



Buttons

Buttons

Stephen Morehouse Avery

Speaking strategically, the village of Angres is not worth the powder, and it is doubtless for this reason that it is able to smirk impudently up at the bright French sun when all of the surrounding towns have been bombarded to bits. Angres doesn't nestle beautifully in any hills. It peeks right up out of a mildly rolling country as though its immunity was the result of divine protection rather than the incidence of its board of trade. It has proved the importance of being unimportant.

Mme. Moignea was entirely unappreciative of the town's good fortune, She declared that she preferred bullets to billets, and that an occasional shell was n'importe compared to the devastation of those British appetites. The madame had a big and comfortable house—she was the general's wife, you know—so it was but natural that her third floor should be a barracks, her second floor a quarters de luxe for those unscrupulous sublieutenants, and her downstairs une grande dining-room.

“Eat is what they do, those Tommee Atkeens. They eat and flirt with that Emilie of mine, m'sieu, until I am verree wild.” It was too much for madame.

That Emilie of hers was enough to make any one “verree wild.” Of course her talents in this direction were utilized more upon men than mothers, but as to the “wild” part of it, there can be no doubt The men were made wilder than madame. It was said that Emilie's pretty face had kept the blaze from the great house when the Huns swept through on their way to the gates of Paris. In fact, all through the weary months of Schrecklichkeit in Angres, Emilie had devoted most of her time to singing to and flirting with the officer Fritzie.

It had been worth while, however, because those officer Fritzie got to like Angres pretty well, and everything was left intact for the most part when a French flank movement squeezed the Germans into trenches just east of the village.

Then came the glorious occupation of the poilus and all would have been lovely if Gottlieb had not made off with her buttons. But Gottlieb had become angry and taken her buttons, which was a dastardly bit of frightfulness in Emilie's eyes.

You see, it was a very wonderful collection of buttons. There were French buttons, English buttons, German buttons, even Russian and Italian buttons, and they had been terribly hard to collect, because those officer people did not like to give them up. Emilie's enemies said that she would offer a kiss for a regimental button which was not already in her collection.

"It was this way, ma mere," said Emilie. "Gottlieb was a captain of the Bavarian Forty-Third, and I did not have their button.

Besides, he wanted to take me back for a Fritzie wife, and he was the nicest officer Fritz that was ever in this house."

"He is a German, Emilie. You should be ashamed."

"But I did not want Gottlieb—only his button, which he should have given me gladly. Instead, he said, ma mere, that I must kiss him to get it. This I said I would do, because I thought he was a nice Fritz. But when I had the button I did not want the kiss and postponed it."

Madame became a little wilder than usual.

"You are a wicked girl, Emilie, and your great father will be broken in the heart with you. Be gone! It is the time for you to go to the hospital."

"It is a tragedy. I am broken in the heart already, because of my buttons. Before the retreat Gottlieb came for his kiss, but his mustache was longer, and I could but refuse. Then he did swear verree much, and took all my buttons away with him. Your Emilie is desolated."

"My Emilie is insane and wicked."

The French occupation was quite brief.

Emilie busied herself with the hospital work. She quickly obtained all the new buttons, and she had only two proposals from the new officers. Then the poilus were relieved by a regiment of British

"Tomme Atkeens," the Bradford Fusiliers. The second floor was filled with unscrupulous sublieutenants, the most unscrupulous of whom was that Lieutenant Vic Cottingham. Emilie had to sing them but one quaint little English

song that night to reduce this Vic to such a state of non-resistance that she easily snipped a button from his coat.

“You are a verree generous Tommee, M’sieu Lieutenant Veek,” she said.

“And you are a verree beautiful and accomplished little maid of Angres,” he said right back. “When the war is over, I am going to take you back—”

But Emiliie dodged out of the corner and was safe. Every time the lieutenant came out of his trench for a rest period, however, he bothered her to death with his makings of love. He took her in a boat on the river Deule, and said he loved to hear her talk. If that was all he said he loved, Emilie would not have minded, but he was more inclusive. Her passion was for buttons, not proposals. Her collection of the latter, nevertheless, was almost as varied and extensive as her purloined bag full of buttons.

All of this she explained to the unscrupulous Cottingham as they lingered in the garden back of the house. She felt that an explanation was due him, because he was one of the very finest makers of love that she had ever had the pleasure to resist, and because he was going back to his trench in the morning, and this might be the last chance.

“Yes, M’sieu Veek,” she said, “I would like very much to go back to your beautiful place in England with you, but you will probably be killed. Then I would have neither my Veek nor my buttons. It is too much to ask of a poor French girl.”

“How do you know I will be killed?” demanded the ardent Vic.

“A one-leg husband would be just as bad.”

“How do you know I will lose a leg?” shouted the predestined victim. “I intend to get out of this war all in one piece.”

“Even then I would be without my priceless buttons, Veek.”

“By gad, I’ll follow that Gottlieb to Berlin and get your pesky buttons. Will you do it then?” Here was a spark of hope. Emilie’s heart began to throb with excitement. Perhaps those buttons which she mourned as irretrievable might be restored to her. A wave of gratitude for the originator of this splendid idea swept

over her, and her hand rested momentarily upon his. For this indiscretion she had to battle valiantly for the next minute and a half to protect the citadel of her lips.

“You are a bad Veek,” she exclaimed; “but if you should get my buttons back I could-could love you maybe for a month, perhaps.” Then she broke away and tried to run in the house, but the unscrupulous one caught her.

“Will you promise, Emilie, to go back to go England with me if I get ‘em?”

“I will promise that thing, Veek,” she replied, and darted into the house and safety.

Lieutenant Vic Cottingham entered the little hole of a dugout which was the throne room from which he ruled his little section of trench and sent for Sergeant Sands of the Suicide Club, better known as the unholy order of bombers. The sergeant was red-headed and Scotch-Irish, as you might suspect. By trade he was rivet slinger for hard-working steel construction gangs. By present occupation he was the latest thing in bombers.

“Yes, sir,” he said.

“Was there a raid last night, sergeant?”

“There was not, sir.”

“We have no prisoners then, I take it?”

“One poor Fritz was yanked out of a shell crater just before dawn. He is too scared to count, sir.”

“Bring him here, sergeant,” ordered Cottingham, “and get an interpreter.”

It was truly pitiful, the dilapidation of that Fritz. He was half naked and dirty and unshaven. And hungry! He had been in that crater for four days without a bite. His mouth watered at the sight of the lieutenant’s candle.

“Do you know Captain Gottlieb Nienstedt?” began the lieutenant, and the Fritz immediately began to get scared, that is, more scared than he already was. The interpreter talked with him a moment.

“He says Captain Nienstedt is with the Bavarian Forty-Third, sir.”

“Where is his company located?” came the next question.

The Fritz and the interpreter had quite a wrangle over this. “He says he won’t tell,” said the linguist finally.

Cottingham roared. “He says he won’t tell? By gad, we’ll make him tell! Sergeant, go fetch a big breakfast and place it on the table.” This was quickly provided, and the Fritz began to writhe the minute the smell of bacon hit him. His eyes popped out and he gurgled to the interpreter.

“He says he will now tell,” said the latter.

Then, after more throaty gurgling by the Fritz, “He says the captain’s company is directly opposite us.”

“Where is his dugout?” demanded the inquisitor.

“Just over the knoll, about fifty yards north of the communication trench,” was the reply.

“Ask the prisoner if Captain Nienstedt is known to have any buttons,” said Cottingham.

“He says damn few, sir. He says the captain needs a new uniform.”

The lieutenant swore a little. “I mean, has he a collection of buttons?”

The Fritz became voluble at this question.

His sergeant had spoken of a very great collection of buttons in a bag, which, the captain valued much.

“Take him out and feed him,” said the unscrupulous Cottingham. Then to Sergeant Sands, “Sergeant, get volunteers for a raid to-night. I am the first volunteer. We will go over at two-fifteen.”

“Shall we strike at that dugout? I beg to recommend it, sir.”

“Very good suggestion, sergeant. We will by all means do so.”

Back in the general's big house two belligerents were marshalling their forces against each other. The casus belli was a standing disagreement about most everything. The immediate breach of friendly relations had been brought about by Emilie's announcement that she was going back to England with that unscrupulous Cottingham the minute the war was over.

"What!" demanded madame, "You would waste yourself upon that stupeed braggart of a Tommee Atkeens, when the noble Colonel Cartier will jump through your fingers at the word? Cotteengham—ha!—a lieutenant!"

"He has the grand courage, ma mere. He has said that he will go to Berleen after my buttons."

"To Berleen! I laugh and weep. Berleen! I ask you, is there a poilu who would not make that boast? That Cotteengham will not so much as poke his noodell above the parapet."

"He is not have any fear at all. He will get my buttons back. He says, 'Silly things, buttons; but I'll get 'eem.'"

"When he breengs back those buttons, then go to England with heem; but not otherwise. Will you promeese me that?"

"But no, ma mere. He is the only one who has offered to go to Berleen after them. That Cartier but laughed. Besides, that Veek is a veree especially fine lover. He knows theengs about it that even I do not know."

"Ah, yes! But certainement he does. Why should he not. Experience, he has had plentee."

"You are cruel to that Veek. He comes by eet natural, no?"

Madame was right about one thing. That Cottingham would not poke his noodle above the parapet if he was in his right mind. A crease across the back of his head where the hair would never grow again had taught him that a careless trench dweller had about as much chance as a clay pigeon. When he went over the parapet, as he had many times, he went all together with a curse on his lips and a prayer in his heart that the Fritzie had been "hated" so thoroughly by the big guns that they would not be in the mood for marksmanship.

That night Cottingham and Sergeant Sands sat in the dugout and planned in detail for their little midnight call upon Herr Gottlieb. The sky was clouded and well suited to their purpose.

Outside, waiting the hour, were twenty-seven of the toughest bunch of Suicide Club dynamite slingers that ever lived in a ditch.

The sergeant had Gottlieb's dugout spotted so that he could crawl to it with his eyes shut.

"You wish a quiet affair, if possible, sir?" he asked.

"We must surprise that section of the trench," replied the lieutenant. "I want some time in that dugout."

"It depends on the number of Fritzie's around it, sir. If there are but a few between the two trench bends, perhaps we can silence them, get some prisoners, blow up the dugout, and wriggle out in the dark."

"That is what we want, sergeant." When the little timepiece which lived on Cottingham's wrist assured him that it was two-fifteen, he and the sergeant went outside and led the bombers through a little stretch of advance trench which the Fusiliers had been gradually working forward. The danger was minimized by the coal-tar blackness of the night, but they had to move with cat-like quietness or the Fritzie fireworks would show them up. Sergeant Sands was the de facto commander of the expedition, although the lieutenant, as his superior, was nominally in charge.

"All right men," said the sergeant, and they clambered out of the trench and stole away into the darkness. The enemy's trench line was about four hundred and fifty yards ahead, and they could advance upright for a bit.

The Bradford bombers were in their element. The extreme peril of the night trench raid hardly occurred to them. They had been through it so many times that it required a very exceptional trench raid to even interest them. There would be a scuffle for sure, and a 'ell of a scrap, perhaps; but they would come out all right. It was the spirit of the bombers—we'll come out all right.

"Down, now!" came the sergeant's whispered hiss of a command, and down they went on their hands and knees on the wet ground.

Then began the tortuous, nerve-blasting, foot by foot advance which is one of the most severe-tests of human courage that could be asked. The deadly slowness of it would have taken the heart out of gallant but more sensitive men. The bomber is a peculiar type, nerveless, reckless, and absolutely fatalistic.

Cottingham's boldness was of another sort. It was all he could do to restrain himself from jumping up and dashing forward. There was a thrill to "going over" in the light of the sun and with chaps shouting all about one and shells bursting everywhere, but this—cursed sneaking, he'd call it, and it rattled a fellow, you know.

After an age of stealthy crawling the raiders lay at the foot of the little knoll at the top of which was the fortified bit of trench that was their objective. They were literally under the enemy's guns, and in the stillness they could hear the night watch moving about. Occasionally the Fritzies' voices could be heard, and once one of them laughed out, and the clearness of his laughter pierced the silence as would the scream of a shell.

One might have heard the breathing of the bombers below as they relaxed from the rigid tenseness which the sudden sound had struck into them. Wet through and through, and covered with mud, they lay there waiting the sergeant's word.

The slightest sound and the machine guns above would have swept the little slope with a sheet of fire through which no living thing could have passed.

The sergeant was too old at this business to keep his men long under such a strain. "Now, men!" he said in a low voice, and at the word the twenty-nine raiders dashed forward. They mounted the rise and flung themselves into the black pit with a suddenness that must have stupefied the handful of defenders.

Not gunshot was fired. The muffled cursing and scuffle of the brief hand-to-hand combat, and the terrible thuds of heavy blows dealt in the dark, and then, almost at the same instant—silence again. But there were two heavy-handed bombers waiting at the end of the trench section to welcome any unlucky Fritz who might happen along, and that unscrupulous lieutenant had climbed off the Hun who had been the recipient of his personal attentions and was looking for the entrance of a certain dugout in which there were such things as Gottliebs and buttons.

He was not long in finding it. Just a few paces down the trench from where the brief melee had occurred and behind a high point where the parapet was

conveniently high, Cottingham's flashlight discovered a heavy little sheet-iron door in the trench wall.

That Fritz back there must have been very hungry, indeed, to have told the truth in this unusual fashion. But he had not told the whole truth. He had said nothing about Gottlieb's being a nightowl. Yet here was light streaming out of a tiny chink at the bottom of the door, and much did that tiny point of light disconcert the unscrupulous lieutenant who had expected to find his host tucked in for the night.

It required a thorough recollection of every detail of that Emilie's loveliness and fitness to become Mrs. Cottingham to convince the lieutenant that it was necessary to open that door.

First he gave it a bit of a push, but it wasn't that kind of a door. It had to be dragged, and the first drag opened it only about an inch and a half, but through that inch and a half the lieutenant took one penetrating peek.

Around the little table in the center of the room sat three officer Fritzie's playing cards. Over their heads hung an electric light, and over in front of the mirror a fourth Fritz brushed his bristles with a real hairbrush. There were two entrancing bunks, one legitimate chair, several framed photographs on the walls, and numerous magazines strewn about. The only thing that dugout lacked was period furniture.

Cottingham turned his attention again to the card players. He presumed they were playing skat, but he began to doubt this when one of them showed his hand and said, "Drei Koenigen. Was habst du?" The man opposite said, "Alle blau." According to Cottingham's feeble German, one player had announced three kings and the other had said that his cards were all blue. This sounded very much like the game they had taught him in the States, wherein his Yank instructor had said, "all blue," and on the strength of it had demanded eight pounds. Silly game it was, but the lieutenant did not have time to reflect about it, because the disgruntled loser, who from Emilie's description must have been Gottlieb, pushed across the table a little heap of—buttons.

The sight of them was enough to banish caution. Cottingham jerked open the door and put his automatic in the faces of the astounded officer Fritzie's. They were too surprised to even curse, and they stood against the wall with their hands

as high as the dugout roof would permit and watched him as he scooped each man's pile of buttons into the big pocket of his bomber's coat.

"You see, my hand is high," he laughed, but he did not laugh long. Eight hands is a good many for one man to watch while he gathers buttons, and before he knew it that Gottlieb had shot him in the head. Almost with the flash and the crash Cottingham demolished the light globe with the barrel of his revolver and dropped underneath the table.

In the pitch black and the silence of the room not a man dared move. The lieutenant's wound was evidently not serious. He huddled there in a daze, but listening for a sound that would tell him the position of the Fritzie. He could hear the scurrying outside which the report had caused. It seemed as though they waited in this breathless stillness for hours. Perhaps it was two minutes.

Then some one shouted in the door: "Come on out 'ere, Fritzie, or I'm dingin' yer ter 'ell Three I'm givin' yer—wan—two—"

But Sergeant Sands never got to three. There was a tumult of yelps in that dugout, and those four officer Fritzie bolted through the little door into the waiting arms of the Bradford bombers with such haste that the undersized door couldn't accommodate as many as wanted to get through at the same time. Cottingham staggered after them.

"Have they got yer, Liftinint?" demanded the sergeant.

"Bit of a head wound," replied Cottingham.

"Are your bombs placed?"

"They are, sir."

"Fire them and let's go."

Another minute and the raiders went back over the parapet with two machine-guns and eleven Fritz prisoners, including four officer Fritzie. They were out of danger when the bombs exploded, wrecking the concrete emplacements.

After that the whole German line for half a mile burst into a sheet of rifle and machine-gun fire that forced them, prisoners and all, flat on their stomachs.

The terrifying and agonizingly slow crawl back to the British trenches to the blackest hour of the night seemed miles long. The sergeant half dragged the semiconscious Cottingham with him as they moved forward. Four of the men were seriously wounded before they finally gained the shelter of the little advance trench from which they had started. But that was nothing. “Another successful raid by the Bradford bombers,” the dispatches would say.

And madame was wondering and worrying again about that Emilie. Never had she delayed when her time was up at the hospital before.

Probably she was flirting with one of the doctors—or perhaps, with one of those Tommee Atkeens who was hurt in that raid last week.

This last was a very shrewd conjecture, because that was exactly what Emilie was doing.

She was sitting on the edge of that unscrupulous Cottingham’s cot pretending to be ministering to his needs when in reality she was submitting to his makings of love with great joy. On the white coverlet, all arranged in order, was a great array of military buttons. They were very precious, because this beloved Veek had been all the way to Berleen after them. Each time she counted them and found the correct number present, she watched her chance and kissed the defenseless lieutenant on the cheek or nose or the bandaged head.

“You know, Emilie,” he said, “I brought back your Gottlieb as well as your buttons. Thought you might want him, you know.”

“But no, mon cher Veek—I am content with only the buttons and—you.”