



In years to come they'll swear it never happened. It *couldn't* have happened. "You're joking," some smart Alec will say. "You're never telling me that you and Fritz laid down yer guns and set to with a football like it was a Saturday afternoon kickabout?" Maybe I'll clip that smart Alec round the ear. Or maybe I'll just say to him, "You don't know. You weren't there."

I *was* there. I know.

I remember when the spirit of Christmas came down and knocked some sense into us. How we had a real bit of loving our enemies and doing good to those who despise us. And if it was only for a few hours, so what? Better to do that on Christmas day than knock seven types of shit out of each other. We had a laugh, too—Fritz put up a sign saying, "Gott mit uns" and one of our boys put up a sign that said, "We got mittens too."

There was a young German lad who I spotted and made a beeline for. Just to have a chat, of course, but why not enjoy the chance while you can? He told me his name—Edgar—and showed me a picture of his girl, Heike. She was nice enough in a Prussian sort of style, although she wasn't a stunner like him. I told him my name—Harry—but I didn't have a picture of a girl to show him, just one of my family. He said nice things about them, seeing as he spoke quite good English, enough for us to get along. I didn't have a word of German, but I did have some Woodbines and they're a universal language, aren't they?

So we shared a couple of gaspers and cheered on the footballers, chatting away until somebody decided we'd had enough fun. Then it was back to the trenches and heads down, ready to shoot anybody across the way who peeped out, irrespective of whether we'd just been playing football and singing Christmas songs with them.

I spent the next few weeks scared stiff that I'd pick off Edgar or end up in hand to hand combat with him if they made a sortie. But then we got moved back from the line and eventually popped up several miles east, so that worry eased off, even if I didn't forget him. How could you forget blue eyes like his?

That all happened as 1914 was creeping its way into 1915, and by midsummer of that year I was home, with two fingers missing off my left hand. Only having three fifths of the required digits was enough for me to get a trip home to Blighty, although not enough to stop me keeping the books at the local factory. They were delighted to have me back, especially as I brought a military medal with me. I've always suspected the boss made more of it than I did; vicarious heroism or something like that.

Come 1919 and the peace which I'd thought would never arrive, I was feeling the itch to go back to Belgium and pay my respects to my old muckers. When my bachelor uncle died, leaving me his house and a tidy sum to go with it, I took the leave I was owed and headed across the Channel.

I was pottering around some of the makeshift graveyard sites, alternately trying to put on a brave front and wondering why the hell I was bothering with the effort, when I saw a vaguely familiar shape. I couldn't place him at first, and us both being in mufti I didn't have the usual clues a uniform can give, but he waved, so he must have recognised me. I waved back with my half a hand, and he limped closer on what must have been either an injured leg, or an artificial limb.

At five yards away, the penny dropped. I got a glimpse of those blue eyes and the tentative smile.

"Edgar!"

"Harry! You have remembered me."

How could I forget? We shook hands, just as we had five years previously before we'd been herded back to our trenches.

"I am glad you survived," he said, with his devastating smile.

"So am I, believe me." Best to get the key question dealt with early on. "How's Heike?"

"Married. To a farmer who has both of his legs still whole." Edgar didn't seem heartbroken at the fact. "I got her news while I was in hospital."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not. She's happier where she is." I later found out she'd had her doubts before he'd marched off to the front. Maybe she saw the war as an opportunity of thinking things through, or even to have her problem solved for her by one of our bullets. But that's getting ahead of this part of the story. "You will be wanting to be alone with your thoughts. Would you like to meet for dinner?"

"I would like that very much."

We arranged when and where to meet, then with a cuff of my arm he was off, leaving me all of a shiver. I'd been thinking of him, see, on and off ever since we shared those Woodbines, despite the guilt. Not guilt about having what the parson calls carnal thoughts about another bloke—I got over that years ago—but the fact those thoughts had been about one of the enemy. Although seeing as the Armistice was done and dusted, I don't suppose he *was* the enemy anymore.

I went off on my pilgrimage, paying my respects where I could, trying not to think about meeting Edgar for dinner; just because Heike was off the scene didn't necessarily mean what I wanted it to mean. There might be an Elke or a Brunhilde for all I knew, with a bouncing babe on her lap. Even if there wasn't, what chance was there that he'd like men in the way I like them? And what chance that he fancied me?

As my old serjeant used to say about getting home for Christmas, "Fat chance, me old cock." And yet...there'd been something in the way he'd looked at me, both Christmas morning and just that day, which wasn't my imagination. You might call it a clear twinkle of curiosity,

the sort of thing I'd seen in certain men in certain places that meant, "You're on a winner tonight if you fancy it."

When it came to Edgar, I fancied it alright.

I was in a right old state by the time we met up, although I'd avoided Dutch courage as I was at enough risk of saying what I shouldn't. You always have to tread a careful path. But Edgar seemed as delighted as I was to remake acquaintance; we ordered wine and food and sat in the late autumn sunshine in the estaminet's tiny garden.

"Your English puts me to shame," I said, once we were settled. "It's even better than I remembered it."

"I have been practicing." He took a drink, but he didn't give me any further enlightenment as to why he'd had the need to practice. "I will teach you some words of German, if you wish."

"I might take you up on that." Especially if what I learned was along the lines of, "I don't half fancy you."

We chatted away, discussing what we'd returned to away from army life. Turned out he was a master carpenter, so it was just as well I was the one who'd lost a couple of fingers. Soon the wine and the sunshine had gone to my head, my tongue giving away my thoughts.

"Tell me off for being a nosey bastard, but was it your leg injury that put your Heike off marrying you? It happened to a couple of pals of mine back home." I stopped, realising I was about to launch into a big, unnecessary explanation.

He just smiled, then took another sip of wine. "No, I do not think so. We simply realised we are now too different." He stared up at the sky. "I do not think I shall bother to marry."

I stared at *him*, willing him to turn towards me so I could read those blue eyes. Eventually I got my wish.

"And you? Is there a wife or a girl waiting at home?" he asked, with a suggestion that the answer mattered to him.

"No. My mother always reckoned I was maid shy, but it's not just that. I can't see myself marrying, either." I held his gaze, the way I'd held blokes' gazes in the past. "See, it's a case of—" the arrival of some bread and butter put a stop to what I'd intended saying.

We ate, with conversation remaining on the excellence of the bread, and how the stuff we'd had in the trenches barely passed for food at times. When our meals came, I thought I'd missed my chance, but as soon as we'd eaten our fill he looked at me again, with *that* glint in his eyes and asked, "Where are you staying?"

I told him about the little room I'd taken at a small place nearby. It was small but spotlessly clean and compared to the previous places I'd slept in Belgium it was the height of luxury. He had similar accommodation at another local boarding house, only his room had two beds, because his mate was supposed to have been coming with him but had changed his mind at the last moment.

"He was too scared of what old memories he might find here," Edgar said, with a shrug. "So, I thought if you didn't have a room you could share mine, but as you have one..."

I tapped the table, suddenly inspired. "Funnily enough, you could be helping somebody out, believe it or not. When I booked in, the manager was telling me he was trying to find a space for a young war widow who'd turned up on the off chance. He was fully booked, so had to offer her a room sharing with a stranger, but if I bunk up with you, he could give her mine."

It was nothing but the truth, another example of Lady Luck smiling at us.

“Very generous and very sensible. The spirit of Christmas must linger here still.” Edgar waved his hand, airily. “I was about to suggest we took a glass of brandy here, but it would be discourteous to keep this poor young lady waiting any longer. We can drink just as well at my lodging.”

I went back to my hotel, heart going nineteen to the dozen, while Edgar waited on a seat in what was left of the town square. I managed—just—to get my message across to the host coherently, and he was very grateful to me for my generosity. I collected my things and was on the way back to meet Edgar when the doubts set in. What if I was letting my trousers run ahead of my brain? For all I knew, he’d have cleared off, leaving me without any lodging for the night, as some sort of cruel joke. I know that’s not logical, but when do worries and logic necessarily coincide?

There was a worse scenario. The offer of a bed for the night might be no more than that, a gesture between friends. I know blokes who took a while to get used to living on their own, sleeping in a room for one after all those years of being forced into other people’s company. I always swore I’d treat myself to spending a whole week on my own, when the bloody war was over, although when it came to it, I only managed a day. All the things we were going to do when the war was over—how many of them came to fruition, even if we still had the arms and legs and sanity to do them? One thing I’d never thought of doing was the one I might have the chance of that night.

As I came in sight of the square, I was pleased to see him still sitting there, but as that one worry went, another came hard on its heels. Me and one of the enemy. What would the lads have said about that, the ones who lay in the soil here, killed by Edgar’s mates, maybe? Would they think me a traitor, or would the spirit of that truce prevail?

As I drew closer, Edgar stood and waved to me. At that very point a church bell started ringing somewhere close by, low and sweet. I don’t believe in signs, but I took that as one. “All sorted?” He asked.

“All sorted.”

We had that brandy back at his—our—hotel, then we went up the wooden hill. I unpacked my stuff while he sat on his bed and chatted reassuringly, as though he could see straight into my mind. He went to the bathroom, then I took my turn; when I got back to the room he’d changed into an old-fashioned nightshirt, which raised the question of whether I was going to strip in front of him and put on my pyjamas or whether I’d go, all coy like, behind the screen.

Nothing venture, nothing gain, so it was strip there and then, although I didn’t include a tease with it. Didn’t take long for me to realise he was watching me, with a distinct look of appreciation in his eye. When I’d got down to my drawers, I paused and turned to him, smiling so he knew I wasn’t upset at being admired. He looked me up and down—*that* look, I’ve seen it often enough.

“I know you speak no German,” he said, “but do you have any French?”

“A little. *Sivvoo play* and *merci*. Why?”

He wore a shy smile. “I wondered if you knew the meaning of *voulez vous couchez avec moi?*”

“Oh, yes. I know that one alright.” I checked the door was locked then sat next to him on the bed. “Wee. Jer ver.”

“That may be poor French, but it is the correct answer.” He leaned in, kissed me and the thing I’d dreamed of on Christmas Day of 1914 at last came true; reconciliation between two nations, at least between these two small parts of them.

Afterwards, as we lay sharing a Woodbine—I'd brought a packet with me for old time's sake—I tried not to think about the future. I mean, you're feeling like a girl must do when she meets the bloke she wants to pop the question, but what chance have you got in my case? Two blokes, and one of them a Jerry. Maybe if I got through the next five minutes, then the next five after that, I'd find we'd got through an hour, and then the night. Maybe if we took it five minutes at a time we could get through a week, a fortnight...

"What are you thinking of?"

"Me?" Snuggling closer, I said the first thing that came into my head. "Just wondering why you learned English, Edgar."

"I will tell you if you promise not to laugh at me. I like your Sherlock Holmes. I wanted to read him in the original form."

"I'm not laughing. It's as good a reason as any. I like a good Conan Doyle, myself." I felt rather than heard him chuckle, then kiss the top of my head.

"And I wanted to understand your humour, too. *We got mittens*. Remember?"

"I do."

"I thought if we two ever met again, I wanted to be able to make a joke. They say we have no sense of humour, as a race."

I sat up, better to see if he was having me on, but he appeared serious enough. "So, have you got a joke, then?"

He nodded. "Why did the Tommy use a long cigarette holder? Because he promised his mother he'd stay away from Woodbines."

I chuckled, even though I'd heard it before, about an Aussie soldier. "That's almost funny. Well done."

"You should learn a bit of German. Then you could tell me your jokes in my own language and I might understand them."

"I might just do that." I snuggled down with him again. "We could have our own Christmas truce again, this year. Mark the anniversary."

"I would like that." He started nuzzling my neck. "And in the meantime, I would like this."

"So would I, old cock."

Sorting out the how and where and all the rest of that anniversary celebration could wait. In the trenches, we lived by the day and by the moment, and that's what we could do in that small room. We had found a bit of peace on earth and a touch of goodwill: how could that hurt anyone?

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