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ROBERT GRAVES

CHRISTMAS TRUCE

YOUNG STAN COMES around yesterday about teatime -- you know my grandson Stan? He's a Polytechnic student, just turned twenty, as smart as his dad was at the same age. Stan's all out to be a commercial artist and do them big coloured posters for the hoardings. Doesn't answer to 'Stan', though -- says it's 'common'; says he's either 'Stanley' or he's nothing.

Stan's got a bagful of big, noble ideas; all schemed out carefully, with what he calls 'captions' attached.

Well, I can't say nothing against big, noble ideas. I was a red-hot Labour-man myself for a time, forty years ago now, when the Kayser's war ended and the war-profiteers began treading us ex-heroes into the mud. But that's all over long ago -- in fact, Labour's got a damn sight too respectable for my taste! Worse than Tories, most of their leaders is now -- especially them that used to be the loudest in rendering 'We'll Keep the Red Flag Flying Still'. They're all Churchwardens now, or country gents, if they're not in the House of Lords.

Anyhow, yesterday Stan came around, about a big Ban-the-Bomb march all the way across England to Trafalgar Square. And couldn't I persuade a few of my old comrades to form a special squad with a banner marked 'First World War Veterans Protest Against the Bomb'? He wanted us to head the parade, ribbons, crutches, wheel-chairs and all.

I put my foot down pretty hard. 'No, Mr Stanley,' I said politely, 'I regret as I can't accept your kind invitation.'

'But why?' says he. 'You don't want another war, Grandfather, do you? You don't want mankind to be annihilated? This time it won't be just a few unlucky chaps killed, like Uncle Arthur in the First War, and Dad in the Second... It will be all mankind.'

'Listen, young 'un,' I said. 'I don't trust nobody who talks about mankind -- not parsons, not politicians, nor anyone else. There ain't no such thing as "mankind", not practically speaking there ain't.'

'Practically speaking, Grandfather,' says young Stan, 'there is. Mankind means all the different nations lumped together -- us, the Russians, the Americans, the Germans, the French, and all the rest of them. If the bomb goes off, everyone's finished.'

'It's not going off,' I says.

'But it's gone off twice already -- at Hiroshima and Nagasaki,' he argues, 'so why not again? The damage will be definitely final when it does go off.'

I wouldn't let Stan have the last word. 'In the crazy, old-fashioned war in which I lost my foot,' I said, a bit sternly, 'the Fritzes used poison gas. They thought it would help 'em to break through at Wipers. But somehow the line held, and soon our factories were churning out the same stinking stuff for us to use on them. All right, and now what about Hitler's war?'

'What about it?' Stan asks.

'Well,' I says, 'everyone in England was issued an expensive mask in a smart-looking case against poison-gas bombs dropped from the air -- me, your Dad, your Ma, and yourself as a tiny tot. But how many poison-gas bombs were dropped on London, or on Berlin? Not a damned one! Both sides were scared stiff. Poison-gas had got too deadly. No mask in the market could keep the new sorts out. So there's not going to be no atom bombs dropped neither, I tell you, Stanley my lad; not this side of the Hereafter! Everyone's scared stiff again.'

'Then why do both sides manufacture quantities of atom bombs and pile them up?' he asks.

'Search me,' I said, 'unless it's a clever way of keeping up full employment by making believe there's a war on. What with bombs and fall-out shelters, and radar equipment, and unsinkable aircraft-carriers, and satellites, and shooting rockets at the moon, and keeping up big armies -- takes two thousand quid nowadays to maintain a soldier in the field, I read the other day -- what with all that play-acting, there's full employment assured for everyone, and businessmen are rubbing their hands.'

'Your argument has a bad flaw, Grandfather. The Russians don't need to worry about full employment.'

'No,' said I, 'perhaps they don't. But their politicians and commissars have to keep up the notion of a wicked Capitalist plot to wipe out the poor workers. And they have to show that they're well ahead in the Arms Race. Forget it, lad, forget it! Mankind, which is a term used by maiden ladies and bun-punchers, ain't going to be annihilated by no atom bomb.'

Stan changed his tactics. 'Nevertheless, Grandfather,' he says, 'we British want to show the Russians that we're not engaged in any such Capitalist plot. All men are brothers, and I for one have nothing against my opposite number in Moscow, Ivan Whoever-he-may-be... This protest march is the only logical way I can show him my

dislike of organized propaganda.'

'But Ivan Orfalitch ain't here to watch you march; nor the Russian telly ain't going to show him no picture of it. If Ivan thinks you're a bleeding Capitalist, then he'll go on thinking you're a bleeding Capitalist; and he won't be so far out, neither, in my opinion. No, Stan, you can't fight organized propaganda with amachoor propaganda.'

'Oh, can it, Grandfather!' says Stan. 'You're a professional pessimist. And you didn't hate the Germans even when you were fighting them -- in spite of the newspapers. What about that Christmas Truce?'

Well, I'd mentioned it to him one day, I own; but it seems he'd drawn the wrong conclusions and didn't want to be put straight. However, I'm a lucky bloke -- always being saved by what other blokes call 'coincidences', but which I don't; because they always happen when I need 'em most. In the trenches we used to call that 'being in God's pocket'. So, of course, we hear a knock at the door and a shout, and in steps my old mucking-in chum Dodger Green, formerly 301691, Pte. Edward Green of the 1st Batt., North Wessex Regiment -- come to town by bus for a Saturday night booze with me, every bit of twenty miles.

'You're here in the exact nick, Dodger,' says I, 'as once before.' He'd nappooed a Fritz officer one day when I was lying with one foot missing outside Delville Wood, and the Fritz was kindly putting us wounded out of our misery with an automatic pistol.

'What's new, Fiddler?' he asks.

'Tell this lad about the two Christmas truces,' I said. 'He's trying to enlist us for a march to Moscow, or somewhere.'

'Well,' says Dodger, 'I don't see no connection, not yet. And marching to Moscow ain't no worse nor marching to Berlin, same as you and me did -- and never got more nor a few hundred yards forward in the three years we were at it. But, all right, I'll give him the facts, since you particularly ask me.'

Stan listened quietly while Dodger told his tale. I'd heard it often enough before, but Dodger's yarns improve with the telling. You see, I missed most of that first Christmas Truce, as I'll explain later. But I came in for the second; and saw a part of it what Dodger didn't. And the moral I wanted to impress on young Stan depended on there being two truces, not one: them two were a lot different from one another.

I brings a quart bottle of wallop from the kitchen, along with a couple of glasses -- not three, because young Stan don't drink anything so 'common' as beer -- and Dodger held forth. Got a golden tongue, has Dodger -- I've seen him hold an audience spellbound at 'The Three Feathers' from opening-time to stop-tap, and his glass filled

every ten minutes, free.

'Well,' he says, 'the first truce was in 1914, about four months after the Kayser's war began. They say that the old Pope suggested it, and that the Kayser agreed, but that Joffre, the French C.-in-C. wouldn't allow it. However, the Bavarians were sweating on a short spell of peace and good will, being Catholics, and sent word around that the Pope was going to get his way. Consequently, though we didn't have the Bavarians in front of us, there at Boy Greneer, not a shot was fired on our sector all Christmas Eve. In those days we hadn't been issued with Mills bombs, or trench-mortars, or Verey pistols, or steel helmets, or sand bags, or any of them later luxuries; and only two machine-guns to a battalion. The trenches were shallow and knee-deep in water, so that most of the time we had to crouch on the fire-step. God knows how we kept alive and smiling... It wasn't no picnic, was it, Fiddler? -- and the ground half-frozen, too!

'Christmas Eve, at 7.30 p.m., the enemy trenches suddenly lit up with a row of coloured Chinese lanterns, and a bonfire started in the village behind. We stood to arms, prepared for whatever happened. Ten minutes later the Fritzes began singing a Christmas carol called "Stilly Nucked". Our boys answered with "Good King Wencelas", which they'd learned the first verse of as Waits, collecting coppers from door to door. Unfortunately no one knew more than two verses, because Waits always either get a curse or a copper before they reach the third verse.

'Then a Fritz with a megaphone shouts "Merry Christmas, Wessex!"

'Captain Pomeroy was commanding us. Colonel Baggie had gone sick, second-in-command still on leave, and most of the other officers were young second-lieutenants straight from Sandhurst -- we'd taken such a knock, end of October. The Captain was a real gentleman: father, grandfather, and great-grandfather all served in the Wessex. He shouts back: "Who are you?" And they say that they're Saxons, same as us, from a town called Hully in West Saxony.

'"Will your commanding officer meet me in No-man's land to arrange a Christmas truce?" the Captain shouts again. "We'll respect a white flag," he says.

'That was arranged, so Captain Pomeroy and the Fritz officer, whose name was Lieutenant Coburg, climbed out from their trenches and met halfway. They didn't shake hands, but they saluted, and each gave the other word of honour that his troops wouldn't fire a shot for another twenty-four hours. Lieutenant Coburg explained that his Colonel and all the senior officers were back taking it easy at Regimental H.Q. It seems they liked to keep their boots clean, and their hands warm: not like our officers.

'Captain Pomeroy came back pleased as Punch, and said: "The truce starts at dawn, Wessex; but meanwhile we stay in trenches. And if any man of you dares break the truce tomorrow," he says, "I'll shoot him myself, because I've given that German

officer my word. All the same, watch out, and don't let go of your bundooks."

'That suited us; we'd be glad to get up from them damned fire-steps and stretch our legs. So that night we serenaded the Fritzes with all manner of songs, such as "I want to go Home!" and "The Top of the Dixie Lid", and the one about "Old Von Kluck, He Had a Lot of Men"; and they serenaded us with Deutschland Uber Alles, and songs to the concertina.

'We scraped the mud off our puttees and shined our brasses, to look a bit more regimental next morning. Captain Pomeroy, meanwhile, goes out again with a flashlight and arranges a Christmas football match -- kickoff at 10.30 -- to be followed at two o'clock by a burial service for all the corpses what hadn't been taken in because of lying too close to the other side's trenches.

'"Over the top with the best of luck!" shouts the Captain at 8 a.m., the same as if he was leading an attack. And over we went, a bit shy of course, and stood there waiting for the Fritzes. They advanced to meet us, shouting, and five minutes later, there we were...

'Christmas was a peculiar sort of day, if ever I spent one. Hobnobbing with the Hun, so to speak: swapping fags and rum and buttons and badges for brandy, cigars and souvenirs. Lieutenant Coburg and several of the Fritzes talked English, but none of our blokes could sling a word of their bat.

'No-man's land had seemed ten miles across when we were crawling out on a night patrol; but now we found it no wider than the width of two football pitches. We provided the football, and set up stretchers as goal posts; and the Rev. Jolly, our Padre, acted as ref. They beat us 3-2, but the Padre had showed a bit too much Christian charity -- their outside-left shot the deciding goal, but he was miles offside and admitted it soon as the whistle went. And we spectators were spread nearly two deep along the touch-lines with loaded rifles slung on our shoulders.

'We had Christmas dinner in our own trenches, and a German bugler obliged with the mess call -- same tune as ours. Captain Pomeroy was invited across, but didn't think it proper to accept. Then one of our sentries, a farmer's son, sees a hare loping down the line between us. He gives a view halloo, and everyone rushes to the parapet and clambers out and runs forward to cut it off. So do the Fritzes. There ain't no such thing as harriers in Germany; they always use shot-guns on hares. But they weren't allowed to shoot this one, not with the truce; so they turned harriers same as us.

'Young Totty Fahy and a Saxon corporal both made a grab for the hare as it doubled back in their direction. Totty catches it by the forelegs and the Corporal catches it by the hindlegs, and they fall on top of it simultaneous.

'Captain Pomeroy looked a bit worried for fear of a shindy about who caught that hare; but you'd have laughed your head off to see young Totty and the Fritz both politely trying to force the carcase on each other! So the Lieutenant and the Captain gets together, and the Captain says: "Let them toss a coin for it." But the Lieutenant says: "I regret that our men will not perhaps understand. With us, we draw straws." So they picked some withered stems of grass, and Totty drew the long one. He was in our section, and we cooked the hare with spuds that night in a big iron pot borrowed from Duck Farm; but Totty gave the Fritz a couple of bully beef tins, and the skin. Best stoo I ever ate!

'We called 'em "Fritzes" at that time. Afterwards they were "Jerries", on account of their tin hats. Them helmets with spikes called Pickelhaubes was still the issue in 1914, but only for parade use. In the trenches caps were worn; like ours, but grey, and no stiffening in the top. Our blokes wanted pickelhaubes badly to take their fiancées when they went home on leave; but Lieutenant Coburg says, sorry, all pickelhaubes was in store behind the lines. They had to be content with belt-buckles.

'General French commanded the B.E.F at the time -- decent old stick. Said afterwards that if he'd been consulted about the truce, he'd have agreed for chivalrous reasons. He must have reckoned that whichever side beat, us or the Germans, a Christmas truce would help considerably in signing a decent peace at the finish. But the Kayser's High Command were mostly Prussians, and Lieutenant Coburg told us that the Prussians were against the Truce, which didn't agree with their "frightfulness" notions; and though other battalions were fraternizing with the Fritzes up and down the line that day -- but we didn't know it -- the Prussians weren't having any. Nor were some English regiments: such as the East Lancs on our right flank and the Sherwood Foresters on the left -- when the Fritzes came out with white flags, they fired over their heads and waved 'em back. But they didn't interfere with our party. It was worse in the French line: them Frogs machine-gunned all the "Merry Christmas" parties... Of course, the French go in for New Year celebrations more than Christmas.

'One surprise was the two barrels of beer that the Fritzes rolled over to us from the brewery just behind their lines. I don't fancy French beer; but at least this wasn't watered like what they sold us English troops in the estaminets. We broached them out in the open, and the Fritzes broached another two of their own.

'When it came to the toasts, the Captain said he wanted to keep politics out of it. So he offered them "Wives and Sweethearts!" which the Lieutenant accepted. Then the Lieutenant proposed "The King!" which the Captain accepted. There was a King of Saxony too, you see, in them days, besides a King of England; and no names were mentioned. The third toast was "A Speedy Peace!" and each side could take it to mean victory for themselves.

'After dinner came the burial service -- the Fritzes buried their corpses on their side of

the line; we buried ours on ours. But we dug the pits so close together that one service did for both. The Saxons had no Padre with them; but they were Protestants, so the Rev. Jolly read the Service, and a German Divinity Student translated for them. Captain Pomeroy sent for the Drummers and put us through that parade in proper regimental fashion: slow march, arms reversed, muffled drums, a union jack and all.

'An hour before dark, a funny-faced Fritz called Putzi came up with a trestle table. He talked English like a Yank. Said he'd been in Ringling's Circus over in the United States. Called us "youse guys", and put on a hell of a good gaff with conjuring tricks and juggling -- had his face made up like a proper clown. Never heard such applause as we gave Herr Putzi!

'Then, of course, our bastard of a Brigadier, full of turkey and plum pudding and mince pies, decides to come and visit the trenches to wish us Merry Christmas! Captain Pomeroy got the warning from Fiddler here, who was away down on light duty at Battalion H.Q. Fiddler arrived in the nick, running split-arse across the open, and gasping out: "Captain, Sir, the Brigadier's here; but none of us hasn't let on about the Truce."

'Captain Pomeroy recalled us at once. "Imshi, Wessex!" he shouted. Five minutes later the Brigadier came sloshing up the communication trench, keeping his head well down. The Captain tried to let Lieutenant Coburg know what was happening; but the Lieutenant had gone back to fetch him some warm gloves as a souvenir. The Captain couldn't speak German; what's more, the Fritzes were so busy watching Putzi that they wouldn't listen. So Captain Pomeroy shouts to me: "Private Green, run along the line and order the platoon commanders from me to fire three rounds rapid over the enemies' heads." Which I did; and by the time the Brigadier turns up, there wasn't a Fritz in sight.

'The Brigadier, whom we called "Old Horseflesh", shows a lot of Christmas jollity. "I was very glad," he says, "to hear that Wessex fusillade, Pomeroy. Rumours have come in of fraternization elsewhere along the line. Bad show! Disgraceful! Can't interrupt a war for freedom just because of Christmas! Have you anything to report?"

'Captain Pomeroy kept a straight face. He says: "Our sentries report that the enemy have put up a trestle table in No-man's land, Sir. A bit of a puzzle, Sir. Seems to have a bowl of goldfish on it." He kicked the Padre, and the Padre kept his mouth shut.

'Old Horseflesh removes his brass hat, takes his binoculars, and cautiously peeps over the parapet. "They are goldfish, by Gad!" he shouts. "I wonder what new devilish trick the Hun will invent next. Send out a patrol tonight to investigate." "Very good, Sir," says the Captain.

'Then Old Horseflesh spots something else: it's Lieutenant Coburg strolling across the

open between his reserve and front lines; and he's carrying the warm gloves. "What impudence! Look at that swaggering German officer! Quick, here's your rifle, my lad! Shoot him down pointblank!" It seems Lieutenant Coburg must have thought that the fusillade came from the Foresters on our flank; but now he suddenly stopped short and looked at No-man's land, and wondered where everyone was gone.

'Old Horseflesh shoves the rifle into my hand. "Take a steady aim," he says. "Squeeze the trigger, don't pull!" I aimed well above the Lieutenant's head and fired three rounds rapid. He staggered and dived head-first into a handy shell-hole.

'"Congratulations," said Old Horseflesh, belching brandy in my face. "You can cut another notch in your rifle butt. But what effrontery! Thought himself safe on Christmas Day, I suppose! Ha, ha!" He hadn't brought Captain Pomeroy no gift of whisky or cigars, nor nothing else; stingy bastard, he was. At any rate, the Fritzes caught on, and their machine-guns began traversing tock-tock-tock, about three feet above our trenches. That sent the Brigadier hurrying home in such a hurry that he caught his foot in a loop of telephone wire and went face forward into the mud. It was his first and last visit to the front line.

'Half an hour later we put up an ALL CLEAR board. This time us and the Fritzes became a good deal chummier than before. But Lieutenant Coburg suggests it would be wise to keep quiet about the lark. The General Staff might get wind of it and kick up a row, he says. Captain Pomeroy agrees. Then the Lieutenant warns us that the Prussian Guards are due to relieve his Saxons the day after Boxing Day. "I suggest that we continue the Truce until then, but with no more fraternization," he says. Captain Pomeroy agrees again. He accepts the warm gloves and in return gives the Lieutenant a Shetland wool scarf. Then he asks whether, as a great favour, the Wessex might be permitted to capture the bowl of goldfish, for the Brigadier's sake. Herr Putzi wasn't too pleased, but Captain Pomeroy paid him for it with a gold sovereign and Putzi says: "Please, for Chrissake, don't forget to change their water!"

'God knows what the Intelligence made of them goldfish when they were sent back to Corps H.Q., which was a French luxury shadow... I expect someone decided the goldfish have some sort of use in trenches, like the canaries we take down the coal pits.

'Then Captain Pomeroy says to the Lieutenant: "From what I can see, Coburg, there'll be a stalemate on this front for a year or more. You can't crack our line, even with massed machine-guns; and we can't crack yours. Mark my words: our Wessex and your West Saxons will still be rotting here next Christmas -- what's left of them."

'The Lieutenant didn't agree, but he didn't argue. He answered: "In that case, Pomeroy, I hope we both survive to meet again on that festive occasion; and that our troops show the same gentlemanly spirit as today."

'"I'll be very glad to do so," says the Captain, "if I'm not scuppered meanwhile." They shook hands on that, and the truce continued all Boxing Day. But nobody went out into No-man's land, except at night to strengthen the wire where it had got trampled by the festivities. And of course we couldn't prevent our gunners from shooting; and neither could the Saxons prevent theirs. When the Prussian Guards moved in, the war started again; fifty casualties we had in three days, including young Totty who lost an arm.

'In the meantime a funny thing had happened: the sparrows got wind of the truce and came flying into our trenches for biscuit crumbs. I counted more than fifty in a flock on Boxing Day.

'The only people who objected strongly to the truce, apart from the Brigadier and a few more like him, was the French girls. Wouldn't have nothing more to do with us for a time when we got back to billets. Said we were no bon and boko camarade with the Allemans.'

Stan had been listening to this tale with eyes like stars. 'Exactly,' he said. 'There wasn't any feeling of hate between the individuals composing the opposite armies. The hate was all whipped up by the newspapers. Last year, you remember, I attended the Nürnberg Youth Rally. Two other fellows whose fathers had been killed in the last war, like mine, shared the same tent with four German war-orphans. They weren't at all bad fellows.'

'Well, lad,' I said, taking up the yarn where Dodger left off, 'I didn't see much of that first Christmas Truce owing to a spent bullet what went into my shoulder and lodged under the skin: the Medico cut it out and kept me off duty until the wound healed. I couldn't wear a pack for a month, so, as Dodger told you, I got Light Duty down at Battalion H.Q., and missed the fun. But the second Christmas Truce, now that was another matter. By then I was Platoon Sergeant to about twenty men signed on for the Duration of the War -- some of them good, some of 'em His Majesty's bad bargains.

'We'd learned a lot about trench life that year; such as how to drain trenches and build dug-outs. We had barbed wire entanglements in front of us, five yards thick, and periscopes, and listening-posts out at sap-heads; also trench-mortars and rifle-grenades, and bombs, and steel-plates with loop-holes for sniping through.

'Now I'll tell you what happened, and Dodger here will tell you the same. Battalion orders went round to company H.Q. every night in trenches, and the C.O. was now Lieut.-Colonel Pomeroy -- D.S.O. with bar. He'd won brevet rank for the job he did rallying the battalion when the big German mine blew Ccompany to bits and the Fritzes followed up with bombs and bayonets. However, when he sent round Orders two days before Christmas 1915, Colonel Pomeroy (accidentally on purpose) didn't tell the Adjutant to include the "Official Warning to All Troops" from General Sir Douglas

Haig. Haig was our new Commander-in-Chief. You hear about him on Poppy Day -- the poppies he sowed himself, most of 'em! He'd used his influence with King George, to get General French booted out and himself shoved into the job. His "Warning" was to the effect that any man attempting to fraternize with His Majesty's enemies on the poor excuse of Christmas would be court-martialled and shot. But Colonel Pomeroy never broke his word, not even if he swung for it; and here he was alongside the La Bassée Canal, and opposite us were none other than the same West Saxons from Hully!

'The Colonel knew who they were because we'd coshed and caught a prisoner in a patrol scrap two nights before, and after the Medico plastered his head, the bloke was brought to Battalion H.Q. under escort (which was me and another man). The Colonel questioned him through an interpreter about the geography of the German trenches: where they kept that damned minny-werfer, how and when the ration parties came up, and so on. But this Fritz wouldn't give away a thing; said he'd lost his memory when he'd got coshed. So at last the Colonel remarked in English: "Very well, that's all. By the way, is Lieutenant Coburg still alive?"

'"Oh, yeah," says the Fritz, surprised into talking English. "He's back again after a coupla wounds. He's a Major now, commanding our outfit."

'Then a sudden thought struck him. "For Chrissake," he says, "ain't you the Wessex officer who played Santa Claus last year and fixed that truce?"

'"I am," says the Colonel, "and you're Putzi Cohen the Conjurer, from whom I once bought a bowl of goldfish! It's a small war!"

'That's why, you see, the Colonel hadn't issued Haig's warning. About eighty or so of us old hands were still left, mostly snobs, bobbajers, drummers, transport men, or wounded blokes rejoined. The news went the rounds, and they all rushed Putzi and shook his hand and asked couldn't he put on another conjuring gaff for them? He says: "Ask Colonel Santa Claus! He's still feeding my goldfish."

'I was Putzi's escort, before I happened to have coshed him and brought him in; but I never recognized him without his grease paint -- not until he started talking his funny Yank English.

'The Colonel sends for Putzi again, and says: "I don't think you're quite well enough to travel. I'm keeping you here as a hospital case until after Christmas."

'Putzi lived like a prize pig the next two days, and put on a show every evening -- card tricks mostly, because he hadn't his accessories. Then came Christmas Eve, and a sergeant of the Holy Boys who lay on our right flank again, remarked to me it was a pity that "Stern-Endeavour" Haig had washed out our Christmas fun. "First I've heard

about," says I, "and what's more, chum, I don't want to hear about it, see? Not officially, I don't."

'I'd hardly shut my mouth before them Saxons put out Chinese lanterns again and started singing "Stilly Nucked". They hadn't fired a shot, neither, all day.

'Soon word comes down the trench: "Colonel's orders: no firing as from now, without officer's permission."

'After stand-to next morning, soon as it was light, Colonel Pomeroy he climbed out of the trench with a white handkerchief in his hand, picked his way through our wire entanglements and stopped halfway across No-man'sland. "Merry Christmas, Saxons!" he shouted. But Major Coburg had already advanced towards him. They saluted each other and shook hands. The cheers that went up! "Keep in your trenches, Wessex!" the Colonel shouted over his shoulder. And the Major gave the same orders to his lot.

'After jabbering a bit they agreed that any bloke who'd attended the 1914 party would be allowed out of trenches, but not the rest -- they could trust only us regular soldiers. Regulars, you see, know the rules of war and don't worry their heads about politics nor propaganda; them Duration blokes sickened us sometimes with their patriotism and their lofty skiting, and their hatred of "the Teuton foe" as one of 'em called the Fritzes.

'Twice more Saxons than Wessex came trooping out. We'd strict orders to discuss no military matters -- not that any of our blokes had been studying German since the last party. Football was off, because of the overlapping shell holes and the barbed wire, but we got along again with signs and a bit of café French, and swapped fags and booze and buttons. But the Colonel wouldn't have us give away no badges. Can't say we were so chummy as before. Too many of ours and theirs had gone west that year and, besides, the trenches weren't flooded like the first time.

'We put on three boxing bouts: middle, welter and light; won the welter and light with k.o.'s, lost the middle on points. Colonel Pomeroy took Putzi up on parole, and Putzi gave an even prettier show than before, because Major Coburg had sent back for his grease paints and accessories. He used a parrokeet this time instead of goldfish.

'After dinner we found we hadn't much more to tell the Fritzes or swap with them, and the officers decided to pack up before we all got into trouble. The Holy Boys had promised not to shoot, and the left flank was screened by the Canal bank. As them two was busy discussing how long the no-shooting truce should last, all of a sudden the Christmas spirit flared up again. We and the Fritzes found ourselves grabbing hands and forming a ring around the pair of them -- Wessex and West Saxons all mixed anyhow and dancing from right to left to the tune of "Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush", in and out of shell holes. Then our R.S.M. pointed to Major Coburg, and some of our blokes hoisted him on their shoulders and we all sang "For He's a Jolly Good

Fellow". And the Fritzes hoisted our Colonel up on their shoulders too, and sang Hock Solla Leeben, or something... Our Provost-sergeant took a photo of that; pity he got his before it was developed.

'Now here's something I heard from Lightning Collins, an old soldier in my platoon. He'd come close enough to overhear the Colonel and the Major's conversation during the middle-weight fight when they thought nobody was listening. The Colonel says: "I prophesied last year, Major, that we'd still be here this Christmas, what was left of us. And now I tell you again that we'll still be here next Christmas, and the Christmas after. If we're not scuppered; and that's a ten to one chance. What's more, next Christmas there won't be any more fun and games and fraternization. I'm doubtful whether I'll get away with this present act of insubordination; but I'm a man of my word, as you are, and we've both kept our engagement."

'"Oh, yes, Colonel," says the Major. "I too will be lucky if I am not court-martialled. Our orders were as severe as yours." So they laughed like crows together.

'Putzi was the most envied man in France that day: going back under safe escort to a prison camp in Blighty. And the Colonel told the Major: "I congratulate you on that soldier. He wouldn't give away a thing!"

'At four o'clock sharp we broke it off; but the two officers waited a bit longer to see that everyone got back. But no, young Stan, that's not the end of the story! I had a bloke in my platoon called Gipsy Smith, a dark-faced, dirty soldier, and a killer. He'd been watching the fun from the nearest sap-head, and no sooner had the Major turned his back than Gipsy aimed at his head and tumbled him over.

'The first I knew of it was a yell of rage from everyone all round me. I see Colonel Pomeroy run up to the Major, shouting for stretcher-bearers. Them Fritzes must have thought the job was premeditated, because when our stretcher-bearers popped out of the trench, they let 'em have it and hit one bloke in the leg. His pal popped back again.

'That left the Colonel alone in No-man's land. He strolled calmly towards the German trenches, his hands in his pockets -- being too proud to raise them over his head. A couple of Fritzes fired at him, but both missed. He stopped at their wire and shouted: "West Saxons, my men had strict orders not to fire. Some coward has disobeyed. Please help me carry the Major's body back to your trenches! Then you can shoot me, if you like; because I pledged my word that there'd be no fighting."

'The Fritzes understood, and sent stretcher-bearers out. They took the Major's body back through a crooked lane in their wire, and Colonel Pomeroy followed them. A German officer bandaged the Colonel's eyes as soon as he got into the trench, and we waited without firing a shot to see what would happen next. That was about four o'clock, and nothing did happen until second watch. Then we see a flashlight

signalling, and presently the Colonel comes back, quite his usual self.

'He tells us that, much to his relief, Gipsy's shot hadn't killed the Major but only furrowed his scalp and knocked him senseless. He'd come to after six hours, and when he saw the Colonel waiting there, he'd ordered his immediate release. They'd shaken hands again, and said: "Until after the war!", and the Major gives the Colonel his flashlight.

'Now the yarn's nearly over, Stan, but not quite. News of the truce got round, and General Haig ordered first an Inquiry and then a Court Martial on Colonel Pomeroy. He wasn't shot, of course; but he got a severe reprimand and lost five years' seniority. Not that it mattered, because he got shot between the eyes in the 1916 Delville Wood show where I lost my foot.

'As for Gipsy Smith, he said he'd been obeying Haig's strict orders not to fraternize, and also he'd felt bound to avenge a brother killed at Loos. "Blood for blood," he said, "is our gipsy motto." So we couldn't do nothing but show what we thought by treating him like the dirt he was. And he didn't last long. I sent Gipsy back with the ration party on Boxing Night. We were still keeping up our armed truce with the Saxons, but again their gunners weren't a party to it, and outside the Quartermaster's hut Gipsy got his backside removed by a piece of howitzer shell. Died on the hospital train, he did.

'Oh, I was forgetting to tell you that no sparrows came for biscuit crumbs that Christmas. The birds had all cleared off months before.

'Every year that war got worse and worse. Before it ended, nearly three years later, we'd have ten thousand officers and men pass through that one battalion, which was never at more than the strength of five hundred rifles. I'd had three wounds by 1916; some fellows got up to six before it finished. Only Dodger here came through without a scratch. That's how he got his name, dodging the bullet that had his name and number on it. The Armistice found us at Mons, where we started. There was talk of "Hanging the Kayser"; but they left him to chop wood in Holland instead. The rest of the Fritzes had their noses properly rubbed in the dirt by the Peace Treaty. But we let them re-arm in time for a second war, Hitler's war, which is how your Dad got killed. And after Hitler's war there'd have been a third war, just about now, which would have caught you, Stanley my lad, if it weren't for that blessed bomb you're asking me to march against.

'Now, listen, lad: if two real old fashioned gentlemen like Colonel Pomeroy and Major Coburg -- never heard of him again, but I doubt if he survived, having the guts he had -- if two real men like them two couldn't hope for a third Christmas Truce in the days when "mankind", as you call 'em was still a little bit civilized, tell me, what can you hope for now?

'Only fear can keep the peace,' I said. 'The United Nations are a laugh, and you know it. So thank your lucky stars that the Russians have H-bombs and that the Yanks have H-bombs, stacks of 'em, enough to blow your "mankind" up a thousand times over; and that everyone's equally respectful of everyone else, though not on regular visiting terms.'

I stopped, out of breath, and Dodger takes Stan by the hand. 'You know what's right for you, lad?' he says. 'So don't listen to your Granddad. Don't be talked out of your beliefs! He's one of the Old and Bold, but maybe he's no wiser nor you and I.'