and faded David couldn't tell if it had originally been brown or blue. His feet were wrapped in muddy rags, and he was carrying a rifle that was even longer than David's Lebel, with a wicked looking spike bayonet. His overcoat was crisscrossed with thin leather belts supporting an assortment of pouches and a wooden canteen. He had a homemade scarf wrapped around his neck and ears, and on his head he wore the battered remnants of what had once been a three-cornered hat.

"Who are you?" David asked in astonishment.

"The name's Nathaniel" the stranger replied. "Would you happen to have any tobacco you could spare?"

"Just the foul French stuff they send up with the rations" David said as he held out his oilskin pouch.

"Aye. Rations. I've heard tell of them." Nathaniel filled a clay pipe from the pouch as he said this. He tucked the pipe into his overcoat pocket and handed back the pouch. "Now all I have to do is find a fire. All right, then. Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?" David asked.

"I'm here to show you how soldiers spent Christmas in the past, of course!"

"I can't leave my post" David insisted.

"You won't leave it" Nathaniel replied. "At least, your body won't."

He reached out and touched David's hand. Instantly David found himself standing beside a dirt trail in a forest. A long column of men dressed like Nathaniel were trudging along the trail. They clutched their overcoats tightly around their bodies and leaned forward as a cold wind blew snow and sleet against their faces.

"It's Christmas night, 1776" Nathaniel explained. "These men are marching to Trenton."

"Have they just come from a battle?" David asked. "They look exhausted, and there's blood in the snow." He pointed to the trail, where the snow was streaked with blood.

"Nay. They're marching to a battle." Nathaniel replied. "Their exhausted from marching in these conditions. And from lack of proper food and shelter in their camp. They'll march all

night before they get to the battle. The blood in the snow is from their feet. Many of them don't have shoes."

"I've heard that conditions were terrible in Valley Forge." David said.

"Aye. That they were." Nathaniel agreed. "But that will be next winter. Fortunately these men don't know that's what they have to look forward to. These men are volunteers, like you. And like you, they're asking themselves why they volunteered. They're wondering if anyone knows or cares that they're here. Their enlistments will expire next month, and most aren't planning to re-enlist. But they'll win a major battle tomorrow morning. It won't be a big battle, and tactically it won't be all that important, but will be a major strategic victory. They'll show the world, and themselves, that this rag-tag army can beat the British and their crack Hessian mercenaries. Most of these men will re-enlist after the battle. And the battle will help bring the French in on the side of the Americans."

"That's one of the reasons I volunteered." David said with a touch of pride. "Doing my bit to repay France for Lafayette."

"He was a big help" Nathaniel agreed. "And their navy was an even bigger help. Of course, there were also Prussian volunteers. And a man named von Steuben who taught us how to be soldiers. He was a son of a bitch on the drill field, but he turned us into an army."

David opened his mouth, but discovered he didn't know what to say. For years he'd only thought of the Germans as enemies, and the Prussians represented the worst of Germany. The thought of them as an ally was staggering. And it was slowly beginning to dawn on him that the men marching in front of him were marching to fight the British, who were now our ally.

"War doesn't make much sense if you take a broad view of it, does it?" Nathaniel asked. "But life doesn't often give you a choice. Some very smart men worked very hard to try to avoid this war. One of them was Ben Franklin, who's one of the smartest men who ever lived. Eventually even he came to the conclusion that the colonies had to declare their independence, even though it meant war with Great Britain."

Nathaniel turned his gaze to the men trudging through the snow. "These men gave Franklin and the rest of the Congress the support they needed to make that decision. Without this army, everyone who signed the Declaration of Independence would have signed his own death warrant. No one person could have created this nation, but together these men made it happen." For a long time he silently watched the men shuffle past. Then he spoke again. "They turned the world upside down. They created a country where the government existed to serve the people instead of the other way around. The earthquake they started toppled the monarchy in France and reduced the monarchy in England to a figurehead. The changes were

so dramatic that in less than 150 years England would be our ally in a war against a different monarchy. A war in which you're playing a part. Or at least you will be once I get you back to your post." He let go of David's hand.

David shook his head to clear the sleep from his brain. Good God! He'd fallen asleep on sentry duty! And such a strange dream. He cautiously looked around. No *Sergeant* Laurent. No one had caught him sleeping. He would have spent some time in prison for certain if he'd been caught. He stared back into no-man's-land. Where the hell was his relief, anyway?

He felt a tap on the back of his leg. He turned around and where an instant before there had been empty trench, a British soldier was sitting on an empty grenade crate and staring up at David. A cigarette jutted out of the corner of his mouth, and the smoke curled around the edge of his steel helmet.

"You're a long way from the British sector" David said.

"I ain't no limey" the man replied. The voice was unmistakably American.

"You certainly look like one."

"Yeah, and you look like a frog, but you ain't. I'm a volunteer, same as you. I hitched a ride to England on a cattle boat in 1915 and came over with the Kitchner mob." He stared intently at David for an uncomfortably long time. Then his expression softened a bit. "The name's Arthur, if you're interested."

David had no idea what to say at this point. "Uh, hello Arthur. I'm David." This didn't seem like much so he added "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Anything you can do for me? Didn't GSOC-P tell you I was coming?" Arthur asked.

"GSOC-P?" David was totally confused.

"Ghost Soldier of Christmas Past. He was supposed to brief you about some military event that happened on Christmas in the past. Did he come by?"

"Well, there was a man who called himself Nathaniel . . . but I thought it was just a dream." David was beginning to think he was still dreaming

"Oh. OK. You got Nathaniel." Arthur said this as though it explained everything. "Nice guy, and he's really dedicated, but he's not very well organized. Always losing his tobacco pouch. Did he bum any tobacco off you?" David nodded. "I thought so. And he didn't tell you I was coming. I'm GSOC-C. I'm gonna show you what's going on tonight."

“So you’re the Ghost Soldier of Christmas Present?” David asked tentatively.

Arthur looked at him as though he were a child. “No,” he explained. “That would be GSOC-P, and we’ve already got one of them. We can’t have a Christmas Past and a Christmas Present. That would confuse everyone. I’m Christmas Current, and we’d better get going. We ain’t got all night, you know.” He stood up and held his hand out toward David. As he straightened up David saw his uniform was torn and bloody between his gas mask and his ammunition belt.

“You’re wounded!” David exclaimed.

“No, I’m dead.” Arthur explained calmly. “It goes along with the ‘Ghost’ part of my title. I stepped in front of a machine gun on the Somme. Doesn’t hurt anymore, and it don’t slow me down none. Take my hand.”

David slowly reached out until he touched Arthur’s hand. Instantly everything around him changed. He was still in a trench, but it was drier than his trench and the sides were neatly reinforced with woven sticks. A sentry was standing on the fire step, peering into no-man’s-land. The shape of his helmet alarmed David.

“He’s German!” he hissed to Arthur.

“You’re not the only one keeping watch tonight” Arthur replied. “Don’t worry. He can’t see or hear us. Recognize the terrain?”

It was hard to pick out details because the night was so dark, but the horizon was faintly visible against the night sky. “That shattered chimney looks similar to one in our sector” David observed. “But the shape is different.”

“That’s because you’re seeing it from the other side” Arthur replied. “We’re almost exactly opposite the sap where you were keeping watch.”

The sentry stamped his feet on the fire step. “Mein Gott, es ist kalt!” he whispered to himself. He wrapped a scarf tighter around his neck.

“He’s trying to keep warm, same as you.” Arthur explained. “His name is Karl Schröder. He’s a Bavarian who was drafted in 1916. He was all excited about the war and cheered for the troops in 1914, but he started having doubts when they invaded Belgium. He was a school teacher and he found it difficult to answer some of the questions his students asked about the war. That didn’t matter when they expanded conscription, though, so he kissed his wife and his baby daughter good-bye and went to war. Right now he’s hoping his family has enough food

for Christmas dinner, and enough coal to keep warm. He's also worrying about a trench raid. The Germans think the Foreign Legion doesn't take prisoners."

David shifted uncomfortably. "I wouldn't say that we *never* take prisoners," he said.

"But maybe you don't take them as often as you should?" Arthur asked. "If I handed you a rifle right now, would you shoot him?"

David shook his head no.

"Well then, would you stab him in the belly with a bayonet?"

"Of course not" David immediately snapped.

"But he's the enemy!" Arthur replied. "Have you forgotten why you volunteered to fight for France? Do you want to let the Germans stay in France and Belgium forever?"

"No" David said uncomfortably.

Arthur chuckled. "It ain't so easy to shoot a man when you know his name and his family, is it? It's easier if you just think of him as a Boche or a Hun. What if the Germans were attacking your trench? And Karl was in the middle of the attack, charging at you with a bayonet. Would you shoot him then?"

"Of course!" There was no hesitation in David's answer.

"But it's the same guy! What if you went over the top in an attack? And you saw Karl shooting at your buddies. Would you shoot him?"

"Yes!" David shouted. He was getting angry at these questions.

Arthur's voice softened. "Of course you would. That's necessary to win the war. But you don't win wars just by killing folks. You win wars by defeating the enemy. And sometimes you have to kill folks to do that. It don't make sense. It's not logical that sometimes it's OK to shoot a man and sometimes it ain't, but war ain't logical. This whole mess coulda been avoided if the politicians had acted logically before it started, but they didn't. You can't change that. You can't change the fact that Karl Schröder is standing across from you, thinking about his wife and daughter. All you can do is shoot him if he's keeping you from winning the war and don't shoot him if he ain't."

Arthur paused to let the words sink in. "I am telling you this because you're gonna need to know it in the future. You've seen things and done stuff that will haunt you after the war.

Most of the time you done the right thing. Once in a while you slipped up, but you can't change that. You was trying to do the right thing, but you're human. Humans make mistakes. When the ghosts come to haunt you, you won't be able to chase them away by wishing you did something different. And they won't forgive you if you don't forgive yourself. You just gotta remember why you went to war in the first place, and you gotta remember that you was trying to do the right thing. You also gotta remember that there's a lot of things you can't control. You can't control who the enemy is or where he is. If he's trying to kill you, you gotta kill him first. If he's trying to surrender, you gotta let him live. If you make a mistake, you gotta let go of it."

They stared at the sentry in silence while David thought about this. Then Arthur flipped his cigarette butt onto the ground and said "I think it's time to get you back to your own post." In an instant he was gone, and David was staring at the familiar horizon in front of his trench. He didn't think he'd been asleep, but a confusing jumble of thoughts and images were tumbling through his head. He was trying to make sense of them when he had had the uncomfortable sensation that he wasn't alone. He turned around and saw a soldier slouched against the trench wall, nonchalantly eating a bar of chocolate. At least, he thought it was a soldier. There were no brass buttons, rank, medals, or other military markings on his uniform. He was wearing a shapeless green overcoat, with bulging pockets, that only extended a little past his waist. Loose fitting green trousers, also with bulging pockets, extended from there to a pair of filthy brown boots. The only things that marked him as a soldier were a green steel helmet covered with netting, a canvass ammunition belt with a couple of grenades hanging from the suspenders, and a rifle slung over his shoulder.

"You must be the soldier of Christmas yet to come" David said.

The soldier gave a slight nod of acknowledgement and continued to eat his chocolate.

"Are you American?"

Another slight nod.

"Are you going to show me what Christmas will be like during a war in the future?" David asked.

The soldier wadded the paper wrapping around the remains of his chocolate bar and stuffed it into a pocket. "Hadn't planned to" he replied.

"Has mankind finally learned the folly of war?" David asked hopefully.

The soldier gave a sardonic smile. “Hardly” he replied. “You think you’re fighting in the war that will end all wars, but twenty years after your war there was a real lollapalooza. Wasn’t your fault. You won your war, but the peace treaty that followed was based on hate. Some people say the two wars were just one big war, with a twenty year cease fire. A lot of the same countries were fighting, and a lot of people were killed. But I’m not here to talk about that.”

“What’s the point?” David sat down on the fire step and slumped against his rifle. “I’m freezing my ass off in this Godforsaken strip of France, and for what? So I can pave the way for an even bigger war?”

“Ah, but there *is* a point” the soldier said with surprising gentleness. That’s why I’m here. I want to show you something that’s better than war. Something that’s worth fighting for.” He pulled a knitted glove off his hand and extended it toward David. David hesitated for a moment, but then he reached out and touched it.

The transition seemed gentler this time. David found himself standing in the corner of a warm living room. A Christmas tree stood in the opposite corner, magically lit by dozens of colored lights and hung with more ornaments than David had ever seen. A little boy and a little girl unwrapped presents under the tree and then ran to hug their parents with joy.

“This is peace on earth” the soldier said softly. “The father fought in my war. The mother nursed wounded soldiers back to health, and comforted the ones who couldn’t be saved. But that’s behind them now. There are still wars in the world, but the wars are getting smaller, and they’re affecting fewer people. Things aren’t perfect, but they’re getting better. And it’s not just in the United States. This house is in Chicago, but I could show you similar scenes in Berlin and Dresden. Those were cities that we destroyed during my war, but they’ve come back. In a few years I could show you scenes like this in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Most people in Japan aren’t celebrating Christmas because they’re not Christians, but believe me. Japan has come back. We destroyed Tokyo during my war, but now it’s a thriving city.”

The soldier paused while David thought about this. “Do you know why those cities recovered so quickly? And why the people are happy? It’s because they are free. Their lives are not perfect by any means, but they are in control. They control their government. That’s why there are fewer wars. No longer does a king, or a dictator, or a religious zealot send them blindly off to war. Not every country is free, and sometimes even free countries blunder into a war. But the world is a lot freer than it used to be, and there are more free voices to yell ‘Stop!’ when a country blunders into war. You helped make that happen. And so did I.”

The soldier looked at the happy family and sighed. “All wars are horrible.” he said. “But sometimes good comes out of war. The Revolutionary War weakened the monarchies and gave

birth to the idea that a country could be run by the people. The Civil War ended slavery. Your war toppled the last of the big, autocratic monarchies. My war ended fascist totalitarianism.”

“Will there ever be an end to all war?” David asked.

“I don’t know” the soldier sighed. “I can’t see any further into the future than what my life would have been if I hadn’t stepped on a mine. All I know is that things are getting better.”

David watched the happy family for a long time. Finally he spoke. “I’m glad some good will come from all the death and misery in the trenches. I hope my buddies will believe me when I tell them about this.”

The soldier chuckled. “Well, I wouldn’t be too concerned about that. You know how sometimes you wake up from a dream and you remember it vividly, but as the day goes by the details just seem to fade away? This will be like that. The details will fade very quickly, but the knowledge that you are not fighting in vain will remain.” He took one last, long look at the family and softly said “It’s time to go back.”

This time the transition was much more gradual, as if the spirit was unwilling to leave the tranquil house. David gradually became aware that he was once again staring into no-man’s-land. There was a kind of stark beauty to it which he’d never noticed before. The cold didn’t seem as penetrating either. He felt almost happy, although he couldn’t for the life of him imagine why that would be. He felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned and saw *Sergeant* Laurent standing behind him, holding a rifle as if he were going to take the next watch. This was unheard of! Could it be that the mighty sergeant was unwilling to wake one of his men on Christmas morning?

“Thanks for relieving me.” David said. “And Merry Christmas!”

“Je ne comprend pas?” the sergeant replied.

“Joyeux Noël, mon sergent!” David said. He walked back to the main trench, where he had a blanket waiting. Maybe someone had saved him a bit of the captain’s punch. . .