

# THE LOOIE'S CHRISTMAS PRESENT

BY D. B. MCNERNEY

It was a hellava Christmas eve we spent in '17. Frits played Santy Claus nearly all night but all he put in our socks was a lot of whistlin' and wailin' messengers of death and destruction. Somebody said we had 'em on the run. Ye gods! If we did, I'd hate to have been "in it" when the Boche were on top.

I hope I never get in a muddier hole than that trench was. A heavy snow had fallen, and then it got warm enough to melt the snow on the ground and turn the rest into rain. It made that ditch too sloppy even for animals to stay in, much less men who were supposed to be fightin' for "democracy," somebody said. I'd like to get my hands on the guy who said that. Jeess! Everybody was thinkin' about savin' his own guts. Nobody got time to think of those lovely gilt-edged principles this war had started about.

Anyways, we were trying our best to keep warm, dry and most of all, sane. We'd take turns at guard duty out in the rain and between times try to sleep off our worries on the foul smellin' floor of the dugout. Cripes! Wasn't this never gonna stop? Did we have to sit there and let him find us and blow us all to hell without us gettin' a man-sized crack at 'im? Then somebody over in the corner would start mumblin', then cryin', and finally jump up with a howl and race out the door only to be knocked cold by the guttiest shave-tail in Black Jack's army that I ever saw. Believe me, this Looie was all man. He'd joined the outfit just 'fore we came up and there wasn't much known about him. He loosened up that night, though. Seems like he was scairt nearly to death but kept talkin' and talkin' so's to show the rest of us he wasn't. I got kinda next to 'm and 'fore long he was spielin' out his whole family history.

Seems like his ole man coulda got 'im 'most any job back home so's he wouldn't have to be in the thick of it over there with the Frogs, but he had pride, this kid did. The gal he was so stuck on didn't have much respect for 'im in that way, so he ups and says he'll show 'em what guts he's got. And with that he joins up. Then his ole man made 'im take a commission he'd bought for 'im and then tried his damndest to tie the kid down in the trainin' camps. The youngster was too set no finishin' what he'd started so he manages to get over on the first transport.

We was sittin' there for awhile and all at once the noise outside stopped. The Looie blew his whistle and we all piled out like rats out of their holes to take our places along the trench. Just as we expected, the Heinies attacked us. They came out of that foggy screen in front

of us like a bunch of howlin', yippin' Comanches only they was howlin' just to keep up their own nerve, not because they was blood-thirsty or nothin' like that. Then some guy comes jumpin' down on me and for awhile I was very busy until I finally jabs 'im in the belly and then he lays very, very still. No time to think, though, 'cause they was scrappin' goin' on all around me. Then one of their officers jumps up on a parapet and yells something in German and the whole lousy bunch of 'em starts to tear out toward Berlin. I hear a whistle blow and out we go after 'em on a counter-attack. In a minute we're on 'em like they was on us and the whole bloody act is done over again. But it looks like we can't hold the position so back we go to our muddy, stinkin' ditch. All this fightin', men killed and wounded, and not an inch gained or lost for either side. It's a damn good thing I didn't

think about it all then or else I mighta done somethin' crazy.

Well, I gets back and then starts to see what damage has been done, but mainly to see if our kid Looie has pulled through o.k. Somebody yells at me from the dugout and I goes in to see what they want. There lays the kid in our Chaplain's arms as white as anything I ever saw. His eyes are standin' out like two big searchlights and then with a little weak smile he says, "Hello, Mac." Gee, I ain't never cried 'fore, but when that kid looked at me like that, I felt a lumpy feelin' in my throat so's I couldn't hardly answer 'im. I could tell he was done for us so I says, "Hello, Lootenant, How's tricks?"

"Nothin' doin', Mac," he says. "But I shown 'em that I had guts, and after all, Mac, it's like Father here says. Once you show life you got guts, you got 'im licked.

Dyin' ain't losin', Mac, not if you die right. And that's what I'm tryin' to do."

"Sure," I says kinda cracky-like but I see it's too late 'cause he's all limp like a rag, and sure enough gone.

It's a damn shame a kid like him has to go. He didn't get no medals or nothin'. He just went out and kept goin' till a bullet hit 'im and then that was all. I was just luckier than he was.

I saw his folks afterwards and his gal too. She was married then. They may a' been his folks and all that but none of 'em knew the kid like I did. War didn't make no man of 'im, it just made 'im a man sooner. It was in 'im all the time. You can't get around it, there ain't nothin' noble about war, but I guess people won't see that. Everybody gets crazy when the band starts playin'. Why shouldn't they? Didn't we?

## ASPIRATION

Petals fallen,

Withered away,

Gone the rose

Of a yesterday.

Ideals changed,

Dreams are fading,

Gone the hue,

The stem remaining.

—N J L