Sapper

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I. — THREE TO ONE
An Incident in the Advance from Paris

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"SURE, and it's the neatest little girl I've seen this side of Connymara that you are. It's a souvenir that you're wanting? By jabers! it's a souvenir you'll have, anyway. 'Tis the correct thing the other side of the water, whichever way you go."

The resounding noise of a kiss assailed my scandalised ears, followed by rapidly retreating feminine footsteps.

"I'll be after waiting for you here tomorrow morning at the same time." Sergeant Michael Cassidy's rich Irish voice followed the invisible recipient of his souvenir as she departed; and judging by the way he leaned over the railings waving an extremely dirty pocket-handkerchief, I came to the reluctant conclusion that the lady was not only not averse to receiving souvenirs, but would in all probability return for more.

"Are you not ashamed of yourself, Michael Cassidy — you with a wife and four children in Ballygoyle?" I remarked, as the handkerchief gradually became less violent.

"And what the devil — Ah! by all the saints! 'tis you, sir." Limping and leaning heavily on a crutch, Sergeant Cassidy came towards me. "'Tis great to see you again, sir. Is it

wounded you've been, or why are you not over yonder?" He waved his free arm vaguely in the direction of Wales: however his meaning was clear.

"I was abroad when it started, Cassidy, and they've caught me for Kitchener's Army." I held my cigarette case out to him.

"'Tis bad luck that," he remarked, as he lit one of my best gold-tipped cigarettes. "But bedad you'll be after getting all you want when you do get out. It's no picnic at all — what with the Black Marias, and coal boxes, and snipers."

"What's the matter with you?" I asked as we sat down.

"I stopped a bit of lead with my foot. Nothing at all: we were just putting up a bit of wire one night in a wood, and one of them snipers got an outer in my foot."

He regarded the offending member with a critical eye, and carefully deposited it on a seat.

And here, to make things clear, I must digress for a moment. Michael Cassidy is a sergeant in His Majesty's Corps of Royal Engineers, to which I also have the honour to belong in the humble capacity of officer. I say humble advisedly; for there are sergeants of many sorts and kinds, and there is Michael Cassidy, and in his presence even Brigadier-Generals have trembled. Now in the days before the exigencies of the service had taken me abroad to an abominable island given over almost exclusively to priests and goats (anyone who has been condemned to soldier there will at once recognise its name) — in the days before my incarceration, then, on this dread spot, I had for some years soldiered side by side with Sergeant Cassidy. For when one's motto is "Ubique," it follows that one may live for a

space with a man, and then obeying the dictates of the Great Powers that Be at the War Office, be rudely torn away from old friends and associations, whom one may never see again, and be hurled into the midst of new faces as well as new conditions. Lucky for the man who escapes the abode of goats: but that is neither here nor there, and anyway it's all in the day's work, I suppose.

Be that as it may, the order of my release from its inhospitable shores having coincided most aptly with a regrettable midnight fracas with the local police, which incidentally is quite another story, I had shaken its dust rapidly and joyfully from my feet and sailed for home, full of war and cocktails. I had landed some ten days before, to find myself posted to a "Catch 'em Alive oh!" but withal cheery crowd of solicitors, grocers, tailors, and coalheavers, who go to make up the New Army. Chancing to wander one morning round the garden of a select London mansion, which had been put at the disposal of wounded soldiers, my eyes had been gladdened by the events which I have already chronicled, and I metaphorically fell upon the neck of my old and disreputable friend.

"And how's the old crowd getting along, Cassidy?" I asked when he was comfortably settled.

"Fine, sir, fine. 'Tis a lot of officers we've lost, though — killed and wounded." He gave a little sigh. "Do you recall young Mr Trentham, him that came to us last Christmas, just before you went away?"

"I do," I answered. "I see he's wounded, in today's list."

"'Tis that that made me speak, sir. You remember him — quiet he was — without the necessary swallow which helps

an officer to drink the healths of his men properly on Christmas Day."

I had vivid recollections of his inability to do so — but that is neither here nor there.

"Well, sir, he may not be able to drink like some of us" — I indignantly repudiated this monstrous aspersion — "he may not, I say, be able to drink like some of us, but glory be he can fight. I have not seen his equal outside Ballygoyle. You mind the manner of young gentleman he was, sir, strong as a bull, with an arm like the hind leg of an elephant. He was fair crazy to get at them, was Mr Trentham; he couldn't stand the sort of fighting we were getting at all. 'It is not fighting,' he says to me one day, 'when you can't bill someone over the head with the butt end of a rifle once in a way.' I said to myself at the time, I said: 'May Heaven help the Boche you do put your hands on, for he'll want all of that and more.'

"Well, one day, I misremember the name of the place we were at, but it wasn't like what it is now, all one long line — there was a chance of striking a stray Uhlan on his own, scouting, if he wasn't drunk — and when them fellows do get on the drink, you can take it from me, sir, the races at Ballygoone ain't in it. Well, Mr Trentham and I were out one day, things being fairly quiet, and we thought we might visit one of those cafés they call them, and see if we could raise a bottle of the good. 'Tis poor stuff they have there, but we thought it was worth trying. We came along the road, and there in front of the café we were going to, we saw some horses tied up.

"'Steady,' says he to me all of a sudden; 'they aren't our horses, nor French either, unless I'm much mistaken.' At that moment out walks a man. 'Jove, Cassidy,' says he, pulling me behind a bush, 'it's Germans they are: a patrol of Uhlans.'

"'They are that, sir,' says I. 'What will we do? for not a drop will they have left in that café."

"He thought a moment, and then a lovely look came over his face. 'What will we do, Cassidy?' he says. 'What do you think?'

"'The same as you, sir,' says I.

"With that I followed him as fast as we could leg it towards that café, keeping under cover of some bushes by the road. At last we got to the place, and crept in through the back. Just as we got to the window, creeping, we were, along the side of the house, we heard a girl scream inside, followed by a roar of laughter. Mr Trentham, he forgot the risk, straightens himself up and looks in through the window. I do the same. Mother of Heaven! 'twas awful. There was six of them in all, six of the dirty traitorous swine. They'd been drinking hard, and the old lady that kept the café was trussed up in a corner. They'd been having pot shots at her with the empty bottles. Her face was all cut, and half stunned she was. The old man was bound to the table, but they hadn't stunned him. They'd left him in the full possession of his senses that he might the better appreciate the fun. They'd got the daughter — a pretty girl, of maybe twenty — in a chair. Well, I needn't say more, but every time the poor old man tried to get to her, they pulled the table

back and roared with laughter. The swine — the cowardly swine!"

The veins were standing out in Cassidy's neck as he spoke: he was back again looking through that window. "Mr Trentham he turns to me and mutters. 'Three to one, Michael Cassidy, three to one,' he says, and his face was white, saving only his eyes, and they were blood-red. 'Three to one,' and his voice was thick, and he shook like a man with the ague as we crept through the back door. 'Three to one,' he snarled as we got to the door, while his hand, that had been shaking with the fury of his passion, grew steady as a rock. For a moment we stood outside of the door, and as I looked at him I said to myself, I said, 'You were dangerous at the window when you saw red,' I says; 'but by the Holy Mother a regiment of Uhlans wouldn't stop you now.' And then we went in. 'Twas great, oh! 'twas great. They stood there, that six — gaping, they were. Then one of them muttered 'English.' Then I saw Mr Trentham go in. Oh! 'twas an education — a dream. And then I lost sight of him in the box-up. I got home on one of their heads with my rifle belt, and split it like a pumpkin. My backhander hit the lamp, and spoilt the next one, but it reached his face, and it was enough for him. And then I saw one getting out of the door. I caught him in the garden: he will not play that game again. When I got back I found everything was silent, saving only the poor old woman moaning in the corner. It was an awful sight. Mr Trentham, he'd swung two of them together, and cracked both their skulls. They was dead as mutton. The other one he'd got at with his hands.

"'Is there any more of them, Michael Cassidy?' he says.

"'There is not, sir,' says I. 'They are all dead, the devils, and their horses are without.'

"''Twas a great blow that first one of yours,' he says.

"'It felt good, sir,' says I. ''Tis a blow we use at Ballygoyle with empty bottles on race days.'

"While we'd been speaking we'd untied the old man and the old lady, but the poor girl she just lay there dazed and sick. 'Twas awful, the room. You've never seen such a shambles in your life, sir — oh! 'twas fearful. We pulled out the dead Germans, and threw them into the wood, and then we cleared up the mess as best we could. We left them there, the three of them, the poor old man trying to comfort his old wife, and the pair of them weeping by the daughter. Ah! the devils, the swine: to think of it. It might have been one's own girl, sir; and the look in her eyes — I'll never forget it."

"But you killed the lot, Cassidy. That's the main point: you killed the brutes," I cried excitedly.

"And is not one officer of the British Army and one sergeant sufficient for six Germans when it comes to that sort of work, especially when the officer is such as Mr Trentham?" he answered with dignity.

He did not add a like comparison for the sergeant.

I admired him for it.

II. — A FIRE IN BILLETS
A Farm near Bailleul, December 1914

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"'Tis a fine body of men that they are," remarked Sergeant Cassidy to me, as I sat with him one day in the house where he was slowly recovering from the wound in his foot, which had caused his temporary absence from the plains of Flanders. As he spoke his eyes followed the fire engine, drawn by two grand white horses, disappearing in the distance. The bell was still clanging faintly, as he absent-mindedly felt in his pocket, to find that as usual he'd left his cigarettes upstairs.

"'Tis a fine body of men that they are," he remarked again, as he took one of mine. "But, by jabers! sir, seeing them going up the street there, brings to my mind the last fire that I was present at, over yonder." On this occasion he indicated Northumberland with a large hand; but, no matter.

"You'll mind," he went on after a reflective pause, "that those farms over the water are not what you would call the equals of Buckingham Palace for comfort. The majority of them are built in the same manner all over the country, and when you've seen one you've seen the lot. There's the farm itself, in which reside the owners and the officers. The officers have a room to themselves, but in these farms all the rooms lead into one another. Mr Tracey — you mind him, sir, the officer with the spectacles, fat he was — he was powerful set on washing, which is not to be encouraged in that trying weather; and he was rendered extremely

irritated by the habit of the ladies of the farm, who would walk through the room when he was in his bath.

"I mind one morning, perishing cold it was, when I came up to the kitchen to see him, and I looked through the door. Two of the old women of the farm were in the room, and they'd left both the doors open, while they had a bit of a set-to about something. Poor Mr Tracey was sitting in his bath, shouting at them to go out of the room and shut the door. He'd lost his spectacles, and his towel had fallen in the bath, and the draught was causing him great uneasiness. 'Twas a terrible example of the dangers of washing in those parts."

Sergeant Cassidy shook his head reflectively.

"Still," he continued after a moment, "'twas of the farms I was speaking. They have most of them two barns which run perpendicular to the farmhouse, so that the three buildings enclose a sort of square yard in the middle of them. The barns are full of straw and hay and the like, and there it is that the men sleep, though 'tis well to climb up to the loft, and not to remain on the ground floor. The reason will be clear to you. These folks are very partial to pigs and hens and cows, and they are not particular where the animals go at night. When therefore I was roused from my sleep on one occasion by a fearful yell from below, I was not surprised.

"'Mother of Heaven! 'tis the Germans,' says the man next to me, hunting for his gun.

"''Tis nothing of the sort,' I says, as I looked through the loft. ''Tis the pig, going to bed, and she has sat on the face of Angus MacNab.'

"'The dirty beast has sat on me face,' cried MacNab, as he saw me.