Sapper

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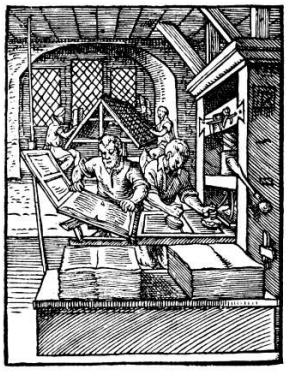

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Table of Contents

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THE END

Sapper
[Herman Cyril Mcneile]

Table of Contents

PREFACE

Table of Contents

IT is now eight years ago since Shorty Bill made his bow to the public in *No Man's Land* and *The Human Touch*.* And I feel that, perhaps, some explanation is needed for again putting him on the stage.

Books on the war are no longer popular, but I cannot help thinking, from remarks that have been made to me, that there are still some people who would like to be reminded, and others, of a younger generation, who would like to learn.

In that belief I have ventured to resurrect Shorty Bill. He is a character compounded of three men, whom I had opportunities of studying closely. One of those men still lives: the other two paid the price. And I venture to think that if a little more of the spirit which actuated my models existed to-day, we should not be living in a constant atmosphere of civil war which makes our present world such a bright and enjoyable spot.

H.C. McNeile, February, 1926.

[* The stories in this collection are reprinted, minus their original titles, from these two books.]

PART I

I

Table of Contents

I HAVE in my mind the tale of a superior young man—a very superior young man, genteel, and thoroughly versed in the intricacies of etiquette. The majority of the human race was, without any loss to itself, unaware that he existed; but the "ladies" and "gentlemen" on the staff of Mogg's Mammoth Emporium viewed him as the supreme arbiter of elegance. And just because the average human being would have asserted—and asserted correctly—that for such as him there is no hope save drowning in puppyhood, I would tell his story. It is the exception which proves the rule. It is the proof that we are the slaves of custom and environment; and that, given something as the bed-rock, much may be done by a good teacher. There was something in this very superior young man as it turned out, though few would have suspected it, had they seen him before the war. But then, no one can ever listen to a person of the male sex proffering a good line of stockings in Lisle thread at one and eleven-three without experiencing a strong desire to be sick. Which goes back to what I said before: the whole thing is one of environment. The stocking vendors knew no better; for want of the necessary teaching they took to their nauseating trade. It's all in the Old Book—how shall they learn, unless they be taught? Had they had the teaching—well, listen to the story of this very superior young "gentleman," one time deputy chief stomach bender of Mogg's Mammoth Millinery

Emporium—terms. Strictly Cash. What the sub deputy chief waistcoat creaser will say if he reads these words I shudder to think. You see, the very superior young "gentleman" was *so* genteel.

A hot morning sun shone down on the outskirts of the town. Nothing moved, nothing stirred; utter silence brooded over the houses that once had been buzzing with people—the people of Arras. Now their only occupants were rats. The little gardens at the back were dank with unchecked weeds, save where a great conical hole showed the clean brown earth. And at the bottom of each of these holes lay a pool of foetid green water. The walls were crumbling, decay was rampant, the place breathed corruption. Occasionally the silence would be broken by a crash, and a little heap of brick rubble would subside into the road, raising a cloud of thick choking dust. Occasionally there would be another sound, like the drone of a great beetle, followed by a dull echoing roar and a bigger cloud of dust. Occasionally would come the ping-phut of a stray bullet; but of human life there was no sign.

Not, that is to say, to the casual observer; but to the man who looked out of the aeroplane circling above much was visible which you or I would not see. To him there came the vision of an occasional move behind some mouldering wall: sometimes an upturned face, sometimes the glint of steel. In one garden by a broken cucumber frame a man was polishing his bayonet, and the flash from it caught the observer's eye. Just opposite—thirty yards away—two or three men were sitting round a fire from which the smoke curled slowly up. And the bayonet cleaner was clothed in

khaki, while the cookers had on a dirty field grey; between them lay No Man's Land. But to the casual observer—silence: silence and death and the dreadful stink of corruption. Many others had cleaned bayonets and cooked stews under these same conditions, and many in the doing thereof had gone suddenly, and without warning, into the great Silence. For it was a sniper's paradise, as the victims—could they have spoken—would have testified. As it was they lay there lightly buried, and the same fool men made the same fool mistakes and came and joined them. As I say, it was a sniper's paradise....

Into this abode of joy, then, came the very superior young "gentleman." It was principally owing to the fact that Miss Belsize—the "lady" who dispensed camisoles, or some equally seductive garments—had flatly refused to accompany him any longer to the High Street Picture Palace if he remained in his frock coat, that our friend had donned khaki. For a long while he had stoutly affirmed that he was indispensable; then the transfer of affection on the part of camisoles to a dangerous-looking corporal from the wild and woolly West decided him. He did not like that corporal. No man who, meeting a comparative stranger, beat him on the back painfully, and, having looked his latest glad rags up and down, remarked with painful distinctness, "Lumme! is it real?" could possibly be considered a gentleman. But Miss Belsize had laughed long and laughed loud; and—well, I will not labour the point. In due course our superior one found himself in the haunt of death I have briefly described above, still full of self-importance and as inconceivably ignorant as

the majority are who come for the first time to the game across the water.

Recently arrived with a draft it was his initial experience of war in France, in contrast with training in England; in fact, the morning in question was his first visit to the trenches. And because many better men than he have endeavoured to conceal a peculiar sinking of the stomach by an assumed bravado, let us not blame him for the attitude he endeavoured to take up.

"Pretty quiet, isn't it, corporal?" he remarked airily, as his section came to rest in a trench behind a mass of broken brick and cobble stones. "Lor', look at that glass up there, hidden in the stones." For a moment curiosity mastered him, and he reached up towards it with his hand. The next instant he gave a cry of anger, as a jolt in his ribs with a rifle doubled him up. "What the deuce—" he began angrily.

"Don't you deuce me, my lad," said the corporal dispassionately, "or you and me will quarrel. Just you do what you're told, and I'll write and tell your ma you're a good little boy." The corporal—a man of few words—went on his way, leaving our hero—whose name by the way was Reginald Simpkins—fuming.

"If that blighter hits me again," he remarked when the N.C.O. was out of hearing, "I'll—"

"You'll what?" An old soldier looked at him scornfully. "He goes an' saves yer mouldy life and then yer bleats. Got yer bib, Reggie darling?"

"Not so much of your row." The corporal had come back again. "This ain't a ruddy colony of rooks in the nesting

season. Now, Simpkins, you and Ginger—first relief. There's your periscope—you can relieve them other two."

"Where's the periscope?" asked Reginald of his companion in a whisper.

"The glass up there, you flat-faced perisher—hidden in the stones. Wot d'you think it is? A noyster laying eggs!"

The trench settled down to silence as the company relief was completed, and Reginald morosely nursed his grievance. Much of the gentle flattery to which he had been accustomed at Mogg's Mammoth Emporium seemed conspicuous by its absence in this new sphere in which he found himself. Not to put too fine a point on it, people seemed positively rude at times, even ruder than they had been at home. He confided as much in an aggrieved whisper to the unsympathetic Ginger.

"Rude!" That worthy spat with violence and accuracy. "You wait till you bump into Shorty Bill. Rude! Gawd! 'E's a 'oly terror."

"Who is Shorty Bill?" queried Reggie, his eyes fixed on the glass whose mysteries he was beginning to understand.

But Ginger was in no mood for further confidences. "You'll find out fast enough 'oo Shorty is. 'E's down 'ere today. You watch that there periscope. This ain't no rest cure—this bit 'ere. It's 'ell."

"It seems pretty quiet," ventured the watcher after a short silence.

"Yus! That's wot the last man said wot I was with behind this wall. There's 'is brains on that stone behind you."

With an involuntary shudder Reginald looked round at the stone, on which the grim stains still remained. "What did it?"

he asked, barely above a whisper.

"Black Fritz," answered the other. "'E's a sniper, what lives opposite; and 'e's paid for 'is keep that swine 'as—paid for 'is keep. Charlie Turner, an' 'Arry, an' Ginger Woodward, an' Nobby Clark, an' the sergeant- major, an' two orficers. Yus—'e's paid for 'is keep, 'e 'as—'as Master Black Fritz."

"And he's over there," said Reggie, a little breathlessly.

"Yus. Where the 'ell do you think 'e is? In an aeryplane?" Once again Ginger spat dispassionately, and then relapsed into a silence from which he refused to be drawn until the presence of two more men beside him indicated that the hour of relief had come.

"Now look here, Simpkins," said the corporal when the relief was completed, "this is your first visit to the trenches, isn't it? Well, you can sit down now and have a sleep, or you can write or read if you like. But, whatever you do, don't go showing your ugly face over the top; because this place ain't healthy." He turned away, and Reggie was left to his own resources.

"Come round the corner," said Ginger in his ear. "I'll show you a spot to sleep. I know this 'ere bit like me own back parlour."

And so—had any one been sufficiently interested in his doings to report the fact—it might have been noted that ten minutes later our friend was sitting on the fire step writing a lurid epistle to Miss Belsize, while Ginger lay peacefully asleep beside him, breaking the complete silence with his snores.

At last the letter was finished, and Reggie gave way to meditation. Everything was so utterly different to what he

had anticipated that he could hardly believe he was actually in that mystic place the trenches. To his left a crumbling wall ran along until it bent out of sight, a wall which in most places was three or four feet high, but which at one spot had been broken down until it was almost flush with the ground, and the bricks and rubble littered the weeds. In front of him lay the town, desolate, appalling, with a few rooks cawing discordantly round the windowless houses. And over everything brooded an oppressive hot stinking stillness that almost terrified him....

After a while his gaze settled on the place where the wall was broken down, and his imagination began to play. If he went there—it was only about ten yards away—he would be able to look straight at the Germans. So obsessed did he become with this wonderful idea that he woke up the sleeping Ginger and confided it to him. There being a censor of public morals I will refrain from giving that worthy warrior's reply when he had digested this astounding piece of information; it is sufficient to say that it did not encourage further conversation, nor did it soothe our hero's nerves. He was getting jangled—jangled over nothing. It was probably because there was such a complete nothing happening that the jangling process occurred. A shell, a noise, anything; but not this awful, silent stagnation. He bent down mechanically and picked up half a brick; then just as mechanically he bowled the half-brick at the lump of dÚbris behind the broken bit of the wall. And it was that simple action which changed our very superior young "gentleman" into a man: on such slender threads hang the destinies even of nations.

He watched the brick idly as it went through space; he watched it idly as it hit the ground just by a clump of dock leaves; and from that moment idly ceases to be the correct adverb. Five seconds later, with a pricking sensation in his scalp and a mouth oddly dry, he was muttering excitedly into the ear of the now infuriated Ginger.

"A man where, you ruddy perisher?" he grunted savagely. "Fust yer tells me if you goes and looks at the 'Uns you can see 'em; and then you says there's a man in the nettles. You ought to be locked up."

"There is, I tell you. I heaved a brick at that bunch of leaves, and it hit something that grunted." Reginald was still clutching his companion's arm.

"Un'and me, Clara," said the other peevishly, "this ain't a sixpenny 'op."

He got up—impressed in spite of himself by the other's manner—and peered at the mass of dÚbris. "Wot d'yer want with 'eaving bricks for, anyway," he continued irately after a long inspection which revealed nothing. "This 'ere ain't a bean-feast where you gets the bag of nuts."

"Watch this time, Ginger." Once again a large fragment came down in the neighbourhood of the dock leaves—followed by an unmistakable groan.

"Lumme, mate," said Ginger hoarsely, "wot is it?" The two men stood peering at the rubbish, not ten yards away. "I'll go and get the corporal. You..." But he didn't finish his sentence.

Two shots rang out almost simultaneously. One was from the German lines, and there was a short stifled scream from the other side of the traverse. The other was from the

rubbish heap ten yards away, and the blast made a piece of hemlock rock violently. Otherwise the rubbish heap was lifeless— save for a sepulchral voice—"Got him." There was a crash of falling bricks from a house opposite—the sound of what seemed to be a body slithering down—and then silence.

Ginger's grip relaxed, and he grinned gently. "Gawd 'elp you, Reginald; you 'ave my blessing. You've been dropping the brickyard on Shorty Bill's back." He faded rapidly away, and our friend was left alone, gazing with fascinated eyes at the miraculous phenomenon which was occurring under his very nose. Suddenly and with incredible swiftness a portion of the rubbish heap, with dock leaves, nettles, old cans, and bricks adhering to it, detached itself from the main pile and hurled itself into the trench. With a peculiar sliding movement it advanced along the bottom, and then it stopped and stood upright. Speechless with amazement, Reginald found himself gazing into the eyes of a man which were glaring at him out of a small slit in the sacking which completely covered him. A pair of dirty earth-stained hands gently laid down a rifle on the fire-step—a rifle with a telescopic sight. Then from the apparition came a voice.

"Say, kid, are you the son of a —, who has been practising putting the weight in my back? Don't speak, son, don't speak, or I might forget my manners. Once in the ribs —and once in the small of the back. God above, my lad, if I'd missed Black Fritz, after lying up there for him for eight hours as part of the scenery, I'd have—"

"'Ullo, Shorty." The corporal rounded the traverse. "Fritz has got another. Poor old Bill Trent. Copped clean through

the 'ead."

The corporal, followed by the strange uncouth being in sacking, with his leaves and bricks hanging about him, moved away, and Reginald followed. With his heart thumping within him he looked at the dreadful thing that ten minutes before had been a speaking, seeing, man; and as he looked something seemed to be born in his soul. With a sudden lightning flash of insight he saw himself in a frock coat behind the counter; then he looked at the silent object on the step, and his jaw set. He turned to Shorty Bill.

"I'm dam sorry about that brick; but I'm new to the game, and I had no idea you were there. Didn't you say you'd got Black Fritz?"

"'Ave you, Shorty—'ave you got the swine?" An eager chorus assailed him, but the man in the sack had his eyes fixed on the very superior young "gentleman." At length he turned to the men around.

"Yep—I got him. Half left—by the base of that red house. He came out of the top window. You can see a black thing there through a periscope." The men thronged to have a look, and Shorty Bill turned to the stone thrower.

"Can you shoot?"

"A little; not much I'm afraid."

"Like to learn the game? Yep?—Right. I'll teach you. It's great." He moved slowly away and turned up a communication trench, while into the eyes of Mogg's pride there came a peculiar look quite foreign to his general disposition. A game—a great game! He looked again at the poor still thing on the step, and his teeth clenched. Thus began his fall from gentility!...

II

Table of Contents

It was not a very rapid descent. The art of sniping and its attendant pastime scouting is not learned in a day. Moreover, in company with the other games that are played in the trenches, it has the one dominant feature about it. One mistake made in the rules is one too many; there is no chance of making a second. True, the player will have taught the man who takes his place yet another of the things not to do; but personally—even at the risk of being dubbed a pessimist—the method of teaching is one I would prefer to see others employ, sentiments which were shared to the full by Shorty Bill. Therefore our superior young friend, having gazed upon the result of a sniper's bullet, and in the gazing remoulded his frock-coated existence, could not have come under a better master.

Shorty Bill was a bit of a character. Poacher and trapper, with an eye like a lynx and a fore-arm like a bullock's leg, he was undoubtedly a tough proposition. What should have made him take a liking to Reginald is one of those things which passes understanding, for two more totally dissimilar characters can hardly be imagined. Our friend—at the time of the shooting of Black Fritz—was essentially of that type of town-bred youth who sneers at authority behind its back and cringes to its face. Such a description may sound worse than the type deserves; for all that, it is a true one of the street-bred crowd—they've been reared on the doctrine. Shorty was exactly the reverse. Shorty, on one occasion, having blocked six miles of traffic with a fractious mule, and

being confronted suddenly by an infuriated Staff officer who howled at him, smiled genially and electrified the onlookers by remarking pleasantly, "Dry up, little man; this is *my* show." That was Shorty in front of authority. Behind its back — well, his methods may not have commended themselves to purists in etiquette, but I have known officers sigh with relief when they have found out unofficially that Shorty had taken some little job or other into his own personal care. There are many little matters—which need not be gone into, and which are bound to crop up when a thousand men are trying to live as a happy family— where the unofficial ministrations of our Shorty Bills—and they are a glorious if somewhat unholy company—are worth the regimental sergeant-major, the officers, and all the N.C.O.'s put together. But—I digress; sufficient has been said to show that the two characters were hardly what one would have expected to form an alliance.

The gentle art of sniping in the battalion when Bill joined with a draft had been woefully neglected. In fact, it was practically non-existent. It is not necessary to give any account of how Bill got the ear of his platoon commander, how he interested him in the possibilities of sniping in trench warfare, or any other kind of warfare for that matter, and how ultimately his platoon officer became mad keen, and with the consent of his C.O. was made Battalion sniping officer. Though interesting possibly to students of the gun and other subjects intimately connected with sniping, I have not the time to describe the growth of the battalion scouts from a name only to the period when they became a holy terror to the Hun. I am chiefly concerned with the

development of our frock-coated friend into a night prowler in holes full of death and corruption, and one or two sage aphorisms from the lips of Shorty Bill which helped that development. They were nothing new or original, those remarks of his teacher, and yet they brought home to him for the first time in his life the enormous gulf which separated him from the men who live with nature.

"Say, kid, do you ever read poetry?" remarked Bill to him one night soon after the episode of the brick-bats as they sat in an estaminet. "I guess your average love tosh leaves me like a one-eyed codfish; but there's a bit I've got in me head writ by some joker who knows me and the likes o' me.

"'There's a whisper on the night wind, there's a star agleam to guide us, And the wild is calling, calling... let us go.'"

Shorty contemplatively finished his beer. "'The wild is calling.' Ever felt that call, kid?"

"Can't say I have, Shorty." His tone was humble; gone was the pathetic arrogance that had been the pride of Mogg's; in its place the beginnings of the realisation of his utter futility had come, coupled with a profound hero worship for the man who had condescended to notice him. "When are you going to teach me that sniping game?"

The real sniping commander of the battalion—I mean no disrespect to the worthy young officer who officially filled that position— looked at the eager face opposite him and laughed.

"You'd better quit it, son. Why, to start with, you're frightened of the dark."