

Sergt. Empey's Own Story of His Life

ARTICLE III.

Teaching Tommies Baseball

Sergeant Arthur Guy Empey, author of "Over the Top," has won his place as one of the most vivid and picturesque writers of the Great War. In this series of articles, published exclusively in New York in The Tribune, he tells of his own varied experiences and thrilling adventures. Next Sunday's instalment is "Love vs. Wine."

By Arthur Guy Empey

WE WERE sitting on a fire-step in the front line trench. It was bright and sunny and we were bubbling over with good humor. There were two reasons for this: First, our battalion was to be relieved at 9 that night and we were going back for a two weeks' rest; second, it was spring. We could smell it in the air. Even the wind blowing from the German trenches in our direction had a sweet and "springy" smell.

About thirty yards down a communication trench to the left was an orchard. The trees were scarred from bullets and fragments of shell, but even these battered trunks could not resist the feel of spring, because here and there on the twigs and branches could be seen bursting buds. Flipping around were numerous birds, chirping, and sometimes wrangling among themselves.

To me it seemed odd that birds could accustom themselves to war. Occasionally a German shell, or perhaps one of ours, would go screaming over the orchard. The birds did not seem to mind the noise—just carried on with their nest-building.

In our company was an American named Alexander Stewart. Naturally he and I were very chummy. Stewart and I were the chief "amusement promoters" in the company, the Tommies constantly looking to us for some new diversion.

In the English army a Tommy seems to have the idea that an American's chief vocation in the United States is to invent, and to keep on inventing. Of course, Stewart and I did not in any way try to dissipate this idea; in fact, we encouraged it, and took great pride in being looked up to in this way, but, believe me, it kept us hustling to keep the Tommies amused.

It was getting too warm for soccer football and we knew as soon as we got into rest billets that the issue would be put right up to us: "How are you going to amuse us while behind the lines?"

We were Americans and red-blooded; spring was in the air, and our thoughts turned to what every American boy is thinking of upon the arrival of spring—baseball.

I turned my eyes to the muddy parapet (rear wall of the trench) and fixed my gaze on a fragment of German shell imbedded in the mud. Pretty soon this fragment seemed to change into a baseball player, with mask, protector and catcher's mitt. He was crouching behind the home plate and signalling to the pitcher. Just then Stewart said: "Say, Emp, I wonder if we could teach the Tommies how to play baseball?"

I immediately turned in his direction. He was also staring at that fragment of shell.

I answered: "Did you ever try to teach a Chinaman how to speak French?"

He got it right away and a dejected look spread over his countenance, and he let out a long-drawn sigh.

A Tommy sitting on my right butted in with: "Did you see baseball, Yank? Why, I saw a game in London, and it is absurdly easy to play, but I can't see I fancy bit."

With a look of disgust Stewart turned to me and said: "I guess you're right, Emp, it would be easier to teach the Chinaman French."

That night we were relieved and went behind the lines.

The next afternoon, after parade, we were sitting in an orchard drinking tea. About a month before Stewart and I had taught the Tommies how to pitch horseshoes. There was great rivalry among the different squads, each squad having a team.

Just then Corporal Watkins came over to us and asked, "Where are the 'orse shoes? I can't find 'em."

Another Tommy answered: "Strafe me plink, where are your 'orses? Can't you bloom'n well see the 'officers usin' 'em behind that billet over there? Blime me, they're alwys a rumblin' the game."

Sure enough, the officers were using our horseshoes.

Stewart, with a look of depression on his face, turned to me and said, "Well, here goes, Emp. Steve Brodie took a chance, so I might be able to get away with this."

Then, turning to the Tommies, he asked, "Did any of you blokes ever hear of John McGraw?"

Three of the Tommies answered "Yes."

A sunny smile and a look of hope flitted across Stewart's face, and he breathlessly asked, "Who is he?" The three started to answer at once, but Stewart, majestically extending his hand, palm forward, said, "Get in line, one at a time. Now, Perkins, who is John McGraw?"

Perkins answered, "Why, 'e's a lance corporal in the Royal Irish Rifles."

According to Stewart's look, that Tommy should have immediately dropped dead.

Turning to the next, he said, "Curly, for the love of Mike, who is he?"

Curly, with a knowing look, answered, "E runs the King's Arms Public 'ouse, down Rye Lane."

With a piteous look, Stewart glanced my way, and I jerked my thumb in the direction of the other Tommy, who seemed to be bursting with suppressed eagerness. Stewart, looking at him, ejaculated, "Spit it out before you choke."

This fellow, with a superior air, turned in the direction of the two dejected Tommies and answered, "John McGraw! Why, everybody knows 'im; 'e was the fellow in the London Spectator who clicked 'crucifixion' for stealing the rum issue at 'Wipers.' 'E was a lad, not 'arf he weren't!"

A hissing noise issued from Stewart's lips, and he seemed to collapse like a punctured toy balloon. After a few seconds he straightened up and a look of determination came into his eyes. Addressing the Tommies, he exploded, "You blokes are enough to make Billy Sunday take to drink. Now, listen here, and let it sink in deep. John McGraw is the manager of the New York Giants. He is a baseball player; get it? A baseball player. A guy what manages a baseball team. Any fellow who can't make good on his team, or in the bush leagues, he sends 'em a cricket bat, with their name inscribed on it and pays their passage to England. Get me?"

Several Tommies took exception to this and said that they had followed cricket all their lives, but had never heard of any American cricketers being sent over by a Mr. McGraw. At this I exploded, and Stewart went up in the air. Standing up and turning to the bunch under the trees, pointing his finger in their direction, he let out:

"Now listen; this is good. I'm going to send down to the Ordnance Corps and get a dozen gimlets and some funnels. With these gimlets I'm going to bore holes in your 'nappers,' and using the funnel I'm going to pour into those garrets of yours a little brains. Then, after you've acquired gray matter, I'm going to teach you the great American game of baseball; and then when through teaching you, I'm going to retire to the Old Soldiers' Home as physically and mentally unfit, because I know the job will put me there."

The Tommies did not take exception to his pointed remarks about their lack of brains. They overlooked this because they were very eager to learn how to play baseball.

A chorus of, "Go to 'it, Yank; that's what we want—something new out 'ere in this bloody mess of mud and 'ooties."

Stewart said that we would have to talk the matter over, and, beckoning to me, went in the direction of the billet. I followed. He then outlined his scheme.

We were to form two baseball classes, Stewart in charge of one, I the other. On the plaster of the billet we carefully scratched out a baseball diamond, and then called the Tommies in. They sat around like little children in a school, eagerly intent. For two hours we explained the game to them. When we got through they all knew how to play baseball—on paper. We dismissed them, telling them another class would be held the following afternoon. That night Stewart and I, around the stump of a candle, went into details for organizing two teams. Everything appeared rosy and we were highly jubilant. A Tommy eased over in our direction and innocently asked: "I see, Yank, isn't it necessary to 'ave baseballs and clubs? We can't very well ply without 'em."

This was a bombshell to us. In our eagerness and excitement we had quite forgotten that bats, balls and gloves were necessary. I thought Stewart was

going to burst. Letting out a "Well, I'll be blowed!" which nearly blew the candle out, he turned a silly look in my direction, and I looked just as cheap.

At last the Tommies had stumped us, and we could see our reputation fading into nothing. A dead silence reigned for over five minutes. Then Stewart started madly to open his haversack. I thought he had suddenly gone crazy. I reached my hand in the direction of my bayonet, fearing that he was looking for a Mills bomb. When he drew his hand out, hanging to his fist was a writing pad. I let go of my bayonet. Borrowing a pencil from me (Stewart was always borrowing), he started writing. I thought perhaps he was going to commit suicide and was writing a farewell letter home, and asked him what was up. He whispered to me:

"Emp, we're two bloody fools not to have thought of this long ago. All we've got to do is to write home to one of the New York papers, asking the readers to send out baseball stuff to us, and it will only be a matter of a few weeks when we will have enough to equip two teams."

I offered to write the letter, and with Stewart bending over me I eagerly turned the letter over to the Mail Order.

We then explained to the Tommies that equipment was necessary and that we had written home, but while waiting for the baseball stuff to arrive we would carry on with our instruction classes.

The next day Stewart and I made a woollen baseball out of an old puttee, fixed up a temporary diamond, and showed the Tommies the general run of the game. Their antics were awful. If we had used a regular baseball I don't think there would have been a Tommy left in the squad without a black eye. Did you ever watch a girl trying to catch a ball? Well, a girls' team alongside of some of these Tommies would have looked like the winner of our world's series. It was hard work keeping their interest up.

Two weeks later we went up into the front line; then came back again for another rest. The interest in baseball was dying out and we were it our wit's end. Time passed, and we figured out that we ought to be hearing from our appeal, but nothing came. Then, once again we went into the Front Line Trench.

The Tommies were very skeptical, and every time baseball was mentioned they would gaze in our direction with a sneering look. This completely got our goats.

One evening we were sitting in a dugout of the support trench; it was raining like the mischief, and we were cold and downhearted. Pretty soon the rations came up. The ration party generally brings the rations down in the dugouts, but the two men carrying our "dixie" set it down in the mud of the trench and almost "shot the chutes" down the entrance to the dugout. They were breathless with excitement. One of them yelled out:

"Yank, there's a limber full of parcels down in the reserve dugout. They're all addressed to you, h'Empey, and they're from America."

Stewart let out a shout and I felt warm all over. How we lorded it over those poor Tommies. That night we were to be relieved and go back to rest billets. We could hardly wait for the time.

The next morning was Sunday, and after church parade we made a mad rush to the Orderly Room to get our mail.

The Quartermaster Sergeant was waiting for me, and behind him stood every officer in the company, trying to disguise the expectant look on their faces. Every eye was turned in the direction of a heap of parcels. I thought the "Quarter" never would start. Even the Captain could not stand it, and giving way to his eagerness, said: "Sergeant, you had better issue the mail."

Stewart and I were all anxiety. Then, stooping down, the Sergeant took up a parcel and read off: "Empey, No. 6203," and threw it over to me. I caught it on the fly. The Sergeant kept

on reading out "Empey," and parcels came through the air like a bombardment.

The first parcel I picked up was stamped, "Passed by Censor," and contained twelve brand new baseballs, or, at least, eleven, and the remains of one. This twelfth ball was stamped, "Opened by Censor," but search as I could, I could find no stamp reading "Sealed up by Censor." We did the sewing up, but that ball looked like a duck's egg when it was finished. Stewart and I roundly cursed the censor. Later, we both cursed the inventor of baseball. There was a reason.

The newspaper readers had nobly responded to our appeal. There were enough gloves and balls for two teams, and even a chest protector and mask. The mask was an article of great curiosity to all. Some of them thought it was a bomb protector. Every one in the trench tried it on, and every one, upon learning that the catcher was to wear the mask, wanted immediately to sign up for the position. Stewart and I could have been elected to Parliament right there if these Tommies could have had their way.

The next afternoon the candidates, forty in all, and the whole company turned out en masse on the baseball field, which we had laid out during our previous stay in rest billets.

From that day on Stewart and I led a dog's life. Though on paper everything looked bright and the candidates were letter perfect in the game, or thought they were, on the field they were the dubs of the worst calibre—regular boneheads. If McGraw, of the Giants, had had that mob wished on him he would have chuckled up his job and taken the stump for women's suffrage; so you can appreciate our fix.

Stewart was a really good pitcher; plenty of curved stuff, having played semi-pro ball in the United States. It was my intention to catch for him, and fill in the other positions with the most likely candidates. This scheme did not work in with the popular version of a little bit. Out of the forty trying for the team twenty-eight insisted on being catcher. They wanted to wear that mask. If there had been a camera each of the forty would have had a photo taken of himself wearing the "wire cage." Here was a great dilemma. At that time I was only a private, and even an officer would not catch. Stewart again came to the rescue. Calling me aside, he said:

"Leave it to me, Emp, I'll fix 'em. I'll try out each one in turn. Let them wear the mask, and I'll send in some curves, and when the ball cracks them on the shins a couple of times you couldn't put 'em to put on the cage."

The Tommies were strange to curved balls and Stewart had speed. It did my head good to see him damp their ardor and dent their anatomy at the same time. The Tommies would see the ball coming to them and would reach up their hands to get it. Then the ball shined or knee'd 'em and they were tired, rubbing sore spots and sixing Stewart out, no one else wanted to catch, and the situation was saved.

Tommy is a natural born soccer player and clever with his feet, but stupid with his hands when it comes to baseball.

Several of them had a bad habit of stopping ground balls with their feet, especially our shortstop. He would see a hot grass-eater coming his way, then, instead of using his hands, he would put his foot in front of it. The ball would climb his leg and get him on the chin or in the eye. After receiving a puffed-up lip and a beautiful black eye, he flatly refused to play unless I would let him wear the mask. Americans, picture a shortstop wearing a catcher's mask, and then sympathize with Stewart and me. The shortstop was a very art and me. Through diplomatic reasons I gave the mask to him. At this every infielder wanted to wear it. Stewart solved the problem by putting in another shortstop and giving me the mask.

In England they have a game called "rounders," in which you are supposed to hit the baserunner with the ball to put him out. This is generally a tennis ball and is done with a bat. Well, those Tommies had a habit of lamming the baseball with all their might at the unfortunate runner. Many an early practice was broken up this way, because the team would lose interest in baseball when they had a chance to view a fight between a giver and a receiver.

After about ten days' practice we had picked two pretty fair teams and arranged for a scrub game. Stewart's side won, due to his pitching.

Then, as is usual in baseball, things began to happen. A "jinx" seemed to rest on our candidates. Every time we had to go up the line on a working party one or two of the players would get wounded or killed; in fact, being a baseball player got to be perfect Jonah, and the Tommies commenced getting superstitious. If one of our team happened to be working among ten or twelve other company men, he was sure to get hit, while the other fellows came through without a scratch. Stewart and I also began to get frightened, and decided to chuck up the whole thing before we got it ourselves.

Then we went further back behind

the lines. During this stay we rounded out a passable team.

A Canadian battalion, just sent out from England, on their way to France, was passing through our trench. Stewart went over and challenged them to a game for the following Sunday. The challenge was accepted.

We had a week's time in which to strengthen some weaknesses and to teach the bunch a little "inside" baseball. Then the jinx popped up again.

On the morning of the game with the Canadians our cleverest infielder, the first baseman, picked up an old German hand grenade and brought it to the billet. This man was a great souvenir collector; always hammering at "dud" shells, trying to remove the new-explosion.

Seeing him fooling around with a German bomb, I told him to throw it away; that one could never trust those things, and that I did not want to take any chances of losing a first baseman, who was a naturally curious disposition, he refused to do so. Taking the bomb out behind the billet he proceeded to take liberties with its mechanism; result, right hand blown off and an other injury to be healed at first base. What we said about him would not be fit for publication.

The game was scheduled for 2 o'clock, and exactly at 1:35 Mr. Fritz plunked a "five-nine" shell into our infield between home and first base, making a hole big enough for a limber to hide in. This meant picks and shovels for all hands to fill in the hole.

By this time a large crowd of rooters for both sides had lined themselves up along the lines. The compliments that were wafted back and forth made the chaplain pack up and leave before the game started.

Then the betting commenced. It waxed hot and furious. I don't believe there was a loonier game in the crowd after all bets had been placed. Stewart and I tried to discourage this betting because we knew that if we lost we would be ostracized from that time on. We explained to the Tommies that the Canadians were baseball players, and that we were in for an awful trimming, but they wouldn't listen, saying that anybody who could make a ball curve in the air the way Stewart could was enough to put them on a par with the Canadians. Stewart could strike out. We insisted no further.

We came to bat first. Our first man up got beamed, and instead of taking first base he went out into the pitcher's box to lick the pitcher. After a little argument we managed to get him on first.

The Canadian pitcher was wild. The next ball went over the catcher's head and our runner took a truck out.

I batted third, hit to the outfield, the right fielder dropped the ball and I reached second, the runner ahead of me moving to third. Then Stewart got up and placed a corking double out into the air. Stewart was a fast runner. I started for home, touched third, the runner in front of me ploughing along for home plate. He ran like an ice wagon, could hear Stewart pounding behind me. The Tommy's cap blew off, and instead of going home he stopped to pick it up. Stewart was shouting, "Leg it, here comes the ball," as he slid into third base. He could not precede the runner in, so we were trapped for a double play. Stewart's anger was bristling and mine was tugging at his chain.

The Canadian rooters were tickled to death, their sarcastic remarks burning into Stewart and me. Stewart was fast losing his temper.

The first two Canadians struck out. The third man up got his base on a passed third strike. My error.

Then our substitute first baseman pulled a stunt which turned the tables on the Canadians and we were somewhat appeased.

The Canadian runner was playing a few feet off first base. Suddenly our first baseman shouted to him, "Look out, 'ere comes a shell; duck low!" The Canadian dropped to the ground. Stewart instantly sized up the situation and tossed the ball to the first baseman, who touched the baserunner and three were out. We had got our own back. Stewart and I could have both kissed the ruber first baseman of ours. Right then and there we put him in a class with Hal Chase.

Up to the fourth inning neither side had scored. Stewart was pitching in fine form. The Canadians just couldn't connect with his delivery. All they were doing was fanning the air. The Canadian rooters commenced to get frightened because they saw their money disappearing into the Tommies' pockets. They had the greatest contempt for the rest of the team, myself included, but realized that if Stewart did not weaken it would be a case of their going back to billets broke.

Then old Mr. Jinx butted in again, and it happened.

In the British army there is an order to the effect that gas helmets must be carried at all times, even while sleeping.

To disobey this order is a se-

rious offence and means immediate confinement. These gas helmets are in a canvas bag, and are slung around the left shoulder by means of a canvas strap.

In pitching, Stewart's gas helmet bothered him greatly, and after the second inning he took it off. I warned him to be careful, because I noticed several military police in the crowd. But Stewart would not listen. He always was pig-headed.

One of the Canadian rooters spotted that Stewart had laid aside his helmet and artfully communicated this fact to the rest of his team's rooters. I noticed the rooters crowd around him for three or four minutes, and then a great laugh went up and they stretched out along the foul lines.

Suddenly one fellow, getting out in front of the bunch, like a cheer leader, counted, "One, two, three." Then up went a mighty chorus of "Hey, Stewart, where's your gas helmet, where's your old gas bag, where's your old gas bag." They kept this up and it got Stewart's goat. I went out into the pitcher's box and warned him to put on his gas helmet, but, still pig-headed, he refused to do so. He was in an awful temper.

A sergeant of the military police was watching the game, and hearing the cries of the rooters, he walked out on the diamond and asked Stewart where his helmet was. By this time Stewart had completely lost his temper and answered, with a sneer: "Where do you think it is? I sent it home for a souvenir." The sergeant explained to him that it was against army orders to be without a gas helmet, and that he would be better off if Stewart would not listen to him, and answered: "Well, if it's against orders, get them rescinded." The sergeant immediately put him under arrest and marched him off the diamond.

Our hopes were dashed; I could see the game going west. We had no other good pitcher to put in.

Upon seeing Stewart's arrest, the Canadian rooters kept up their gleeful shouting. We were sure up against it. It was the home half of the fourth inning, and two last half of the fourth inning, and two were out. If, by luck, we managed to get the third Canadian out, it would be an easy matter for us to retire us in the next inning, because our swing-batting order was up. Then the Canadians would come to bat and the slaughter would commence.

I was in despair. Stewart must have realized that the game was hopeless because, as he passed me, he whispered, "Watch out for gas; I'll make them hunt for their gas helmets." I didn't get it. Stewart must have realized that the game was hopeless because, as he passed me, he whispered, "Watch out for gas; I'll make them hunt for their gas helmets." I didn't get it.

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