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COHEN GOES TO CONFESSION

A Very Strange But True War-Time Christmas Story
Dealing with a German-Jewish-Irish-American
Plan That Worked

The Holy Sacrament of Penance, in itself a most serious matter, often furnished the basis for amusing tales. None, surely, is more amusing than the solemn but no less mirth-provoking story of how an American army chaplain who could not speak German, assisted by a Berlin Jew, actually gave absolution to German prisoner patients in a hospital in France.

It was the eve of the first Christmas after the Armistice, when a world recovering from four years' dreadful carnage was preparing to celebrate with increased fervor the birth of the Prince of Peace.

Close to the Bay of Biscay, on the outskirts of the city made famous by the religious tolerance edict of Henry of Navarre, seventy-five wounded prisoners of war let their minds wander to distant German homes where they liked to think that loved ones, trimming der Tannenbaum, gave thought to the absent father, husband, son or brother—a prisoner "somewhere in France." There was a Christmas tree in the ward, and those patients able to be about were busily decorating it with original and marvelous creations from the silver wrappings of chewing-gum, chocolate bars and cigarettes, the blue paper protection of rolls of absorbent cotton, variegated bits from tobacco tins. Those who could look through windows saw corps men and convalescent patients hurrying to and fro, carrying stretchers devoid of human forms. Instead, each litter was piled high with Christmas socks that were stuffed to overflowing.

Someone was playing Santa Claus on a wholesale scale. Even the sun was shining, after weeks and weeks of constant rain. God in Heaven seemed to smile upon His children' tranquil at last after a prolonged family squabble. That rare bit of sunshine beckoned all to come out doors, but of little value such an invitation to a prisoner! Even for those not confined to beds by the seriousness of their wounds, it was verboten to cross the threshold.

A Red-headed Irish Nurse Appears. But the ward was not such a bad place now that they had a nurse. When the big Arzonne drive was on for several weeks after the Armistice, hospital trains had brought several thousand American wounded into the hospital center at Grand Blottereau, where I was on Red Cross duty. Segregated according to the nature of their disabilities, most of the generous fracture cases went to Base 11; the hospital where the wounded "Jerries" were. Surgeons, nurses, orderlies, all disregarded scheduled hours trying to salvage human beings from pitiable wreckage. In such an emergency, the skillful care of a trained nurse could not be spared for prisoners. It must have been some time in December when the first nurse was put on duty in the prison ward.

May Fiske could not speak a word of German, but the natural kindness of her heart required no oral expression. She was the possessor of three dominant Irish characteristics besides her reddish hair—a genius for insubordination, love of the oppressed, and abundant religious faith. There

Villanova Students Strongly Support Catholic Press

Villanova, Pa., Dec.—One out of every two-and-a-half students at Villanova College subscribes to some Catholic newspaper or magazine, the Rev. Edward V. Stanford, O. S. A., director of religious activities, has discovered.

The engineering students lead the list, with 86 per cent getting some Catholic publication regularly. The School of Arts, Letters and Philosophy is second with 36 per cent; the School of Science earned a 31.1-2 per cent rating, and the School of Commerce and Finance trailed with 12.1-2 per cent.

Catholic Daughters To Attend Carthage Eucharistic Congress

New York, Dec. 13.—The Catholic Daughters of America will be represented by a delegation of pilgrims, members of the organization, in courts of principal North American cities, at the 1930 biennial international Eucharistic Congress, according to announcement made here today by National Secretary Miss Katharine M. Rosney, of Poughkeepsie, N. Y., at the C. D. of A. National headquarters. Supreme Regent Miss Mary C. Duffy, of Newark, N. J., is expected to officially designate the leaders of the Catholic Daughters' delegation, to represent all sections of the United States at the Carthage Congress.

was a rumor to the effect that her assignment to the prison ward resulted from the first of the three, but whether or not, the second made her an angel in disguise from the prisoners' point of view.

I had often seen May at Mass, but my first real conversation with her occurred the day she came into my office and said: "Miss McKiever, can't the Red Cross supply some soap to clean the poor devils in the prison ward? You know men aren't any good around the sick, and those orderlies let that ward get so dirty it will take an awful lot of soap to clean it. I've used up more than my week's supply and have drawn on my next, but can't vamp another bar from the supply sergeant."

There was very little soap on hand, but what I had I gave her.

The next day she was back again. This time she wanted pipes: "You know how it is, Miss McKiever, my 'Jerries' (they had been duly adopted, by then) don't get any kick out of cigarettes; they're used to pipes." It so happened that I had on hand several boxes of good pipes, but no American doughboy would condescend to smoke; so I made May a present of the lot and threw in several tins of tobacco, mentally praying that I was not sinfully and wantonly misappropriating the "Gifts of the American People to Those in Service."

Enter Mr. Cohen of Berlin

Later in the day I was summoned to the prison ward, incapable of guessing what new emergency had arisen. I plowed through mud past the row of ugly, drab shacks that made up our hospital, until I reached the last, the prison ward. With a scrubbing brush in one hand, the remains of a cake of soap in the other, her cap slightly out of line and her gray cotton crepe uniform considerably spotted, May Fiske greeted me as I entered. Calling to her a short, somewhat bald prisoner of unmistakable Hebrew lineage, she presented Erich Cohen erstwhile Berlin banker, but for the nonce official and only translator for the ward. After a preliminary expression of collective gratitude for the pipes, Cohen led me from bed to bed, introducing me to each occupant as das gnaedige Fraeulein who had provided the pipes and interpreting each word of thanks.

That was my first meeting with Cohen but it was not to be my last. Some days later, I was passing the ward when he called to me from the door through which he must not pass. It was not a question of creature comfort that burdened the interpreter's mind that day, but spiritual affairs. He explained that there were a number of Rhinelanders and Bavarians among the prisoners, some of them walking patients, who were greatly distressed because for many months they had not had an opportunity of hearing Mass. He asked me whether something could be done about it for the walking patients at least. I assured him that I would consult the Sergeant Major, himself a Catholic and, therefore, appreciative of the importance of hearing Mass. But this was too big a problem for the Sergeant Major and the matter was referred to the Commanding Officer. When the C. O. said to me, "All right, they can go to Mass if you'll be responsible for them," I thought he was being facetious, but he really meant it. Thereafter, on a Sunday morning, I could be seen with several "Jerries" at my heels, hurrying to the mess hall, the receiving ward, the post office, the Red cross hut, or wherever Mass was being said that day. There never was a prisoner guard who had less trouble with his charges.

The Strangest Christmas Confession. There were two Catholic Chaplains at Grand Blottereau; the most have been—including hospital personnel as well as patients—between five and six thousand American men and women. What percentage of these were Catholics, I dare not venture to guess, but I know that there had been a double line waiting since early morning to enter the temporary confessionals. Besides, there was a large number of bed patients who could not come to the priests. Eventually, Father Campbell reached the German ward.

His first act was to call the interpreter and say, "Cohen, you will have to help me hear these men's confessions."

"But, Vater," Cohen reminded me, "I am not of de Faith."

"I know that," Father Campbell replied, "but we'll have to figure out some way for you to help me."

It was then that an Irish-American nurse, an American Catholic priest,

(Continued on Page 11)

GREETINGS

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