



THE DUFFER PAYS BACK

By
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"I'll pay you back one day!" the Duffer had said when Herriott made him the laughing-stock at school. And in thrilling circumstances, somewhere in Flanders during the Great War, the Duffer repays!

THE FIRST CHAPTER The Daylight Raid!

"SERGEANT HERRIOTT!" Company Sergeant-major Shaw's voice rapped out. "Eight men for No. 3 Platoon. Take the list."

In the big and muddy yard at the back of Mullhais Farm, which stands somewhere in Flanders, odd groups of khaki-clad men were being sorted out and arranged. The 5th Milchesters were at rest, and a new draft of men had come up from the base. Some of them were old hands who had been down the line, sick or wounded, and were now returned for duty once again.

Most of them were newcomers, however, who had crossed from England ten days or so ago. Sergeant Herriott took his list and called his corporals.

"Atkins and Farmer, you go with Corporal

Lóames. Benson and Coleman with Corporal Drummond. Lang and Doan with Corporal Moss. Johnson and Duff—Corporal Tanner. That's the lot!"

Sergeant Herriott had ticked off the names as he called them out. Now he looked round at the eight new men to whom in the future the word of Herriott would be law. Most of them were youngsters, and Herriott's quick eye decided that they were good. Then his eye fell on the last man.

Three buttons of his tunic were undone, and instead of wearing his equipment as the others did, the whole lot, including his gas-mask, rifle and tin hat, trailed from his hands to the ground. A raw recruit would have looked smarter and more soldierly than this youth did.

"Duff!" Herriott's mind suddenly connected the name and its owner with events of

long ago, and he stepped towards the fellow. "You're Duff, aren't you? Used to be at Cranston?"

"Hullo, Herriott! I spotted you straight away!" Duff was grinning in the same old asinine way he had always done when he had been in the Fifth at Cranston School. "Somebody told me you were in the Milchesters, so I made up my mind I'd join them, if they'd have me. Jolly meeting you, isn't it?"

"Yes," Herriott said quietly. "You'd better go along with Corporal Tanner now. He'll fix you up. I'll be seeing you again."

Herriott well recalled the last time he had seen Duff. It was just after war had broken out, and the Officers' Training Corps at Cranston School was being brightened up. But neither officers nor N.C.O.'s could ever brighten Duff, and most of them abandoned it. Herriott had tried kind words and then sarcasm. He had even made a laughing-stock of Duff before the fellows in training.

He could remember now how Duff had turned on him in the end and, apparently blind with temper, had gasped out: "I'll pay you back one day! Oh, I'll pay you back for this, Herriott!"

It was unlucky for Herriott that the Head himself saw the scene, and more unlucky still that the Head had a strong belief that the N.C.O.'s of the O.T.C. were guilty of bullying when the chance came. Nobody had ever accused Jim Herriott of being a bully, and he had honestly believed that if only Duff could be stung into taking an interest in the drill he could do it all right.

Instead, Herriott was sent for by the Head in due course. There was a row, and the sergeant was disrated to private in the O.T.C. Herriott made no excuse, but two days later he set an example which many others followed. He ran away from school and joined the Army!

The next day he ceased to be a schoolboy and became a man—Private Jim Herriott of the Milchesters. Since then there had been precious little time to ponder on the past, though just occasionally Herriott remembered the amiable, grinning ass who had suddenly shown the hidden depths of his nature and

had gasped out in sheer temper: "I'll pay you back one day, Herriott!"

"I wonder?" Herriott asked himself after Private Duff, now of the 5th Milchesters, had followed the corporal to his billet. "Somehow I can't imagine the old Duffer hating anybody. But it's queer he should join just because he knew I was in the Milchesters. Still, it's no use worrying. If he's waiting for a chance to pay back, he'll get it all right when we go up the line!"

Three days later the Milchesters' rest came to an end, and they went back to the trenches again.

"Keep your head down, you blithering ass!" Sergeant Herriott hissed.

"Sorry, sergeant! But I'm sure there's a mob of Jerries creeping up!"

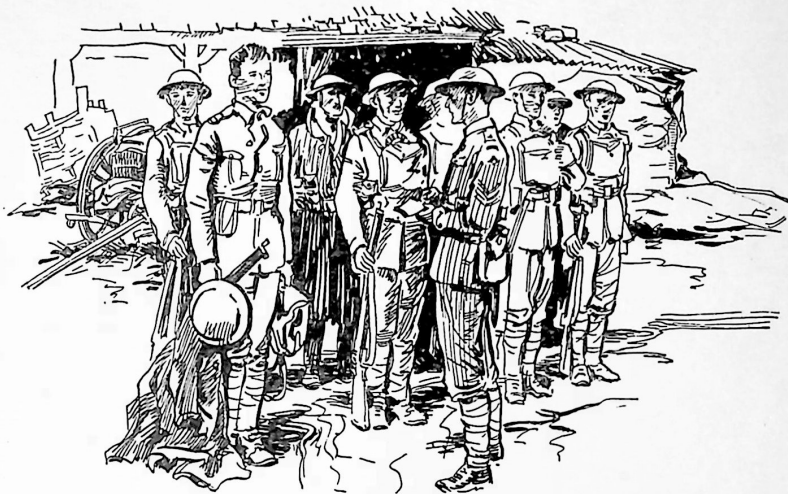
"In broad daylight? Don't talk rot! And anyway, you can look over the top without sticking your whole blinking head above the parapet!"

Sergeant Herriott was already giving Private Duff an example of how one could peer over the parapet without too much risk. With one corporal and seven men Herriott was in charge of No. 8 Post on the particular part of the line now held by the Milchesters, and the enemy across the way, familiarly known as "Jerry", had taken a dislike to No. 8 Post.

For the past hour red-hot metal had been dropping all around them—shells, which burst in the air and sent down a shower of death. In No. 8 Post they crouched against the sides, pressing themselves close to the sandbags for the mere comfort of feeling something fairly solid in a trembling, shaking world.

Now and again one or other of the men would peer cautiously over the parapet. Not that there was any real fear among the veterans that Jerry would make a raid in broad daylight, but they had to keep a good look-out. Yet it annoyed the sergeant in charge when the tall, lanky Duff raised himself to his full height and stared out across the swirling smoke as though he were immune from flying shrapnel.

The shells were now dropping nearer the



Sergeant Herriott's eye fell on the last man, whose slovenly appearance would have disgraced a raw recruit. It was the Duffer, who had been at Cranston School with him.

main front line and behind the outpost, and Sergeant Herriott put his tin hat an inch or two above the top of the parapet and looked out. A gentle breeze sent the heavy smoke swirling and twisting upwards and now and again a clear break showed.

It was through one of these breaks that Herriott had a sudden glimpse of figures in field-grey rising from the ground and breaking into a slow, crouching trot. Not twenty yards away they were, and Herriott heard, even as he grasped the truth, a sharp command in German. The enemy were about to make a daylight raid!

"Gerry! Here now!" Herriott rapped out commands. "Quick! Jump to it! A daylight raid! Collar the bombs! Come on! Up here! Five rounds! Let 'em have it!"

There was not much need for commands once the men had grasped the facts. Rifles blazed away and bombs were thrown. Behind No. 8 Post the shells were pounding and hammering away furiously all along the front line, screening those who were there and

preventing them from knowing what was happening.

In front of the post the smoke was clearing rapidly except for the thinner veil of bursting bombs. With a sudden rush the enemy charged down on the post. Twenty or more there must have been, though already some of their number were lying where they had fallen when bullet or bomb had caught them. Herriott ramméd in another clip of five bullets and then made a swift decision.

"Into them!" he yelled, and jumped on to the parapet. No use staying in the post now. Jerry was on them and the advantage was his so long as he was above them.

For a time after that Herriott saw nothing but the looming figures in field-grey. A bayonet glanced along his arm, slashing into his tunic, and another made a savage jab at him, but he warded it off.

He saw red and fought madly, dimly aware that near him some of his own men were clinging grimly on and were shouting out mad cries of encouragement. Yet time and again when Herriott thought he had driven off his

attackers they came back and fought afresh.

Then suddenly Herriott was gripped from behind, and his arms were pulled back just at the moment when he was driving back a fresh attacker.

Crack! Herriott's rifle was dashed from his grip. It would never have happened but for that vice-like grip which was forcing his arms back and pulling them behind him.

"Run! Run!" German voices were shrieking at him in harsh and guttural accents. Herriott knew the game and fought tigerishly to break free. It was a dash-and-grab raid and the Germans wanted a prisoner. Herriott had played the same game himself and because of that was determined to die rather than be taken prisoner.

"Run! Run, stupid! Run!"

The Germans prodded him in the back and struggled furiously to make him move. They, too, wanted to get back to their own lines now. A horrible fear came to Herriott that he would have to yield. Already his legs were giving and they were half-carrying him so that he could not fall.

Then a great figure, a khaki-clad giant it seemed, came towering in front of Herriott. It was Duff! He was waving his rifle as though it were a club and he brought it round with a mighty swing against the head of the man on Herriott's right.

The man staggered into Herriott, but there was still another clinging to that same arm. Duff swung his clubbed rifle again furiously and shouted wildly:

"Crack! Crack! For ever! Played! Played! Take that! And that!"

Herriott's right arm was free and he swung round to try to plant a savage blow in the face of the man who was gasping out again: "Run, stupid! Run!"

Crack! The German went down under Duff's clubbed rifle. Herriott jumped back and, like a man possessed, swept aside a bayonet. He seized the man's rifle, and as he pushed it farther aside, he got in a hard blow, and then wrenched the rifle from the German.

"Played, Herriott!" came Duff's voice. "Well hit!"

Then something hit Herriott at the back of

the head, and he had a distorted vision of Duff as he went down. He was still waving and swinging that rifle of his, awkwardly and clumsily, and yet with deadly sureness.

A grey mist blotted out everything as Herriott fell, yet he tried to call out "Carry on, Loames!" For a time after that he seemed to be whirled round and round, until something tugged his arm and checked him and a voice sounded in his ears.

"Not hurt, sergeant? Give us your arm. All over, bar shouting! Jerry's breaking the record back to his own lines now! We held the fort—what?"

Herriott struggled to his knees, still dazed and weak, with a head which throbbed so violently that everything seemed to be shaking and shivering in the morning sunlight. Duff gave him a hand and they dropped back into No. 8 Post. For a time, at all events, Herriott was incapable of asking questions, and was content to sit there on the fire-step and hold his aching head.

He gazed round presently and saw two fellows propped up against the trench-side. One had a bandage round his head, while the other lay as though asleep, his tunic undone and his kit slipped free from his shoulders.

Somebody dropped down from the parapet by Herriott's side. A limp figure it was, and in field-grey! The next moment Duff was standing just in front of Herriott, but speaking to the German soldier he had brought in.

"You stay where you're put, my lad," Duff was saying. "A prisoner you are, and you've not much to worry about. They'll patch you up by and by. I'll go and see if there are any more worth bringing in."

"Keep your blinking head down!" Corporal Loames snapped out, and Duff ducked violently behind the parapet as the whine of a bullet sounded overhead.

The Duffer took the corporal's advice after that!

"How do we stand?"

Herriott was getting a grip on himself at last.

"We've been lucky," Loames said. "I thought they'd got you, sergeant, but I couldn't get near you. Just saw them trying

to rush you back. And then Duff jumped in. Crikey! But I'd like to see that chap handling a cricket bat! I'll bet he'd swipe 'em!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER

Zero Hour!

"A strong and determined enemy raid was carried out early on the morning of the 17th after a severe artillery bombardment, but was repulsed with heavy loss to the enemy, three of whom were taken prisoner. Our own casualties were slight."



Herriott looked cautiously over the parapet and saw field-grey figures advancing at the trot. The enemy were making a daylight raid!

THE Milchesters read the news when it was over a week old and they were out at rest again. Sergeant Herriott and two or three others had been wounded, but Herriott was soon patched up and was back with the Millies soon after they came out of the line.

Herriott had a surprise two or three days after he got back. Over the holding of No. 8 Post the colonel had put forward two recommendations, and Sergeant Herriott had been

awarded the D.C.M. and Corporal Loames the M.M.

The story of the way Duff had knocked the Jerries about had also gone the rounds. Instead of his old nickname of the Duffer becoming permanent he was rechristened the Swiper, or simply Swiper Duff. The Swiper was one of several who told the adjutant how Herriott and Loames had led the section against the German raiders. Herriott spoke to Duff about it.

"It was the simple truth," Duff asserted.

"We all said the same thing, being a pretty truthful crowd in my section. We just said you were giddy heroes and that was all he wanted to know. Congrats, Herriott! For the sake of old times."

"Don't rot!" Jim Herriott said. "I always had an idea you were saving something up for me, and you were going to pay me back one day with interest. Remember that affair at Cranston?"

He spoke jestingly now, but Duff flushed

till his old grin came back in a shamefaced sort of way.

"I thought you'd forgotten that, sergeant. I was a miserable rotter over it all. So I owe you something for that, but a lot more for what you've done for me in No. 3 Platoon. You've been a brick and made things easier for me, and if ever I do get the chance I'll try to pay back."

"That's all right, Duffy," Herriott cut in. "Let's call it quits."

A few days later the time came for the Milchesters to go back to the trenches again, and it was generally accepted that they were due to take part in some big show.

They were in the front line for two days, and during that time the N.C.O.'s learned more about the task ahead of them. The word was passed to the rank and file. On the morrow the Millies were going over the top. Zero hour was at five-thirty in the morning, and every man put his watch exactly right by the sergeant's.

A long, long night followed, and, as so often happened before an attack, it was strangely quiet until dawn began to turn the blackness to grey. Then the guns broke forth with frightening suddenness, and far ahead of the front line the world was going up in flames, with the shrieking and crashing of the shells as accompaniment.

From somewhere near the waiting No. 3 Platoon a tiny whistle shrilled and the figure of an officer was silhouetted against the ghastly light of the flames and smoke ahead. Zero hour! The signal had been given!

No. 3 Platoon clambered out and formed into sections. Sergeant Herriott led the way, very slowly and steadily in the beginning, but presently like all of them, in a jerky, dodging way as the wailing lash of machine-gun bullets swept across.

Jerry was making his answer now. His guns sent back shell for shell, and the Millies went ahead through flying debris and clouds of swirling smoke.

"Steady! Steady, Three Platoon!" Jim Herriott's voice sounded thin and feeble, but he was shouting out with all his might. "Pass the word along. Steady! That's our objective!"

The rolling cloud of smoke and flames and flying earth had passed farther on. As the smoke cleared they saw a line of trenches. Herriott called again, and his platoon made the last little dash forward.

They were in the trench now. Frightened figures were cowering in odd corners. They were the survivors of the barrage, and they had passed the stage when they either knew or cared what happened. The trench itself was little more than an ill-kept ditch after the pounding of the guns. But No. 3 Platoon knew their job and got on with it.

Prisoners were sent back after a quick search, and then began the task of "consolidating the position." Not all No. 3 Platoon had reached this trench, but those who had, worked strenuously with entrenching tool to get deeper and better cover.

The enemy guns were hard at work, too. One by one they went down in No. 3 Platoon, till Sergeant Herriott collected the remnant late in the afternoon and got along to a deep crater on the left.

"We can hold on better here," he told them. "Try to get in touch with No. 2 Platoon presently. Anybody seen Mr. Laurence?"

Nobody had seen Mr. Laurence, the officer who had led the attack, but he might be with No. 2 Platoon, or lying somewhere away back. The Lewis gunners were fixing their guns and the riflemen were making sure their magazines were full.

Darkness came and they crouched on the fire-step they had dug out, leaning against the side of the crater and peering over the top. Almost as soon as it was dark Jerry began a fresh bombardment, and the British artillery hammered away in reply. Above the roar and the crashing, Swiper Duff heard a sudden cry and then another.

He crept along a little way towards the spot where the Lewis gunners had fixed their position. This crater was thick with acrid smoke which stung the eyes and burnt the throat.

"Three Platoon! Who's that?"

"All right, sergeant! Duff!"

"Anybody else? If so get them along here! I'm trying to fix this Lewis gun; it's jammed. They were hit."



Dazed and wounded, supporting the sagging figure of Sergeant Herriott, Duff staggered and crawled towards a crater.

In the darkness Herriott struggled with the gun while Duff crept round the crater hunting for other men. The gun was working again presently, and Duff collected three or four men, who gathered near the sergeant.

Their smarting eyes developed an uncanny sense as they peered through the smoke clouds. Herriott suddenly rapped out a command and he was handed a fresh magazine for the gun.

"Bombs! Bombs! Let 'em have it!" he shouted out fiercely, and they answered his call. "Go on! Oh—jammed again! Out! Out you get! Come on!"

In pent-up fury the few men jumped out and their rifles blazed. The shelling had passed farther on, but creeping phantoms—Jerries—had been throwing bombs, lobbing them over to where flashes of flame told them

there was a rifle or gun. Duff was by Herriott's side as they jumped out, and together they charged for the phantoms.

In the darkness they fought till Duff realised that he was fighting thin air. The sharp-cracking bombs were dropping about him now, and there came a livid flash which seared his eyes and sent his head jerking backwards.

The Duffer knew that his eyesight had gone and was conscious of a furious and stinging sensation in his arm. His rifle had dropped, too. At all costs he must get that!

He bent down and touched something, but his eyes were filled with dancing blobs of fire now. Yet he was sure that he could see. Between the dancing balls of fire he glimpsed strange outlines and knew that men were

lying about him. He had the feeling, too, that he was alone in a world of dead.

"Herriott! Herriott!" He was gasping the name out as he tried to find his rifle, and one of the figures near him answered the call.

"Here!" It was Herriott who called weakly. "I'm hit in the leg. We're all right. Holding the line! You carry on, Duffy!"

"Got to get back to the crater," Duff said, and struggled to lift Herriott. He was never quite sure afterwards whether he just dragged him back or whether at times Herriott crawled a little way himself. But they reached the crater and lay for a time.

Then a whispering voice echoed hoarsely across the crater:

"Who's there? Milchesters?"

"Milchesters here!" Duff and two others gave the answer.

"Seventh London!" the voice called, and half a dozen figures were clambering round the crater. "Relief's up! Couldn't get through before. Jerry's been putting it over hot and strong."

The Milchesters had done their job and their weakened force was relieved by a fresh battalion.

"Come on, sergeant!" Duff meant to cling to Herriott at all costs and get him down to the aid post. "Give me your rifle! We're relieved! We're going down!"

Herriott did his best. In the darkness the pair staggered and crawled towards the line they had left early that morning.

Then Herriott slipped and fell, and Duff lay beside him in the shell-hole for a time, until he raised himself and let out a husky shout:

"Stretcher-bearers! Stretcher-bearers!" Duff made the effort in the hope that the S.B.'s were out and that they would get Herriott down. Through the darkness a voice answered his call. The stretcher-bearers were up!

"I'm all right," Duff assured them. "But Sergeant Herriott's got it in the leg. You get him! I'm all right!"

"That's good!" the S.B. told him, as Duff toppled in the darkness. "Anyway, you soon will be, laddie!"

Swiper Duff had a vague idea the next

moment that someone was lifting him, and then he was swinging very gently till he went sound asleep!

He did not even waken when they put him in the ambulance. He had a ticket on him now which gave his name, rank and number, and had several abbreviations which told the hospital people that he had two leg wounds, one arm wound, and several wounds about the right shoulder. As a collector of Jerry's scrap-iron Swiper Duff had done well!

He knew all about it later, of course, but by then he was in England. Yet it was quite a long time before he began to wonder again about all that had happened. What had happened to the Milchesters, and his pals in No. 3 Platoon? Did Herriott get down safely? It was no use asking in the hospital, because they weren't there.

They let him get up one bright day and presently he was toddling round. Someone told him there were other Milchesters in D2 Ward, and he went along. The first man he met was a Millie, and Duff chatted with him.

"Sergeant Herriott? Oh, yes! I know him! Over in that bed down there."

"Right-o!" Duff said, and hobbled off. In front of the bed he stopped and stared for a moment or two just to make sure.

"Hullo, sergeant!" Duff was quite sure now and his old grin was on his face.

"Hullo!" Herriott was staring, too, but looked as though he had seen a ghost. "Jumping snakes! It's Duffy! Old Swiper! I've been dreaming about you!"

"That would upset you!" Duff grinned.

"Don't be an ass, Duffy!" Herriott was grinning himself now. "You got me down, didn't you? I sort of remember patches about it all, but had an idea you fell somewhere and that you were left behind when they carted me down. Made me feel rotten when I thought about it. But you're here!"

"I'm here!" Duff agreed. "And you're here, Herriott! So I've paid back what I owe you. We're quits! It's a lovely war this morning, sergeant!"

"Quite a good war to-day!" Herriott said cheerily. "Sit down for five minutes. I'm jolly glad to see you again, Duffy! Good old Swiper!"